
The “Sthaviravāda” Invention

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There was no early Indian school called “Sthaviravāda.” Recent writers, however, suggest that this ‘school’ came first, and the Theravāda branched from it much later. But no corresponding compound has been found in Sanskrit texts, Chinese or Tibetan translations of Indian works, or inscriptions. The short-vowel form Sthaviravāda occurs in the fourteenth-century Nikāyasaṅgraha and the fifteenth-century Saddharmaratnākara, both written in Sinhala. Modern scholars later adopted or independently recreated this back-Sanskritized form and treated it as though it were the ancient institutional name of a school before Theravāda. Hendrik Kern in 1896 wrote of the “orthodox Sthaviravāda” and of a “primitive Sthaviravāda.”¹ This was not a harmless modernization of spelling. It turned a late Sinhala term for Theravāda into a supposed earlier school, and this invented idea then made the Theravāda look to be later.

Ancient Indian and Indo-Tibetan sources use Sthāvira, Sthāviriya, and related forms, their Sanskrit renderings of the Pāli and Prakrit Theriya. In the later northern four-nikāya classification, the Mahāvihāravāsins, Abhayagirivāsins, and Jetavanīyas are placed under the Sthāvira nikāya.² Thus all these are Theravāda in Pāli.³

There was no separately named Theravāda sect at the First Council because the Saṅgha had not yet divided into schools. Theravāda is the later name for the Dhamma-Vinaya the five hundred Theras recited at Rājagaha. The Dīpavaṃsa states directly that “the collection made by the Theras is called Theravāda.”⁴ So the name does not mark a new school founded centuries later. It identifies the Dhamma and Vinaya transmitted from the original assembly of Theras.

That connection with the earliest Buddhist transmission is supported in many ways. Accounts of the first communal recitation under Mahākassapa survive in seven independently transmitted Vinaya traditions, including those of schools that seceded from Theravāda. The extensive correspondences between the Pāli Nikāyas and the Chinese Āgamas likewise show a substantial common body of teaching, inherited from before the schools divided. What these other schools’ books show is independent witness that the core belongs to the earliest inheritance.⁵

Third-century inscriptions at Nāgārjunikoṇḍa identify Tambapaṇṇaka Theriyas and Theriya Vibhajjavādins associated with a Mahāvihāra. These are Indian records on stone, not claims found only in a later Sinhala chronicle. They establish that a Theriya lineage, tied to Tambapaṇṇi and to the Vibhajjavāda, was in India by the third century. And the inscriptions contain no “Sthaviravāda,” no older school before the early Theras and the Theravāda, and no hint that the Lankan Theriya lineage came later.⁶ While it is true that the Tipiṭaka was carefully preserved in Sri Lanka, that does not make Theravāda a later Sri Lankan invention.

Non-Pāli sources recognize the antiquity of the Theriya lineage, the Sanskritized Sthāvira of the northern books, though they never use the made-up compound

“Sthaviravāda.” Theravāda sources, including the Kathāvatthu commentary, state: *ettesu pana sattarasa vādā bhinnakā, theravādo asambhinnako ti veditabbo*, “seventeen doctrines schismatic, the Theravāda to be understood as non-schismatic.” It then quotes the Dīpavaṃsa in support. The chronicle in turn describes Theravāda as the complete teaching of the Buddha, without omission or addition.⁷

In short, external evidence establishes the antiquity, Indian origin, and pre-sectarian foundations of the Theravāda. The supposed older school called “Sthaviravāda” is an idea manufactured in modern times and then mistaken as fact.

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Footnotes

1. Peter Skilling, “Theravāda in History,” *Pacific World*, 3rd ser., no. 11 (2009): 61–93; Sven Bretfeld, “‘Theravāda’: Sectarianism and Diversity in Mahāvihāra Historiography,” in *Routledge Handbook of Theravāda Buddhism* (2022); Hendrik Kern, *Manual of Indian Buddhism* (1896), 3, 111. The medieval Sinhala form Sthaviravāda is a Sanskrit-derived equivalent of Theravāda, not an ancient Indian school name.
2. Skilling, “Theravāda in History,” 66–68; André Bareau, “Trois traités...” *Journal Asiatique* (1954, 1956). The Sthāvira nikāya includes the Mahāvihāra, Abhayagiri, and Jetavana lineages in later northern classifications.
3. Rhys Davids and Stede, *Pali-English Dictionary*, s.v. “Thera”: a term “only used with ref. to the bhikkhus of Gotama Buddha’s community”; Richard Salomon, *Indian Epigraphy* (1998), 76–77, on the epigraphic Prakrit closest among literary languages to Pāli. The Sanskrit dress of the word implies no institutional succession.
4. Dīpavaṃsa IV.6: pañcasatehi therehi... theravādo ti vuccati. See Bhikkhu Anālayo, “The First Saṅgīti,” 2015. Peter Skilling reaches the same definition from the academic side: *thera* here names the five hundred arahats of the first recitation, not a succession of elders (“Theravāda in History,” *Pacific World*, 3rd ser., no. 11 (2009): 64–65, citing Dīp 4:6); his n. 12 adds that north India admitted the original redaction (*mūlasaṃgīti*) lost, while the Theravāda maintained it preserves it.
5. Anālayo, “The First Saṅgīti,” 2–4; “Comparative Āgama Studies,” 2008. Independent Vinaya and Āgama traditions confirm a shared early doctrinal core.
6. Vogel, *Epigraphia Indica* 20 (1929–30), 22–23; Sircar and Lahiri, *Epigraphia Indica* 33 (1959–60), 250. The inscriptions attest Theriya, Tambapaṇṇaka, and Vibhajjavāda, not “Sthaviravāda.”
7. Kathāvatthupparakaraṇa-aṭṭhakathā, ed. J. Minayeff, *Journal of the Pali Text Society* (1889), 3: *ettesu pana sattarasa vādā bhinnakā, theravādo asambhinnako ti veditabbo*, followed by *vuttam pi c’etaṃ Dīpavaṃse* and Dīpavaṃsa V.51–52: *sattarasa bhinnavādā eko vādo abhinnako...* The commentary’s prose and the chronicle together assert the Theravāda as the undivided and complete *jinasāsana*. The Burmese recension words the prose differently.