

The Significance of the Chinese *Tripitaka* in World Buddhism

Written by Master Yinshun

The main objective of the World Buddhist Fellowship is to link the various schools of Buddhism from all corners of the world. With this spiritual linkage, harmonious cooperation can be accomplished. By promoting the Buddha's highest culture, we can actualize the inspiring ideals of enlightening the world and bringing liberation to people.

We must first acknowledge that the various schools of thought in Buddhism are indeed facets of Buddhism. There is no room for superficial and dogmatic claims that one school is true whereas others are not. The Mahāyāna schools should not be lightly dismissed as illegitimate, nor should the Śrāvakayāna schools conversely be despised as inferior. Communication among Buddhists can only be achieved when the study and practice of Buddhism is carried out in a friendly and accommodating atmosphere, with objective and wholesome thoughts, mutual trust and understanding. With this attitude, the essential splendor of the Buddha's teachings can be selected while the trash and trimmings enshrouding Buddhism can be removed. This will allow us to develop Buddhism into a form that is well adapted to the modern world, therefore guiding the present world to redemption, enlightenment and liberation.

Buddhism stems from one point of origin and is highly adaptable to many circumstances. In order to accommodate to different races, time and environments, it may even appear to develop into entirely different shapes and forms. But a closer study of its trends and patterns of development, how the various schools integrate into one another and how they adapt to new environments, will bring one to the realization that the different forms of Buddhism are interrelated and that cooperation among them is entirely feasible.

Generally, each school has its own strengths and shortcomings. Buddhists should honestly survey these various schools, exchanging the shortcomings in each for the strengths in others on the basis of equality, and for the sake of pursuing truth. In doing so, we will improve our understanding, and realize the ultimate truth as experienced by the Buddha and fully understand his original intention, as embodied in his teaching.

When we trace the different schools of Buddhism in the world today from their origins in India we can see that the proliferation of Sectarian Buddhism seems to have taken place as follows:

(1) With respect to the sacred texts —

The Dharma (*Sūtra*) and *Vinaya* were the earliest to be compiled and circulated. Around the beginning of the first century A.D., the researchers of the Dharma (that is, the *Āgama Sūtras*) were of two groups. Those dedicated to Śrāvaka practice compiled the *Abhidharma*, emphasizing the discernment of the inherent nature of the phenomena of Dependent Origination. And, those who stressed the virtues of the Buddha and the practice of the Bodhisattva compiled the Mahāyāna sutras connected to emptiness, emphasizing the realization of the nature of emptiness (non-inherent nature) of Dependent Origination.

In the third century A.D. Nāgārjuna interpreted the *Āgamas* and *Abhidharma* based on the Mahāyāna sutras of the Śūnyatā School (school of emptiness), and composed his famous Mādhyamika commentaries. At about the same time, Mahāyāna scriptures tending towards the concepts of "eternal reality" and "mind only", such as the *Śrīmālā-siṃha-nāda Sūtra* and the *Mahā-parinirvāṇa Sūtra*, had begun to appear, followed by sutras such as the *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra*. Along with this development, the Sūtrācāryas and Yogācāryas of the Sarvāstivāda sect accepted the Mahāyāna concepts of "emptiness" and "mind only". They compiled a number of the Yogācāra Vijñānavāda commentaries and eventually flourished as a great Mahāyāna School in its own right. Then, at about the fifth century there was a further development of esoteric Yoga from the eternal-reality school.

If one tried to follow the course of development of Buddhism as outlined above, one would have no difficulty tracing the evolution and sequence of the vast diversity of scriptures and doctrines held sacred by the many sects.

(2) With respect to the doctrines —

Buddhism was just Buddhism at first; there was no sectarian difference. It did not divide into the Śrāvakayāna and Bodhisattvayāna until about the beginning of the Common Era. Then, in the scriptures of the Bodhisattvayāna, we begin to see the division of Hīnayāna and Mahāyāna.

In the second and third centuries, sutras of the eternal-reality concept started to appear in the Bodhisattvayāna. It is in such sutras we first see the three systems of teachings: *Bhāva* (existence), *Śūnya* (emptiness) and *Madhyama* (middle); or the three vehicles: Hīnayāna, Mahāyāna and Ekayāna (Buddhayāna). In regards to Bodhisattvayāna, these later dated scriptures laid special emphasis on the achievement of Buddhahood; thus, they were referred to as Buddhayāna.

At the beginning of the fifth century, the Dhāraṇīyāna, emerged from the concept of "wondrous existence" within the Buddhayāna School. This school classified all Buddhist doctrines into *Tripitaka*, *Pāramitā Piṭaka* (including everything of the exoteric schools of Mahāyāna) and *Dhāraṇī Piṭaka*. These three are also known as the

teachings of *Catvāri-satyāni* (the practice of the Four Noble Truths), *Pāramitā* (the practice of perfection) and the Sensual Practice.

These classifications are indicative of the diversification and development of Buddhism and are consistent with the schematic three periods of historical development proposed by the late Venerable Taixu which are:

First 500 years after Buddha's *parinirvāṇa* —Hīnayāna in vogue with Mahāyāna in the background. The *Pāli Tripiṭaka* is representative of the Buddhism of this period.

Second 500 years — Mahāyāna in the lead, leaving Hīnayāna in its wake. The Chinese *Tripitaka* reflects the development of Buddhism in this period.

Third 500 years — Esoteric Buddhism in the lead, leaving the exoteric school in its wake. The Tibetan *Tripitaka* belongs to Buddhism of this period.

Chinese Buddhism, from which Japanese Buddhism is derived, is representative of Indian Buddhism of the second 500 years, i.e. it is founded mainly on Bodhisattvayāna, which links the earlier Śrāvakayāna and the later Buddhayāna.

As it plays such a pivotal role in the historical development of Buddhism, the Chinese *Tripitaka* deserves the special attention of all those concerned with the present development of World Buddhism so that we can have a complete understanding of the contents of Buddhism.

The Chinese *Tripitaka* offers the following:

(a) *Āgamas*—The Chinese *Tripitaka* has all four *Āgamas*. The *Madhyama Āgama* and *Samyukta Āgama* were translated from the texts of the Sarvāstivāda sect, while the *Dīrgha Āgama* and *Ekottara Āgama* were translated from those of the Vibhajyavāda and Mahāsaṅghika sects respectively. Though admittedly it does not contain a complete set of the sutras from a single sect, (the *Pāli Tripiṭaka* does present a set that belongs to one sect), a textual conglomeration of many sects does have its merits. (The Tibetan *Tripitaka* contains only a few sutras from the *Āgamas*.)

(b) *Vinayas*—The Tibetan *Tripitaka* contains the new Vinaya of the Sarvāstivāda sect, the *Pāli Vinaya* belongs to the Tāmraśāṭīya sect, while the Chinese collection encompasses Vinaya of all the following:

- The *Mahāsaṅghika Vinaya* of the Mahāsaṅghika sect.
- The *Five Divisions Vinaya* of the Mahīśāsaka sect, the *Four Divisions Vinaya* of the Dharmaguptaka sect, the *Prātimokṣa* of the Kāśyapīya sect, and the *Samantapasādikā Vinaya* of Tāmraśāṭīya sect. All these are rules of the Vibhajyavāda sect.

• The *Sarvāstivāda Vinaya* and the *Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya*, which are respectively the old and new versions of the Sarvāstivāda sect.

• The *Twenty-Two-Points-Of-Elucidation Śāstra* of the Sammatīya sect from the Vātsīputrīya sect.

This rich collection of materials from different sources is most suitable for comparative studies of Sectarian Buddhism.

(c) *Abhidharmas*—This body of scripture is common to the three main sects of Theravāda Buddhism, namely the Vibhajyavādins, the Sarvāstivādins, and the Vātsīputrīyas. In the Tibetan *Tripitaka* there are only the *Prajñāpti Śāstra* of the *Ṣaḍpada Śāstras* and the later *Abhidharmakośa Śāstra*. The *Pāli Tripitaka* contains seven *Abhidhammas*. While the Chinese *Tripitaka* has an especially large collection of the work of the Sarvāstivāda sect, it also possesses the *Abhidharma* work of most sects. The Chinese *Tripitaka* contains:

• The *Samgīti-paryāya*, the *Dharma-skandha*, the *Prajñāpti*, the *Vijñānakāya*, the *Dhātukāya*, the *Prakaraṇa*, the *Jñānaprasthāna*, the *Mahāvibhāṣā*, the *Abhidharma-hṛdaya Śāstra* (and its commentary), the *Abhidharma-nyāyānusāra Śāstra*, and *Abhidharmakośa-samaya-pradīpikā Śāstras* that were written as a result of their debates with the teachings of the *Abhidharmakośa*. All these belong to the Sarvāstivāda sect.

• Of the work of Vibhajyavādins, the *Śāriputrābhidharma Śāstra*, which is the only important work that links up the Southern and Northern *Abhidharmas*.

• The *Vimokṣamārga Śāstra*, which is a different version of the Pāli *Visuddhimagga*.

• The *Sammitīya Śāstra* and the *Tri-dharmika Śāstra* of the Vātsīputrīya sect.

• Some of the later commentaries that emerged after the third or fourth century A.D. which combined the best teachings of the Sarvāstivāda and Sūtravāda sects, for example, the renowned *Abhidharmakośa Śāstra* and the *Satyasiddhi Śāstra* of Harivarman that had both influenced Chinese Buddhism greatly.

Although the *Tripitaka* of the early period was not given full attention by the mainstream of Chinese Buddhism, the wealth of sacred texts preserved is nevertheless impressive. They are powerful evidence for tracing the divisions of the Śrāvaka sects and the development of the Bodhisattva ideal from the Śrāvakayāna. If the Chinese *Tripitaka* were to be ignored, I assert categorically that it would not be possible to coordinate the many branches of Buddhism nor to fulfill the responsibility of establishing communication among them.

(d) Mahāyāna scriptures of the Śūnyavāda School.

(e) Mahāyāna scriptures of the "eternal-reality" school—These are complete in the Chinese *Tripitaka*. These scriptures are very similar to those found in the Tibetan

Tripitaka. The four great Sutras—the *Prajñāpāramitā*, the *Avataṃsaka*, the *Mahā-saṃnipāta*, and the *Mahā-parinirvāṇa* (to which may be added to the *Mahā-ratnakūṭa*, making five great sutras)—are all tremendously voluminous works. Here, it may be pointed out that the Chinese scriptures are particularly notable for the following characteristics:

- Different translations of the same sutra have been safely preserved in the Chinese *Tripitaka* in their respective original versions without being constantly revised according to later translations, as was the case with Tibetan scriptures. By studying the Chinese translations we can trace the changes in content which the majority of scriptures have undergone over time, and reflect upon the changes in the original Indian texts at different points in time. Thus, we have the benefit of more than one version for reference, recording the evolution of the scriptures.

- The Mahāyāna scriptures that were translated into Chinese before the Jin Dynasties (beginning 265 A.D.) are particularly related to the Buddhism of the Western Region. The center of this region was located in the mountain areas of Kapiśa. Then, the source of the sacred texts expanded further to Tukhāra in the western direction, to Bāmiyan and Nagara in the southwest, to Gandhāra in the southeast and Kashgar, Kukyar and Ku-stana (Khotan) in the northeast. These sacred texts deeply influenced Chinese Buddhist thought. In particular, the *Daśabhūmika Śāstra* and *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra* translated by Bodhiruci, a scholar in Northern India, possess very special characteristics.

(f) Mādhyamika—The Mādhyamika texts of the Chinese *Tripitaka* are considerably different from the Tibetan renditions of the same system of thought. The Chinese collection consists mostly of earlier works, particularly those of Nāgārjuna, such as the *Mahā-prajñāpāramitā Śāstra* that explains the *Mahā-prajñāpāramitā Sūtra* and the *Daśabhūmika-vibhāṣā Śāstra* that explains the *Daśabhūmika Sūtra*. Not only do these texts present Mādhyamika philosophy of a very high order, but also illustrate extensively the great practices of a Bodhisattva.

Of the late Mādhyamika works, i.e., works produced by the disciples of Nāgārjuna after the rise of the Yogācāra system, only the *Prajñā-pradīpa Śāstra* of Bhāvaviveka has been rendered into Chinese. The Chinese *Tripitaka* does not contain as many works of different schools in this system as Tibetan Buddhism does. Of the works that were translated into Chinese, the *Mahāyānāvataraka Śāstra* of Sāramati and the *Mādhyayata Śāstra* of Asaṅga clearly indicate the change of thinking from the Mādhyamika to the Yogācāra system.

(g) Yogācāra-Vijñānavāda—The Chinese *Tripitaka* contains a complete collection of this system of thought. It includes important scriptures such as the *Daśabhūmika Śāstra*, *Mahāyāna-saṃparigraha Śāstra*, and *Vijñāpti-mātratāsiddhi*

Śāstra. While the Tibetan system was mainly founded on the teachings of Sthiramati, which were more akin to the Chinese Mahāyāna-saṃparigraha school of thought, the Chinese students of orthodox Vijñānavāda followed the teachings of Dharmapāla.

The *Vijñāpti-mātratāsiddhi Śāstra*, which represents the consummation of the Dignāga-Dharmapāla-Śīlabhadra schools of thought, is a gem of the Chinese *Tripitaka*. However, the Hetuvidyā, which is closely related to Vijñānavāda, is not fully translated in the Chinese *Tripitaka* and is not as complete as the works of Dignāga and Dharmakīrti collected in the Tibetan *Tripitaka*.

This seems to indicate that the Chinese people were not inclined to the study of logic, nor did they give weight to engagements in verbal gymnastics and debates. Such cultural tendencies limited the influence of the past commentary masters, and denied them of a mainstream position in Chinese Buddhism.

(h) The esoteric Yoga—The Chinese *Tripitaka* includes the translations of the *Tantric Vairocana Sūtra* of both the Miscellaneous Esoteric sect and the Practical sect, as well as the *Diamond Sūtra* of the Yogācāra sect. The only esoteric scriptures that are missing are those of the Supreme Yoga sect, which were not widely circulated as they arrived in China during a time of national chaos. Its very nature of achieving enlightenment through carnal expressions also made Tantrism unacceptable to Chinese intellectuals. However, the texts of esoteric Yoga are abundant in the Tibetan *Tripitaka*.

From the above, it can be seen that the majority of texts in the Chinese *Tripitaka* are Mahāyāna scriptures from the second 500 years, yet translations were not restricted to scriptures of this middle period. The Chinese *Tripitaka* possesses a wealth of works of early Buddhism as well as a good portion of the later period.

Therefore, one can study the Dharma by starting with the Chinese *Tripitaka*, then expand to the early period by studying the *Pāli Tipitaka* of the Śrāvakayāna, and finally extend to the later period by studying the Mādhyamika and Supreme Yoga of the Tibetan system. Thus, one would be able to gain an accurate, complete and comprehensive panorama of the 1600 to 1700 years of development of Indian Buddhism and the three major schools of Buddhism that exist in the world today. The late Venerable Taixu once said, “The objective of writing a history of Indian Buddhism should be to synthesize a new, critical and comprehensive system based on the Chinese *Tripitaka*, the *Pāli Tipitaka* of Ceylon, and selected components of the Tibetan *Tripitaka*.” The goal is not merely to study the history of Indian Buddhism; but to coordinate and connect the many tributaries of Buddhism in the world. We should learn to substitute weaknesses with strengths, and by doing so, develop a global Buddhism that is able to adapt to and guide the modern world.

(Translated by Mok Chung, edited by Mick Kiddle, 20-6-1995.
Revised by Mandy Phan, Jane Truong & Venerable Neng Rong 1-10-2002.)

(Further revision by the Dharma Translation Team ((Bhikṣu Zhihan, Upāsikā Cihui, Upāsikā Mingkong) on 2005-05-05. Diacritic marks added by DTT on 2005-06-11.)

(Diacritic marks revised by DTT on 2009-04-30.)