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THE RAVĀDA BUDDHISM:  
THE SRI LANKAN  
CONTRIBUTION TO ITS  
PROGRESS

K a p i l a A b h a y a w a n s a

Theravāda Buddhist scholars accept that the most authentic teachings of the Buddha were preserved in the Theravāda Buddhist School as it descended from the immediate disciples of the Buddha. Though some adherents of the tradition from time to time deviated from it for one reason or another, it managed to remain in India, securing its identity up to the time of the Third Buddhist Council and then, as a result of Asoka's missionary work, it became thoroughly rooted in Sri Lanka. Presently, it prevails mainly in countries like Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos, and has attained popularity in Singapore, Malaysia and some Western countries, including Australia and the United States of America.

According to the Theravāda commentarial tradition, the Buddha preached his teaching to the people during his lifetime in India through the medium of Māgadhi<sup>1</sup> (the language of Magadha), which was later popularly known as Pāli<sup>2</sup>. The teachings which were presented by the Buddha in the Pāli language were collected in the Tipiṭaka. The classification of the teachings of the Master into Dhamma and Vinaya, and the compilation respectively into Nikāya-s and Vibhaṅga-s (Bhikkhu-vibhaṅga and Bhikkhunī-vibhaṅga), took place at the First Buddhist Council presided over by Venerable Mahā Kassapa and attended by five

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<sup>1</sup> *Sā māgadhi mūlabhāsā – narāyāyādikappikā Brahmṇācassutālāpā – sambuddhācāpi bhāsare* – VinA. 1214.

<sup>2</sup> The word Pāli as a name of language came into existence after the 13th century AD in Sri Lanka.

hundred elders (Thera-s) who were the pioneers of the Theravāda teachings<sup>3</sup>. However, the commentarial tradition of Theravāda believes that the compilation of the teachings of the Buddha into the Tipiṭaka (three baskets) namely Sutta, Vinaya, and Abhidhamma had taken place at the First Council itself<sup>4</sup>. According to canonical tradition, the Second Buddhist Council, which was held one hundred years after the death of the Master, endorsed what had been rehearsed at the First Council<sup>5</sup>. According to the available Theravāda sources, with the addition of Kathāvatthu-pakaraṇa into the Abhidhamma-piṭaka, the compilation of the canon of the Theravādins into Tipiṭaka was finalized at the Third Buddhist Council, which took place at the time of Asoka about two hundred and thirty-five years after the Buddha's Parinibbāna.

It seems that the Theravāda enriched and secured its unique position not only from the canonical tradition but also from its exegetical tradition. It possesses commentaries as well as sub-commentaries and post-commentarial exegesis. The commentaries, which amount to 24 in number, have been made on nearly all the Canonical books, and they provide a vast exegetical literature alone. When we examine the wide range of Theravāda Buddhist literature, we can identify two layers of thought in respect of the doctrinal aspect of Theravāda, as Prof. Y. Karunadasa suggests in his monumental work on Theravāda Abhidhamma<sup>6</sup>. According to Prof. Karunadasa, "One is Early Buddhism, which is presented in the Sutta Piṭaka and to a lesser extent in the Vinaya Piṭaka. The other is distinctly Theravāda Buddhism which makes use of both the literary sources of Early Buddhism and the texts of the Pāli Abhidhamma to evolve a very comprehensive system of thought<sup>7</sup>." We can understand, therefore, that the Theravāda tradition is represented by the Sutta and Vinaya, Abhidhamma Piṭaka-s together with the Pāli commentarial sources.

<sup>3</sup> *Cullavaggapāli, Pañcattikkhandhaka* (Vinaya Pitaka, vol. 11 (London: Pali Text Society, 1995), 286.

<sup>4</sup> T. W. Rhys Davids, J. Estlin Carpenter, eds., *Sumaṅgala vilāsini: Buddhaghosa's Commentary on the Dīghanikāya* (London: Pali Text Society 1886). pt. 1, 15.

<sup>5</sup> *Cūlavaggapāli–Sattattikkhandhaka*.

<sup>6</sup> Y. Karunadasa, *The Theravāda Abhidhamma: An Inquiry into the Nature of Conditioned Reality* (Hong Kong: The Centre of Buddhist Studies, The University of Hong Kong, 2010), 3

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

Although the Theravāda tradition emerged on Indian soil, we cannot find a long history of its existence there. Literary sources confirm that it originated with the First Buddhist Council and gradually declined after its culmination at the Third Buddhist Council. However, it should be mentioned here that the Third Buddhist Council played a crucial role in the propagation and establishment of Theravāda Buddhism both within and outside of India.

With the conclusion of the Third Council, Thera Moggaliputta Tissa, who was the president of the Council, took an extremely valuable step for the propagation of the message of the Buddha even outside its birthplace<sup>8</sup>. After having both purified the Saṅgha and established the pure teaching of the Buddha, Venerable Tissa thought of dispatching missionaries to establish Buddhism in different countries and selected capable monks for this purpose<sup>9</sup>. There is no doubt that Asoka gave his full support to elder Tissa in this respect. It is quite evident from the thirteen-rock edict of Asoka which shows that the King tried to spread the Dhamma not only in his own territories or among the people of the borderland but also in kingdoms far off<sup>10</sup>. However, according to Venerable Buddhaghosa, Venerable Tissa sent off missionaries to nine different countries<sup>11</sup>.

Each Thera was sent to the relevant country together with at least four other monks in order to establish Buddhism there. It is believed that Buddhism is rooted in a country where a higher ordination is offered to a person who is born in that country. In a place where there is a lack of monks, the higher ordination can be granted by an assembly of four monks<sup>12</sup>. That was the reason why at least four monks were sent along with each leading monk.

It is a historical fact that the arrival of Theravāda Buddhism in Sri Lanka took place as the result of the missions undertaken fol-

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<sup>8</sup> J. Takakusu, M. Nagai, ed., *Samantapāsādikā: Buddhaghosa's Commentary on the Vinaya piṭṭaka* (London: The Oxford University Press, Pali Text Society, 1924) Vol.1, 63.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Romila Thapar, *Asoka and the Decline of The Mauryas* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997), 255-57.

<sup>11</sup> See Appendix I.

<sup>12</sup> See *Cūlavagga. Kammakkhandhaka* I.9

lowing the Third Buddhist Council patronized by Asoka. The term Tambapaṇṇi mentioned in the list of countries to where missionaries were dispatched refers to Sri Lanka. Mahāvamsa, one of the chronicles that recorded the arrival of missionaries in Sri Lanka, directly mentioned the name Laṅkādiipa, which denotes modern Sri Lanka instead of Tambapaṇṇi as follows: “Laṅkādiipe manuññamhi manuññam Jinasāsanaṃ patiṭṭhāpetha tumhe, ti pañca There apesayi”<sup>13</sup>. According to the Sri Lankan chronicles, the group of missionaries headed by Ven. Mahinda, who is said to be the son of Asoka, landed in Sri Lanka with the message of the Buddha. The year of the arrival of Ven. Mahinda is supposed to be 236 BCE. The King of Sri Lanka, who was known as Devānampiya Tissa, cordially welcomed Ven. Mahinda and his group, and provided all the facilities for them to establish and popularize Buddhism throughout the country. It is said that Ven. Mahinda took all necessary steps for the firm establishment of Buddhism in Sri Lanka, comprised of all the four assemblies, Bhikkhu, Bhikkhunī, Upāsaka, and Upāsikā, within a very short period.

#### Commentaries in the Sinhala Language (Sīhalaṭṭhakathā)

The centre of Theravāda Buddhism in Sri Lanka was the Mahāvihāra monastery founded in Anurādhapura by the King Devānampiya Tissa under the instruction of Ven. Mahinda. It is clear that was the Sri Lankan monks who lived in the Mahāvihāra emphasized the Theravāda tradition through their literary activities. The development of Theravāda Buddhism in Sri Lanka can mainly be attributed to the different literary activities and exegetical literature based on the Pāli canon which was brought to Sri Lanka by the missionary group headed by Ven. Mahinda.

When we examine the Sri Lankan contribution to Theravāda Buddhism, it is first necessary to pay attention to the exegetical literature, which was extensively developed by the Sri Lankan monks. Sri Lankan chronicles and Pāli commentaries suggest that both the Pāli canon and commentaries were brought to Sri Lanka by Ven. Mahinda when he

<sup>13</sup> W. Geiger, ed., *Mahāvamsa* (London: Pali Text Society 1958) X. 9.

came to Sri Lanka with other members of the group. Further, it is stated that the commentaries which aimed at the exposition of the meaning of the canonical teachings were composed at the First Council, and also rehearsed at the following two councils, and were brought to Sri Lanka by Ven. Mahinda who translated them into the Sinhala Language for the benefit of the local population<sup>14</sup>.

Analyzing Buddhaghosa's statement G. P. Malalasekera observes:

It must be borne in mind that these commentaries were not compiled in the modern sense of the word, nor did any commentaries, such as Buddhaghosa himself wrote later, exist in the Buddha's lifetime or immediately after his death. So that when, in the opening stanzas of the *Sumaṅgalavilāsinī*, Buddhaghosa mentions that the commentary to the *Dīgha-Nikāya* was rehearsed at the first council by 500 holy Elders, we may assume that he means that at this meeting the meanings he attached to the various terms – particularly to those that appear to have been borrowed from Hindu philosophy – were discussed and properly defined. This removes the difficulty of conceiving the contemporaneous existence of the commentaries and the *Piṭkas* from the very earliest times. Such definitions and fixations of meaning formed the nucleus of the later commentaries. The Elders had discussed the important terms at the First Council, and had decided on the method of interpreting and teaching the more recondite doctrines.<sup>15</sup>

According to Ven. Buddhaghosa's statement mentioned above, the origin of the composition of the commentarial literature can be traced back to the First Buddhist Council. But the earliest reference to the First Council, the 11<sup>th</sup> chapter of *Cullavagga Pāḷi*, *Pañcasatikkhanda*, does not report that the monastics made such a composition of the commentaries. It is certain that the commentaries are very important for the understanding of canonical teachings. If the monastics composed such commentaries on the canon, it would be recorded in the *Cullavagga* report, because the composition of commentaries is a sepa-

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14 *Atthappakāsanattham, atthakathā ādito vasisatehi;*

*Pañcavi yā saṅgītā, anusāṅgītā ca pacchāpi.*

*Sihaḷadīpaṃ pana ābhataṭṭha, vasiṇā mahāmahindena;*

*Thapitā sihaḷabhāsāya, dipavāsīnamatthāya.* - Rhys Davids, Estlin Carpenter, *Sumaṅgalavilāsinī: Buddhaghosa's Commentary on the Dīghanikāya* I. 1.

<sup>15</sup> G. P. Malalasekera, *The Pāli Literature of Ceylon* (Colombo: M. D. Gunasena & Co. Ltd. Reprinted 1958), 90.

rate project from the recognition of the canon at the Council. The Cullavagga also records some other activities that took place even after the Council. If there were commentaries composed at the Council, there is no reason for the Cullavagga to neglect to mention it. The records of the Second<sup>16</sup> and the Third<sup>17</sup> Councils also do not confirm the rehearsal of the commentaries at those councils. This suggests that the statement of Ven. Buddhaghosa about the origins of the Aṭṭhakathā cannot be affirmed with the evidence at hand. Further, there is no evidence to show that there was any commentary completed in India before the arrival of Ven. Mahinda in Sri Lanka. The Mahāvamsa, one of the Sri Lankan chronicles, states that in the fifth century when Ven. Buddhaghosa arrived in Sri Lanka, there were no commentaries available in India. The Mahāvamsa explaining the reason for Ven. Buddhaghosa coming to Sri Lanka says the following:

*Pālimattaṃ idhānītaṃ natthi Aṭṭhakathā idha –  
Tathācāriyavādaṅca bhinnarūpā na vijjare  
Sīhalatṭhakathā suddhā Mahindena matīmatā –  
Saṅgītattayam ārūlhaṃ Sammāsambuddhadesitaṃ  
Sāriputtādīgītaṅca kathāmaggaṃ samekkhiya –  
Kata Sīhalabhāsāya Sīhalesu pavattati.*<sup>18</sup>

(The text alone has been handed down here [in Jambudīpa], there is no commentary here. Nor are the broken systems of the teachers found. The commentary in the Sinhala tongue is faultless. The wise Mahinda considered the tradition laid before the three Councils as it was taught by the Perfectly Enlightened One and as recited by Sāriputta and the others and wrote it in the Sinhala language and it is spread among the Sinhalese).<sup>19</sup>

There is no doubt that there was already a practice of providing explanatory details to the deep, profound, and sometimes ambiguous teachings of the Buddha during the time of the Buddha. They were done either by the Buddha himself or by some other lead-

<sup>16</sup> See. *Cūlavagga*, 12<sup>th</sup> chapter.

<sup>17</sup> Takakusu, Nagai, *Samantapāsādikā: Buddhaghosa's Commentary on the Vinaya piṭka* (introduction).

<sup>18</sup> *Mahāvamsa*. xxxvi 227-29.

<sup>19</sup> The translation has been quoted from Goonesekere L. R., *Buddhist Commentarial Literature*, (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 2008), 55-6.

ing disciples of the Buddha. The *Paṭiccasamuppādavibhaṅgasutta*<sup>20</sup>, *Mahātaṇhāsāṅkhāyasutta*<sup>21</sup>, *Sammādiṭṭhisutta*<sup>22</sup>, and *Cullavedallasutta*<sup>23</sup> are some of the examples that show that there were some discourses which bear the commentarial characteristic within the canon itself. And further, we can find *Paṭisambhidāmagga* and the *Niddesa*-s, two different treatises included in the *Khuddakanikāya*, which were composed with the intention of providing commentaries respectively to the *Aṭṭhakavagga* and *Pārāyaṇavagga* of the *Suttanipāta*. In addition to that, the present Pāli commentaries themselves point to some factors which are instrumental in providing fully-fledged commentaries to separate books of the canon, such as *Ācariyavāda* (traditional teachings), *Porāṇakā* (those who knew the ancient legends), *Bhāṇakā* (reciters), *Aṭṭhakathā-naya* (commentarial method) and so on.

For the above-mentioned reasons, we may presuppose that although Ven. *Mahinda* did not have a readymade complete set of commentaries that covered the whole range of canonical literature when he arrived in Sri Lanka, he would have had all the necessary component factors beforehand for him to start a project of the composition of commentaries after his arrival in Sri Lanka.

According to the commentarial tradition, both the canon and the commentaries brought to Sri Lanka were in the Magadha language and Ven. *Mahinda* translated only the commentaries into the Sinhala language for the benefit of the Sri Lankan people<sup>24</sup>. This traditional view also seems to be rather unplausible because one may ask what the purpose of translating commentaries into Sinhala is when the canon is in the Magadha language. On the other hand, commentaries do not provide word-by-word explanations of the canonical teachings. Even without the slightest knowledge of the canonical teachings, it is not easy to properly, grasp what is explained in the commentaries.

<sup>20</sup> S. iii. 2.

<sup>21</sup> M. i. 256.

<sup>22</sup> M. i. 46.

<sup>23</sup> M. i. 299.

<sup>24</sup> *Sihaladīpaṃ pana ābhatāttha vasiṇā mahā mahindena*  
*ṭhapitā sihalabhāsāya dīpavasiṇaṃ atthāya* - Rhys Davids, Estlin Carpenter, *Sumaṅgala vilāsiṇi: Buddhaghosa's Commentary on the Dīghanikāya*, I, Introductory verses. 9.

There is no evidence to show that the Pāli commentaries said to be brought to Sri Lanka by Ven. Mahinda existed at least up to the time that the Pāli canon was written in the books at the time of the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD during the reign of King *Vatṭagāmaṇi*. If there were Pāli commentaries brought to Sri Lanka, why did they completely disappear within the three hundred years before the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD?

It is possible that the foregoing inquiry leads to the fact that Ven. Mahinda brought the Pāli canon and the necessary component factors together with the commentarial method (*Aṭṭhakathā-naya*) and handed them over to his disciples, who were the Sri Lankan monks, and they composed the commentaries in the Sinhala language, which then became known as the *Sīhalaṭṭhakathā* on the basis of the methods and other necessary factors provided by Ven. *Mahinda*.

In any case, it is accepted that the present Pāli commentaries were based on the *Sīhala aṭṭhakathā* (Sinhalese commentaries) that existed before the 5<sup>th</sup> century AD, after which Ven. *Buddhaghosa* and other commentators composed the present commentaries. The *Sīhalaṭṭhakathā*, which were the primary sources of the present Pāli commentaries, are believed to have been composed during the period starting from the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC and ending in the 5<sup>th</sup> century AD.

Regarding the Sinhalese commentaries, Lakshmi R. Goonesekere is of the view:

Mahinda would have introduced the traditional commentaries, but during the centuries that followed his arrival other commentaries had developed, and at the time Buddhaghosa arrived on the island, i.e. in the early fifth century, there were commentaries belonging to different schools<sup>25</sup>.

We have no evidence to show that those original Sinhala commentaries existed for a very long time after the composition of the present Pāli commentaries. They were probably lost following the exit from Polonnaruwa in the 11<sup>th</sup>–12<sup>th</sup> centuries. However, we are fortunate enough to have collected some of the names of those commentaries as they were quoted in the present Pāli commentaries<sup>26</sup>.

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<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.* p. 17.

<sup>26</sup> See. Appendix II.



Most scholars who have researched the origin of Pāli Buddhist commentarial literature are of the view that the *Mahā-aṭṭhakathā* or *Mūla-aṭṭhakathā* can be the main commentary out of all the other commentaries which are reckoned to be Sinhalese commentaries<sup>27</sup>. It is quite evident that Ven. *Buddhaghosa* highly respected the *Mahā aṭṭhakathā* and he placed a great reliance on its accuracy. That is why he mentioned that he compiled the commentary to *Vinaya piṭaka* (*Samantapāsādikā*) taking the *Mahā-aṭṭhakathā* as the basis of it<sup>28</sup>. Though the Theravāda tradition claims that Ven. *Mahinda* brought the commentaries to Sri Lanka and translated them into the Sinhala language, it does not mention the commentaries by their names. Even though we accept *Mahā-aṭṭhakathā* as the commentary brought to Sri Lanka, respecting the tradition, there is no doubt that some of the commentaries listed above are the works of Sri Lankan monks who were inspired by the commentarial method brought to Sri Lanka by Ven. *Mahinda*. The *Mahā-aṭṭhakathā* is believed to be a commentary made for the entire canonical literature. The commentaries which are referred to as *Uttaravihāra-aṭṭhakathā*, *Mahā-paccariya-aṭṭhakathā*, and *Kurundi-aṭṭhakathā* can be regarded as separate and independent commentaries distinct from *Mahā Aṭṭhakathā*, for their names themselves clearly imply that they were composed by monks who lived outside of the *Mahāvihāra*. The *Uttara-vihāra-aṭṭhakathā* mentioned in the *Vaṃsatthappakāsini*<sup>29</sup> is supposed to be a commentary made by the monks who resided at the *Uttara-vihāra* or *Abhayagiri-vihāra* which was established in the 1st century BC; the *Mahāpaccari* is said to be a commentary composed on a raft by Sri Lankan monks; and the *Kurundi-aṭṭhakathā* received its name after the *Kurundavelu-vihāra*, the place in Sri Lanka where it was composed.

<sup>27</sup> Bimala Churn Law, *A History of Buddhist Literature* (New Delhi: Rekha Printers Pvt. Ltd. 2000), 379.

<sup>28</sup> *Samvannaṇam tanca samārabhanto; Tassā mahāaṭṭhakatham sarīram; Katvā mahāpaccariyam tatheva; Kurundīnamādisu viṣṣutāsu. Takakusu, Nagai, Samantapāsādikā: Buddhaghosa's Commentary on the Vinaya piṭka, (introduction).*

<sup>29</sup> G. P. Malalasekera, ed., *Mahāvamsa-ṭīkā: Vaṃsatthappakāsini* (London: Pali Text Society, 1935), I. 25; 55.

It is believed that the *Andhakatṭhakathā* and *Saṅkhepaṭṭhakathā* were not the Sinhala commentaries, though they were consulted by the Pāli commentators. In this regard, L. R. Goonesekere is of the view:

The *Andhaka-aṭṭhakathā* was very likely written in the *Andhaka* (Andhra) language. It may have belonged to the *Andhaka* school of south India as Ven. *Buddhaghosa* more often than not rejects its views. The *Saṅkhepa-aṭṭhakathā* or 'Short Commentary' quoted in the *Samantapāsādikā*, if it is to be accepted as written in south India, was probably also the product of a south Indian school<sup>30</sup>

It is not clearly known whether the commentaries coming under the *Sīhalatṭhakathā*, such as *Vinayaṭṭhakathā*, *Suttantaṭṭhakathā*, *Abhidhammaṭṭhakathā*, *Sīhalamātikatṭhakathā*, *Dīghaṭṭhakathā*, *Majjhimaṭṭhakathā*, *Samyuttaṭṭhakathā*, *Āṅguttaraṭṭhakathā*, *Jātakatṭhakathā*, and *Vibhaṅgappakaraṇassa Sīhalatṭhakathā*, were the component parts of the *Mahā Aṭṭhakathā* or independent commentaries belonging to the sections of the canon that their names implied.

The names *Uttaravihāra-aṭṭhakathā*, *Mahā-paccarī-aṭṭhakathā*, and *Kurundī-aṭṭhakathā* clearly imply that they were composed by monks who lived outside of the *Mahāvihāra*.

There is no doubt that the various commentaries that were composed by the Sri Lankan monks during the time between the arrival of Ven. *Mahinda* and the composition of the present Pāli commentaries in the fifth century have made a great contribution to the development of Theravāda Buddhism.

The commentaries provide not only clarifications of the meanings of the terms that appeared in the canon but also plenty of expositions of the deep and profound doctrinal concepts included in the canon. It should be mentioned here that the commentarial expositions of the teachings of the Buddha were extremely constructive for the Theravādins to establish their identity among the other schools of Buddhism.

Ven. *Buddhaghosa* commenting on *Sīhala Aṭṭhakathā* acknowledges the contribution made by the monks who resided at the *Mahāvihāra* for the enhancement of the identity of Theravāda. According to him,

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<sup>30</sup> Goonesekere, *Buddhist Commentarial Literature*,<sup>3</sup> 18.

the *Therā-s* of the *Mahāvihāra* had a system of explaining the Dhamma peculiar to them (*Therānaṃ samayaṃ*)<sup>31</sup> with the expert decisions (*sunīpuṇavinicchayaṇaṃ*)<sup>32</sup>. Ven. Buddhaghosa says that he tried to translate *Sīhalatṭhakathā* without distorting the commentarial tradition descending from the elders of the *Mahāvihāra*<sup>33</sup>.

Apart from the *Aṭṭhakathācariya*, who made the Sinhalese commentaries, another factor contributing to the progress of Theravāda Buddhism can be found among the Sri Lankan monks who were experts in the teachings of the Buddha, who were endowed with profound knowledge of certain sections of Buddhist teachings and capable enough to express their own decisions on some dubious matters of the Dhamma. Their opinions were accepted and included in some of the present Pāli commentaries by Ven. *Buddhaghosa*. According to Mrs L. R. Goonesekere, the views and opinions of the following were quoted in the Pāli commentaries: *Dīghabhāṇaka Tipiṭaka Mahāsiva*<sup>34</sup>, *Tipiṭaka Cūlābhaya*<sup>35</sup>, *Tipiṭaka Cūlanāga*<sup>36</sup>, *Tipiṭaka Mahā Dhammarakkhita*<sup>37</sup>, and Moravāpivāsī Mahādatta.<sup>38</sup>

### The First Writing Down of the Theravāda Canon

Another massive contribution made by the Sri Lankans to Theravāda Buddhism was the event of writing down the Theravāda canon in the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC in Sri Lanka for the first time in the history of Buddhism. From the origin of the Theravāda canon until the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC, it continued to be transmitted orally from generation to generation for nearly five hundred years among the Theravādins. It is said that a thousand monks who were Arahants and well-versed in the canon and com-

<sup>31</sup> Rhys Davids, Estlin Carpenter, *Sumaṅgala vilāsini: Buddhaghosa's Commentary on the Dīghanikāya*, I, Introductory verses. 9.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> *Samayaṃ avilomanto, therānaṃ theravaṃsapadipānaṃ; Sunīpuṇavinicchayaṇaṃ, Mahāvihārādhivāsinaṃ*. – Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> SA III 281.

<sup>35</sup> SA III 277, PugA 190.

<sup>36</sup> SA III 277; PugA 190.

<sup>37</sup> PugA 190; DhsA 267, 278, 286.

<sup>38</sup> DhsA 230, 267, 284, 286; Ps-a 405; VibhA 81.

mentaries gathered at the place called *Āloka Vihāra* (*Aluvihāra*), Mātale, Sri Lanka, and undertook the project of writing down not only the canon but also the commentaries during the reign of King *Vaṭṭagāmani* (29–17 BC)<sup>39</sup>.

The event of writing down the Pāḷi canon marks a very important juncture in the history of Buddhism. It was a very praiseworthy and intelligent step taken by the Sri Lankan Theravāda monastic community for the purity and the protection of the words of the Buddha. Before its writing down, the canon was in the collective memory of the members of the monastic order who were entrusted to preserve it. It was orally transmitted from generation to generation. In such a situation there would have been the possibility of the distortion of the message of the Buddha. On the other hand, when the canon depends on the hand of a few people, there is no certainty of its survival for the benefit of the generations to come. When taken into a fixed form by means of writing down in books, those possibilities would not arise.

We are fortunate that the writing down of the Pāḷi canon in books in the first century secured its originality with regards to its contents, though there may be writing errors due to it being copied from generation to generation until it was printed. If the Sri Lankan monks had not taken this step, there is no doubt that today we would not have the opportunity to talk about the original teachings of the Buddha (as the Theravādins believe) as recorded in the Pāḷi canon. It is an honour to the Sri Lankans that the Theravāda canon, which was protected by the Sri Lankans orally at first, was put into book form and has been recognized and accepted by all the Theravāda Buddhist countries existing today.

### Pāḷi Commentaries

As we have already seen according to Sri Lankan sources, the original Theravāda commentaries that were brought to Sri Lanka by Ven. Mahinda were translated into the Sinhala language and some other new commentaries were composed in Sinhala by the Sri Lan-

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<sup>39</sup> Mhv. XXXIII, 100.

kan monks. As they were in the Sinhala language, only those who were well versed in the Sinhala language were able to benefit from them. This might be the reason why the *Mahāvihāra* fraternity, which was the guardian of Theravāda Buddhism in Sri Lanka, permitted Ven. *Buddhaghosa* to translate the Sinhalese commentaries into Pāli which was recognized as the common religious language of Theravāda Buddhism, not only in Sri Lanka but also elsewhere. Also, when the canon was written in Pāli, the *Mahāvihāra* community of monks may have felt that it was not compatible to have the commentaries in the Sinhala language.

It is recorded that the Sinhalese commentaries, which were written down together with the Pāli canon in the 1<sup>st</sup> century, were translated into the Pāli language by Ven. *Buddhaghosa* and others starting in the fifth century in Sri Lanka<sup>40</sup>. When we examine the present Pāli commentaries, it is quite evident that they are not merely the direct translations of the corresponding earlier Sinhala commentaries. The system of the presentation of the contents of the present Pāli commentaries by the commentators itself provides us with quite enough evidence to show that the translations were made with revisions and other editorial changes. The great commentator Ven. *Buddhaghosa* himself records how he made the translation of *Dīghanikāyaṭṭhakathā* (*Sumaṅgalavilāsini*) as given below:

*Hitvā punappunāgataṃ atthaṃ pakāsayissāmi  
Sujanassaca tuṭṭhatthaṃ ciraṭṭhitatthañca dhamassa*<sup>41</sup>

(Having removed the repetitive meaning (of the Sinhala commentaries), I will reveal the meaning for the happiness of the good people and for the long life of the dispensation).

This fact is further attested by expressions such as *Mahā-aṭṭhakathāyaṃ sārāṃ ādāya* (having taken the essence of the *Mahā-aṭṭhakathā*), *Mūla-aṭṭhakathāyaṃ sārāṃ ādāya* (having taken the es-

<sup>40</sup> According to *Mahāvamsa*, the chronicle of Sri Lanka, the great commentator Ven. *Buddhaghosa* came to Sri Lanka during the reign of the King Mahānāma (406: 28 A.D.). See *Mahāvamsa* ch. xxxvii.

<sup>41</sup> Rhys Davids, Carpenter Estlin, *Sumaṅgalavilāsini: Buddhaghosa's Commentary on the Dīghanikāya, I. Introductory verses, 10.*

sence of *Mūlaṭṭhakathā*), and *Porāṇaṭṭhakathānaṃ sāraṃ ādāya* (having taken the essence of the *Porāṇaṭṭhakathā*) which appear in the present Pāli commentaries. These expressions clearly show that when they translated a Sinhala commentary, the Pāli commentators re-edited it without translating the entire text.

As the result of the translation project which took place during the 5th century AD in Sri Lanka, we now have commentaries in the Pāli language relating to nearly all the canonical texts. Those commentaries provide the necessary details supportive to understanding the contents of the canonical texts and also give explanatory notes on the meaning of the important words of the canon<sup>42</sup>.

Taken as a whole, these commentaries are a source of encyclopaedic knowledge that covers not only all the theoretical and practical aspects of Theravāda Buddhism but also the social, political, economic, religious, philosophical and historical aspects of India and Sri Lanka where Theravāda Buddhism came into existence and where it was firmly established. L. R. Goonesekere summarizing the contents of the Pāli commentaries observes:

“Most commentaries have, in the course of their explanations, incorporated various episodes, narratives, fables, and legends, whereby the commentators have unknowingly given us much information on the social, philosophical, and religious history of ancient India and Ceylon. Much geographical data and glimpses of political history are also contained in them. While some commentaries such as the *Dhammapadaṭṭhakathā*, *Jātaṭṭhakathā*, and *Dhammapāla’s Paramatthadīpanī* are rich in material on the social and economic history of Buddhist India, most of Buddhaghosa’s commentaries and the later ones, while containing material relating to India, throw a flood of light on the religious and secular history of Ceylon for centuries after Buddhism was introduced into the island. The history of Buddhism in Ceylon, the development of the monastery, the growth of worship and ritual, and the history of the *Saṅgha* can all be traced from the information furnished in them”<sup>43</sup>.

It is not an exaggeration to say that Theravāda establishes its identity distinct from other Buddhist sects mainly on the basis of the Pāli com-

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<sup>42</sup> See. Appendix III.

<sup>43</sup> Goonesekere, *Buddhist Commentarial Literature*, 43-44.

mentarial literature. Specifically, the Pāli *Abhidhamma* commentaries shed much light on this identity as they provide the necessary interpretations for the Dhamma theory of Theravāda which distinguishes it from other *Abhidharma* traditions.

### Visuddhimagga

The *Visuddhimagga*, written by the great commentator Ven. *Buddhaghosa*, is a compendious work on Theravāda Buddhism which includes a wide range of theoretical and practical teachings. It pays much attention to presenting a detailed account of the Theravāda meditative system in order to explain the path of purification leading to *Nibbāna*.

Moreover, the most valuable contribution made by Ven. *Buddhaghosa* through the *Visuddhimagga* to the academic world can be recognized when we examine his exposition of the doctrine of *Patīccasamuppāda* in the chapter called *Paññābhūminiddesa*. *Buddhaghosa* was able to give a comprehensive exposition to the doctrine of *Patīccasamuppāda* for the first time in the history of Theravāda, with the attestation of the teachings of the Buddha. Although the Buddha presented the teaching of *Patīccasamuppāda* consisting of twelve factors in order to explain the emergence and cessation of suffering, there was no decision among Buddhist scholars before *Buddhaghosa* whether those 12 factors belong to one singular lifetime of a being, or to the whole of *samsāric* existence. *Buddhaghosa* was the first scholar of the scholastic period to point out that the 12 links are to be applied in the *samsāric* context and not just in the one singular life span.

*Visuddhimagga* is recognized by the Theravāda Buddhist world as a comprehensive manual of the Theravāda system of path of purification which represents the entire *Brahmacariya* life in a systematic way by collecting relevant materials from the discourses of the Buddha.

### Ṭīkā-Sub-Commentaries

Another aspect of the exegetical literature of Theravāda tradition comes under the name of *Ṭīkā* (sub-commentaries), which are the commentaries on the commentaries (*Aṭṭhakathā*). Sub-commentaries

were composed in Sri Lanka sometimes after the compilation of the Pāli commentaries in order to clarify the ambiguities and any points that were vague in the commentaries. There is no doubt that the sub-commentaries shed much light on the commentaries and explain some matters that are not very clear. When the commentaries and the sub-commentaries are taken together, they provide all the necessary explanations for the Theravāda canonical teachings. It should be emphasized here that most of the sub-commentaries were composed by the Sri Lankan monks who were well versed in the *Mahāvihāra* tradition of interpretation<sup>44</sup>.

### Manuals (*Saṅgaha*)<sup>45</sup>

When we consider the factors contributing to the enhancement of Theravāda Buddhism, we cannot ignore the service rendered not only by the Pāli commentarial literature but also by different types of manuals (*Saṅgaha*) provided by the Sri Lankan monks who were well versed in the particular subjects of Buddhism that they were dealing with. It seems that the aim of the manuals is to collect and present their subject matters in a concise form for educational purposes. Bimala Churn Law in his *A History of Pāli Literature* introducing manual literature in Pāli observes:

“Although the subject matters of these manuals vary, one predominant feature of each of them is this that it presents its theme systematically in a somewhat terse and concise form, purporting to be used as a handbook of constant reference<sup>46</sup>”

### Conclusion

The Pāli canon that was written down by the Sri Lankan monastics and the exegetical literature that includes commentaries, sub-commen-

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<sup>44</sup> See. Appendix IV

<sup>45</sup> See. Appendix V.

<sup>46</sup> Bimala Churn Law, *A History of Buddhist Literature* (New Delhi: Rekha Printers Pvt. Ltd. 2000), 585.



taries, and manuals that were composed by the Sri Lankans were all accepted by the other Theravāda Buddhist countries such as Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos as their sources of Theravāda Buddhism. It is evident that the Theravāda monks of the Mahāvihāra fraternity in Sri Lanka contributed immensely to the establishment and nourishment of Theravāda Buddhism, both at home and in other countries.

There is historical evidence to confirm that Myanmar is one of the countries where Buddhism was reformed several times with the assistance of the Sri Lankan Theravāda monks from a time as early as the 11<sup>th</sup> century. It is said that King Anawrahta (1044–1077) took steps to reform Buddhism in Myanmar with the assistance of the Sri Lankan Theravāda scholars. During the reigns of Narathu (1167–1171), Naratheinkha (1171–1174), and Narapatisithu (1174–1211) Shin Uttarajiva who received higher ordination from the Sri Lankan Mahāvihāra monks was able to establish an Order in Myanmar in the form of the Mahāvihāra school in Sri Lanka (Sinhala Saṅgha). King Dhammazedī (1471–1492) is reported to have sent thousands of Burmese monks to obtain higher ordination from Sri Lanka with the training of the Mahāvihāra school.<sup>47</sup>

Not only Myanmar but other Theravāda Buddhist countries, namely, Thailand, Cambodia and Laos, have also been immensely influenced by Sri Lankan Theravāda Buddhism. With the effort of Parākramabāhu the Great (1153–1186), Theravāda Buddhism was consolidated in Sri Lanka. It is reported that receiving information about this Theravāda reform taking place in Sri Lanka, many monks from Burma, Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos came to Sri Lanka and obtained the higher ordination from Sinhalese monks. Regarding Buddhism in Thailand, Karuna Kusalasaya records in his *Buddhism in Thailand –Its Past and its Present*:

“Thailand also sent her Bhikkhus to Ceylon and thereby obtained the Upasampada vidhi (ordination rule) from Ceylon, which later became known in Thailand as Lankavaṃsa. This was about 1257 A.D. (B.E. 1800). Apparently, the early batches of bhikkhus who returned from Ceylon after studies, often

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<sup>47</sup> Jacques P. Leider, “Text, Linage, and Tradition in Burma: The Struggle for Norms and Religious Legitimacy under King Bodawphaya (1782–1819),” *The Journal of Burma Studies*, 9 (2004): 82–129, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jbs.2004.0000>.

accompanied by Ceylonese monks, established themselves first in Nakhon Sri Thammarat (south Thailand), for many of the Buddhist relics bearing definitely Ceylonese influence, such as Stupas and Buddha images, were found there. Some of these relics are still in existence today.”<sup>48</sup>

We may conclude by saying in no uncertain terms that Sri Lanka has made an invaluable contribution to Theravāda Buddhism from its arrival to Sri Lanka up to the present for its establishment and flourishing, not only throughout the island but also outside of it, and to keep it as a distinct tradition of Buddhism in the history of Buddhist thought.

### Abbreviations

DhsA	<i>Dhammasaṅgi Aṭṭhakathā</i>
Mhv	<i>Mahāvamsa</i>
M	<i>Majjhima-nikāya</i>
PugA	<i>Puggala-paññatti Aṭṭhakathā</i>
S.	<i>Saṃyutta-nikāya</i>
SA	<i>Saṃyutta-nikāya Aṭṭhakathā</i>
VibhA	<i>Vibhaṅga Aṭṭhakathā</i>
VinA	<i>Vinaya Aṭṭhakathā</i>

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<sup>48</sup> Karuna Kusalasaya, *Buddhism in Thailand: Its Past and its Present* (Sri Lanka, Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, Second Reprint 1983), 19.

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## Appendix I

### Names of the missionaries and the relevant countries.

<i>Names of the Missionary</i>	<i>Country</i>
<i>Thera Majjhantika</i>	<i>Kasmira and Gandhāra</i>
<i>Thera Mahādeva</i>	<i>Mahisamaṇḍala</i>
<i>Thera Rakkhita</i>	<i>Vanavāsī</i>
<i>Thera Yonaka Dhammarakkhita</i>	<i>Aparantikā</i>
<i>Thera Mahā Dhammarakkhita</i>	<i>Mahārāṭṭha</i>
<i>Thera Mahā Rakkhita</i>	<i>Yonaloka</i>
<i>Thera Majjhima</i>	<i>Himavantadesa</i>
<i>Thera Soṇa and Thera Uttara</i>	<i>Suvaṇṇabhūmi</i>
<i>Thera Mahinda together with the Thera-s Iṭṭhiya, Uttiya, Sambala, and Bhaddasāla, and the novice Sumana and upāsaka Bhaṇḍuka</i>	<i>Tambapaṇṇi (Sri Lanka).</i>

## Appendix II

The following names of *Sihalaṭṭhakathā* are found in the Pali commentaries:

- 1) *Mahā-aṭṭhakathā* or *Mūla-aṭṭhakathā*, also known as *Aṭṭhakathā*,
- 2) *Uttaravihāra-aṭṭhakathā*,
- 3) *Mahā-paccariya-aṭṭhakathā*,
- 4) *Kurundī aṭṭhakathā*,
- 5) *Andhakaṭṭhakathā*,
- 6) *Saṅkhepaṭṭhakathā*,
- 7) *Āgamaṭṭhakathā*,
- 8) *Porāṇaṭṭhakathā*,
- 9) *Pubbopadesaṭṭhakathā*, or *Pubbaṭṭhakathā*,
- 10) *Vinayaṭṭhakathā*,
- 11) *Suttantaṭṭhakathā*,
- 12) *Abhidhammaṭṭhakathā*,
- 13) *Sīhalamātikaṭṭhakathā*,
- 14) *Dīghaṭṭhakathā*,
- 15) *Majjhimaṭṭhakathā*,
- 16) *Sāmyuttaṭṭhakathā*,
- 17) *Āṅguttaraṭṭhakathā*,
- 18) *Jātakaṭṭhakathā* and
- 19) *Vibhaṅgappakaraṇassa Sīhalāṭṭhakathā*.

### Appendix III

The following is the list of Pāli commentaries which include the names of the canonical texts, names of the Pāli commentaries, and the names of the commentators in the format: *Mūla*; commentary; commentator.

#### Vinayaṭṭhaka

<i>Vinayaṭṭhaka (Pārājika, Pācittiya, Mahāvagga, Cullāvagga and Parivāra)</i>	<i>Samantapāsādikā</i>	<i>Buddhaghosa</i>
<i>Pātimokkha</i>	<i>Kaṅkhāvitarāṇi</i>	<i>Buddhaghosa</i>
<b>Suttapiṭaka</b>		
<i>Dīghanikāya</i>	<i>Sumaṅgalavilāsini</i>	<i>Buddhaghosa</i>
<i>Majjhimanikāya</i>	<i>Papañcasūdanī</i>	<i>Buddhaghosa</i>

<i>Samyuttanikāya</i>	<i>Sāratthappakāsini</i>	<i>Buddhaghosa</i>
<i>Aṅguttaranikāya</i>	<i>Manorathapūrani</i>	<i>Buddhaghosa</i>

### Khuddakanikāya

(i) <i>Khuddakapāṭha</i>	<i>Paramatthajotikā</i>	<i>Buddhaghosa</i> <sup>*49</sup>
(ii) <i>Dhammapada</i>	<i>Dhammapadaṭṭhakathā</i>	<i>Buddhaghosa</i> *
(iii) <i>Udāna</i>	<i>Paramatthadīpanī</i>	<i>Dhammapāla</i>
(iv) <i>Itivuttaka</i>	<i>Paramatthadīpanī</i>	<i>Dhammapāla</i>
(v) <i>Suttanipāta</i>	<i>Paramatthajotikā</i>	<i>Buddhaghosa</i> *
(vi) <i>Vimānavatthu</i>	<i>Paramatthadīpanī</i>	<i>Dhammapāla</i>
(vii) <i>Petavatthu</i>	<i>Paramatthadīpanī</i>	<i>Dhammapāla</i>
(viii) <i>Theragāthā</i>	<i>Paramatthadīpanī</i>	<i>Dhammapāla</i>
(ix) <i>Therīgāthā</i>	<i>Paramatthadīpanī</i>	<i>Dhammapāla</i>
(x) <i>Jātaka</i>	<i>Jātakaṭṭhakathā</i>	<i>Buddhaghosa</i> *
(xi) <i>Niddesa</i>	<i>Saddhammapajjotikā</i>	<i>Upasena</i>
(xii) <i>Paṭisambhidāmagga</i>	<i>Saddhammapakāsini</i>	<i>Mahānāma</i>
(xiii) <i>Apadāna</i>	<i>Visuddhajanavilāsini</i>	<i>Unknown</i>
(xiv) <i>Buddhavaṁsa</i>	<i>Madhuratthavilāsini</i>	<i>Buddhadatta</i>
(xv) <i>Cariyāpiṭaka</i>	<i>Paramatthadīpanī</i>	<i>Dhammapāla</i>

### Abhidhammapiṭaka

<i>Dhammasaṅgani</i>	<i>Atthasālinī</i>	<i>Buddhaghosa</i>
<i>Vibhaṅga</i>	<i>Sammohavinodanī</i>	<i>Buddhaghosa</i>
<i>The remaining five books: Dhātukathā, Puggalapaññatti, Kathāvatthu, Yamaka, and Paṭṭhāna</i>	<i>Pañcappakaraṇaṭṭhakathā</i>	<i>Buddhaghosa</i>

<sup>49</sup> The commentaries marked with an asterisk (\*) are attributed to Ven. Buddhaghosa, but the attribution is contested.

## Appendix IV

Among the sub-commentaries written in Sri Lanka, the following have been recognized as the most important.

Sub-commentaries on Vinaya commentaries (*Samantapāsādikā*)

<i>Vajirabuddhiṭṭikā</i>	<i>Sāriputta</i> (12th century)
<i>Sāratthadīpanī</i>	<i>Sāriputta</i> (do)
<i>Vimativinodani-ṭṭikā</i>	<i>Mahā Kassapa</i> (13th century)

## Sub-commentaries on Sutta-piṭaka Commentaries

<i>Dīghanikāyaṭṭhakathā-ṭṭikā</i> (sub-comm. on <i>Sumaṅgalavilasini</i> )	<i>Dhammapāla</i>
<i>Majjhimanikāyaṭṭhakathā-ṭṭikā</i> , (sub-comm. on <i>Papañcasūdanī</i> )	<i>Dhammapāla</i>
<i>Saṅyuttanikāyaṭṭhakathā-ṭṭikā</i> , (sub-comm. on <i>Sāratthappakāsini</i> )	<i>Dhammapāla</i>
<i>Ānguttaranikāyaṭṭhakathā-ṭṭikā</i> , <i>Sāratthamañjusā</i> , (sub-comm. on <i>Manorathapūranī</i> )	<i>Sāriputta</i>

The first three sub-commentaries were attributed to Ven. Dhammapāla (who is considered to be different from the commentator Dhammapāla) while the last is attributed to Ven. Sāriputta.

## Sub-commentaries on the Abhidhamma commentaries

<i>Atthasālinimūlaṭṭikā</i>	<i>Ānanda</i>
<i>Vibhaṅgamūlaṭṭikā</i>	<i>Ānanda</i>
<i>Pancappakaraṇamūlaṭṭikā</i>	<i>Ānanda</i>

These three sub-commentaries are considered to be *Abhidhamma mūlaṭṭik*. Sometimes, they are also known as *Mūlaṭṭikā*. Authority of the *Mūlaṭṭikā* is ascribed to a Sri Lankan monk called *Ānanda*.

Sub-commentary on *Visuddhimagga*

*Paramatthamañjūsā*

*Dhammapala*

(*Visuddhimaggamahāṭīkā*)

Appendix V

The manuals composed in Sri Lanka by the erudite monks can be listed as follows:

Manuals relating to the subject of *Vinaya*

<i>Vinayavinicchaya</i>	<i>Buddhadatta</i>
<i>Uttaravinicchaya</i>	<i>Buddhadatta</i>
<i>Khuddakasikkhā</i>	<i>Dhammasiri</i>
<i>Mūlasikkhā</i>	<i>Mahā sāmi</i>
<i>Pāḷimuttakavinayavinicchayaśāṅgha</i>	<i>Sāriputta</i>

Manuals relating to the subject of *Abhidhamma*

<i>Abhidhammaṭṭha-śāṅgha,</i>	<i>Ācariya Anuruddha</i>
<i>Paramatthavinicchaya</i>	<i>Ācariya Anuruddha</i>
<i>Abhidhammāvatāra</i>	<i>Buddhadatta</i>
<i>Rūpārūpavibhāga</i>	<i>Buddhadatta</i>
<i>Saccasaṅkhepa</i>	<i>Ananda<sup>50</sup></i>
<i>Mohavicchedanī</i>	<i>Kassapa</i>
<i>Khemappakarāṇa</i>	<i>Khema</i>
<i>Nāmarūpapariccheda</i>	<i>Ācariya Anuruddha</i>

<sup>50</sup> Ven. *Ananda* who is considered to be the *teacher of* Ven. *Dhammapāla*