

A Note on the Term *Theravāda*

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ABSTRACT

With the present article I study the trajectory of the term theravāda from its earliest occurrence in the Pāli canon to its present day usage as a designation of the form of Buddhism found in Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia. My presentation begins with the term theravāda in the Pāli discourses, followed by turning to the Pāli commentaries and chronicles. Next I examine the role of the Pāli canon in the Theravāda tradition and the conception of Theravāda as a monastic lineage, after which I discuss current usage and survey alternative terms.

Keywords

Pāli Canon, South- and Southeast Asian Buddhism, ‘Theravāda’

THERAVĀDA IN THE PĀLI DISCOURSES

The term *theravāda* occurs already in the discourses collected in the Pāli canon. The *Ariyapariyesanā-sutta* of the *Majjhima-nikāya* reports that this expression was used by the future Buddha Gotama when narrating his apprenticeship under two Indian teachers during the time before his awakening. In this context, the expression *theravāda* refers to his mastery of the kind of teachings that were apparently passed on by the two teachers Āḷāra Kālāma and Uddaka Rāmaputta to their disciples.¹ The same expression recurs in other Pāli discourses that report the same event.²

1. MN 26 at MN I 164,4: *tāvataken’eva oṭṭhapahatamattena lapitalāpanamattena nāṇavādañ ca vadāmi theravādañ ca jānāmi passāmi ti ca paṭijānāmi*, ‘as far as mere lip-reciting and mere repetition were concerned, I [could] say the sayings of knowledge and the sayings of the elders, and claim that I knew and saw them’; the passage is repeated at MN I 165,24 (here and elsewhere, translations are my own unless otherwise indicated).
2. MN 36 at MN I 240,26, MN 85 at MN II 93,19 and MN 100 at MN II 212,1 (E^c abbreviates).

A reference to the teachings learned by the future Buddha Gotama is not found in a discourse parallel to the *Ariyapariyesanā-sutta*, which is part of a *Madhyama-āgama* preserved in Chinese translation, a collection probably transmitted within the Sarvāstivāda tradition(s).³ Nor does such a reference occur in Sanskrit fragments that report this same episode.⁴ The same holds for other texts that record the apprenticeship of the future Buddha under these two teachers, such as the Dharmaguptaka *Vinaya*, the *Lalitavistara*, the *Mahāvastu* of the Mahāsāṃghika-Lokottaravāda *Vinaya*, and the Mūlasarvāstivāda *Vinaya*.⁵

A description of the future Buddha's apprenticeship in the *Buddhacarita* does have a reference to the teachings he learned at this stage. However, this description has no counterpart to the expression *theravāda*.⁶ Thus the occurrence of the term *theravāda* in the account of the apprenticeship of the future Buddha under Ālāra Kālāma and Uddaka Rāmaputta is unique to the Pāli canon.

The Pāli commentary on the *Ariyapariyesanā-sutta* takes this reference to imply that Gotama declared his certainty about the teachings of Ālāra Kālāma and Uddaka Rāmaputta.⁷ Considered within its narrative context, I do not find this explanation compelling, since the *Ariyapariyesanā-sutta* continues with Gotama approaching his teachers to find out what they had actually realized. This description conveys the impression that he was aware of the need for some personal realization beyond the type of knowing and seeing that comes from theoretical knowledge. Such awareness would make it less natural for him to claim that he had reached certainty when he had not yet reached any realization himself. Thus I propose that in the present context the term *thera* has the same sense 'elder' that it has elsewhere in the four Pāli *Nikāyas*,⁸ and that the commentarial gloss is the outcome of discomfort with the term *theravāda* standing for non-Buddhist teachings.⁹

3. Anālayo 2012, 516–521.

4. MĀ 204 at T I 776b11, translated Anālayo 2011a, 25, and fragment 330r8 to 331v1 in Liu 2010, 105 (which strictly speaking is actually a parallel to MN 36). The Sanskrit fragment parallel to MN 85 in Silverlock 2009, 111 and the Sanskrit fragment parallel to MN 100 in Zhang 2004, 48 abbreviate the relevant part.

5. T 1428 at T XXII 780b9, Lefmann 1902, 238,²¹ Senart 1890, 118,^s (on the *Vinaya* nature of this work cf. Tournier 2012) and Gnoli 1977, 97,⁶.

6. Stanzas 12:16–42 in Johnston 1936/1995a, 130–133; on the significance of these stanzas and the possible philosophical tenets of the two teachers cf., e.g., Oldenberg 1898, 681–684, Senart 1907, 153, Strauß 1913, 258, Thomas 1933/2004, 80, Johnston 1936/1995b, lvi–lxii, Malalasekera 1937/1995, 296f, Bhagat 1976, 156, Nakamura 1979, 275, Schumann 2006, 85f and Wynne 2007, 42–49.

7. Ps II 171,¹⁵: *theravādan ti thirabhāvavādāṃ, thero aham etthā ti etaṃ vacanaṃ*, translated by Gethin 2012, 6 note 11 as 'a *theravāda* is [a] declaration of being certain; "I am sure of this" is what is meant.'

8. Which need not be Buddhist elders, cf., e.g., AN 4.22 at AN II 22,¹⁶ where on being reproved by Brahmins for not paying respect to old Brahmins, the Buddha points out that these Brahmins do not know what a *thera* is or what are the qualities that make one a *thera*. Here the term clearly refers to elders in general, including Brahmin elders.

9. Gethin 2012, 6, who finds the commentarial explanation acceptable, nevertheless also comments that 'it is, of course, possible that because of the negative context here the commentary deliberately chooses to avoid an explanation in terms of "declaration of the elders".'

An alternative interpretation would be to take the reference in the *Ariyapariyesanā-sutta* to *theravāda* to mean that Gotama had learnt some theory from the elder disciples of Ālāra and Uddaka. This is in fact the sense adopted by the majority of translators of this passage.¹⁰ A possible scenario would then be that Ālāra and Uddaka had handed over the duty of providing basic theoretical instructions to their senior disciples, in order not to have to give the same catechism over and again each time a new disciple joined the group.¹¹ After having learned the *theravāda* from these senior disciples — where I would take the term *theravāda* to convey the sense of ‘sayings of the elders’ and not necessarily of a full-fledged ‘doctrine of the elders’ — the neophyte would then approach the master for further clarification of specific points, which is in fact precisely what Gotama did according to the report given in the *Ariyapariyesanā-sutta*. On this interpretation of the elders Ālāra or Uddaka and their disciples would stand in a natural continuity to references in later Pāli literature to *theravāda* as sayings of Buddhist elders.

THERAVĀDA IN THE PĀLI COMMENTARIES AND CHRONICLES

The term *theravāda* occurs in several passages in the Pāli commentarial tradition.¹² In the commentary on the *Vinaya*, a reference to the ‘sayings of the elders’, *theravāda*, stands for the opinion of some unspecified elders. The *Vinaya* commentary explains that such *theravāda* should never override the presentation in the actual canonical texts, which are referred to in the commentarial tradition as the *pāli*.¹³ Elsewhere the same *Vinaya* commentary also uses the term *theravāda* as a reference to the Pāli canon, together with its commentaries.¹⁴

The Ceylonese chronicle *Dīpavaṃsa* (4.6) in fact defines the expression *theravāda* as a referent to the sayings that according to the traditional account

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10. Chalmers 1926, 115 renders *theravāda* in his translation of MN 26 as ‘the elders’ exposition’ of their founder’s message, and Horner 1967, 208 as the ‘doctrine of the elders’ (accompanied by an explicit reference to the commentarial explanation in note 2); cf. also Neumann 1896/1995, 186: ‘das Wort der älteren Jünger’, and Bareau 1963, 13 ‘doctrine des doyens’. The same sense recurs also in dictionary entries related to the passage in MN 26, cf. Rhys Davids and Stede 1921/1993, 310: ‘the doctrine of the Theras’, and Cone 2010, 359: ‘the statements of elders; what the elders say’ (followed by quoting the passage in MN 26 and the commentarial gloss). Nāṇamoli 1995/2005, 257, however, follows the commentary and renders *theravāda* as ‘I could speak with ... assurance’. Witanachchi 2008, 312 is of course right in pointing out that the passage in question could not be referring to any form of Theravāda Buddhism, given that this takes place before the Buddha’s awakening, but it seems to me that the sense of *theravāda* as the ‘sayings of the elders’ — in this case obviously not Buddhist elders — does yield a meaningful reading of the present passage.
 11. Commenting on the present passage, Guruge 2003, 340 notes that ‘there is no doubt that each hermitage had a body of knowledge which was imparted to the disciples ... meditation according to the theory and principles of Yoga was mastered through application with the guidance of peers.’
 12. In his detailed survey of occurrences of the expression, Gethin 2012, 7 explains that in the commentaries ‘in the majority of instances *theravāda* appears to be used simply and unproblematically to refer to “the opinion or view of an elder or elders”, where the elders are monks of some authority.’
 13. Sp I 231,¹⁴ the passage has been translated in Gethin 2012, 8.
 14. Sp I 52,⁷ where the term occurs in a description of Mahinda’s ability to learn the canon and the commentaries within three years.

were collected by the elders at the first *saṅgīti* (a term I prefer to render as the ‘first communal recitation’ instead of the commonly used ‘first council’),¹⁵ a definition found similarly in the *Mahāvamsa* (3.40). While the idea of maintaining the teachings collected by the elders at the first council is of course common to different Buddhist schools, what the Ceylonese chronicles have in mind is the Pāli recension of these teachings in the way these were transmitted to Ceylon.

According to the record of the first communal recitation in the Theravāda *Vinaya*, the teachings were collected in the form of the five *Nikāyas* and the *Vinaya* of the Pāli canon.¹⁶ From the viewpoint of the Ceylonese chronicles these are thus the ‘Sayings of the Elders’ – the *theravāda* – par excellence, to which from a traditional viewpoint the *Abhidhamma-piṭaka* should probably be added, albeit this is not mentioned explicitly in the account of the first *saṅgīti*.

This provides the background for appreciating the usage of the term elsewhere in the *Dīpavaṃsa* and in the commentary on the *Kathāvatthu*, where this expression stands in contrast to the seventeen *nikāyas* or Buddhist schools that – from the viewpoint of the *Dīpavaṃsa* and the *Kathāvatthu* – seceded from the Theravāda tradition.¹⁷ Thus the proper name Theravāda for the Buddhist tradition nowadays found in Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia has its root in the conception of *theravāda* as the Pāli canon,¹⁸ in the sense that the Theravāda school is the tradition that transmits and follows the Pāli recension of the canon that according to the traditional account had been recited by the elders at the time of the first *saṅgīti* – the *theravāda*.

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15. Oldenberg 1879, 31,2: *pañcasatehi therehi dhammavinayasamgaho, therehi katasamgaho theravādo ‘ti vuccati*, ‘the collection of the teaching and the discipline [was made] by the five hundred elders, this collection made by the elders is called *theravāda*’; with the expression ‘communal recitation’ I follow the formulation already used by Gombrich 1990, 25 and Cousins 1991, 27; on the term *saṅgīti* cf., e.g., Tilakaratne 2000 and Skilling 2009a, 55–60.
16. The account of the first *saṅgīti* at Vin II 287,8 reports that Upāli recited the twofold *Vinaya* or *Vibhaṅga* (i.e., the texts that provide the rules for monks and for nuns together with background narrations and explanations), *ubhatovinaye* (B^e and C^e: *ubhatovibhaṅge*), while Ānanda recited the five collections (of discourses), Vin II 287,27: *pañca nikāye* (B^e and C^e: *pañca pi nikāye*).
17. Kv-a 3,13: *aṭṭhārasanikāyā ... etesu pana sattarasa vādā bhinnakā, theravādo asambhinnako ti veditabbo*, ‘the eighteen schools ... of these seventeen doctrines should be seen as schismatic, the Theravāda as non-schismatic.’ This statement serves as the introduction to a quotation from the *Dīpavaṃsa* on the arising of the different sects. The *Dīpavaṃsa* in fact similarly considers the seventeen doctrines as schismatic, in contrast to the one doctrine that is non-schismatic, Oldenberg 1879, 37,26: *sattarasa bhinnavādā eko vādo abhinnako*, which the next stanza then indicates to be the supreme Theravāda (Gethin 2012: 11f points out that in this passage *theravāda* need not be taken as the name of the Theravāda school, but may just convey the sense of the doctrine of the Theriyas). *Mahāvamsa* 33.97 then goes further, as it considers even the monks of the Abhayagiri to have split from the Theravāda maintained by the Mahavihāra; cf. the discussion in Gethin 2012, 47–49.
18. On the idea of the Buddhist canon in general and on the Pāli canon in particular cf., e.g., Winternitz 1920/1968, 1–288, Renou 1953/2001, 327–351, Warder 1961, Webb 1975, Dhirasekera 1977, Bechert 1979/1993, 66–79, Lancaster 1979, Bond 1982, Norman 1983, Ray 1985, Gómez 1987, Hirakawa 1987, Lancaster 1987, Collins 1990, Hazra 1994, von Hinüber 1996/1997, Oberlies 2000, Freiburger 2004, Harrison 2004, Freiburger 2011, Kleine 2011 and Salomon 2011.

THE ROLE OF THE PĀLI CANON

For the later tradition, the conception of ‘Sayings of the Elders’ as representing the Pāli recension of the texts held to have been recited at the first *saṅgīti* thus furnishes the basic reference point for the sense of identity of the Theravāda school. The basic reference point provided by the Pāli canon would in turn have invested the language in which the texts have been preserved with an aura of sanctity. As explained by Skilling (2009b, 64), ‘the preservation, transmission, and study of the Pali canon and the use of Pāli as a liturgical language — by monastics and laity — is one distinctive and unifying feature of the Theravādin lineages ... Pali was a resource, a database, that offered stability and continuity to a congeries of constantly evolving traditions.’

According to Gunawardana (2005, 56f), ‘widely dispersed and disparate *territoria* where Buddhism prevailed were linked on the basis of the common adherence to the Buddha’s teaching and to shared ritual. This link was kept alive throughout history by movements of religious, texts, relics and images from one centre to another’. Moreover, ‘while shared texts, interpretations of the texts and ritual distinguished the “World of Theravāda Buddhism” from the rest of the “Buddhist World”, its dominant characteristic was the common use of the Pāli language. Obviously, local languages were often used, but Pāli was always accorded the premier place.’

In sum, in the words of Gombrich (1988, 3), ‘hallmarks of Theravāda Buddhism are the use of Pali as its main sacred language and dependence on the Pali version of the Buddhist Canon as its sacred scripture.’

The Theravāda commentarial tradition derives its authority from the claim that it explains the Pāli canon correctly. In fact, the commentary on the *Digha-nikāya* makes quite explicitly the point that, wherever the commentarial tradition or one’s own reasoning is found to disagree with the canonical texts, the canonical presentation is to be given preference.¹⁹

Moving from texts to actual living situations, in a Theravāda setting monastics are considered authoritative if they are able to teach in accordance with the *theravāda* qua Pāli canon. This can take place just by teaching a *jātaka* tale (which in the traditional setting is perceived as canonical, in spite of the actual commentarial status of the *jātaka* prose narratives) or by using Pāli terms for ritual activities,²⁰ irrespective of whether these terms are actually understood by the audience or by the monastics involved.

19. Sv II 568,1, cf. the discussion in Adikaram 1946/1994, 15.

20. Regarding ritual activities it might be pertinent to note that the ‘Sayings of the Elders’ provide precedents for the employment of *parittas*, protective charms, so that such practices need to be recognized as integral to the conception of Theravāda Buddhism from the outset. One such precedent is a discourse explicitly designated for use as a protective charm against malevolent spirits, DN 32 at DN III 194,²⁰ which has a parallel in T 1245 at T XXI 271a7; for Sanskrit fragment parallels cf. Hoernle 1916/1970, 24–27, Hoffmann 1939, Waldschmidt 1961/1967, Sander 1987, 193–208, Hartmann 1991, 65–70, Bechert and Wille 2004 (SHT IX 2161, 2256, 2384, 2402, 2487, 2814), Sander 2007, Karashima and Wille 2009, 97 (Or. 15004/100), Dietz 2011; for a Tibetan parallel cf. Skilling 1994, 460–562, with a study in Skilling 1997, 553–579; for Uighur fragments cf. Maue 1985. Another relevant discourse would be the *Ratana-sutta* (Sn 222–238), cf. also Khp 3,27 (no. 6), in which case it is only the commentary, Pj II 278,1, that explicitly indicates its use as a *paritta*. A parallel to the *Ratana-sutta* can be found in the *Mahāvastu*, Senart 1882, 290,11; for a study of these and other texts that contain parallels to

The Pāli canon as the ‘Sayings of the Elders’ is of course an ideological construct and does not require that the texts collected in this canon be actually read or heard by all those who consider themselves to be following the tradition of the ‘Sayings of the Elders’.²¹ In the words of Collins (1990, 104), ‘the actual importance of what we know as the Pali Canon has not lain in the specific texts collected in that list, but rather in the *idea* of such a collection.’²²

Taking a lead from the well-known Buddhist motif of the wheel of Dharma, I would visualize the ‘Sayings of the Elders’ — the Pāli canon — as comparable to the fixed axle of a wheel.²³ Around this axle the ever changing Theravāda Buddhisms (plural) revolve, each with its own distinct mixture of Buddhist, indigenous and other beliefs, expressing themselves in what we now refer to as the Pāli language, as well as in vernaculars, catering for the ritual and other needs of their respective populations. All of these different aspects, which of course are equally worthy of our attention and study, acquire their Theravādin significance by in some way standing in a relation to the axle of the wheel, the *theravāda* or the ‘Sayings of the Elders’ collected in the Pāli canon.²⁴

THERAVĀDA AS A MONASTIC LINEAGE

Understood in this way, the sense of Theravāda as a monastic lineage is just one aspect of the broader sense of *theravāda* qua Pāli canon. This monastic lineage takes its directional input from adherence to the rules and regulations in the way these have been recorded in the Pāli *Vinaya* — part of the ‘Sayings of the Elders’ — and explained in the respective commentarial tradition. This sense of Theravāda as a referent to the Buddhisms of Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia, with the Pāli canon as a central reference point, is of course different from Sthavira as a term relevant to the history of monastic lineages and Buddhist schools in India. In fact the term **sthaviravāda* does not appear to be attested at all.²⁵ Thus the expression Theravāda is sufficiently distinct from Sthavira and need not be

the prose tale and the stanzas cf. Skilling 1997, 581–613. On the topic of protective Buddhist literature in the Buddhist traditions in general cf. Skilling 1992.

21. Cf. also the useful distinction between a formal canon and a practical canon proposed by Blackburn 2003.
22. Cf., e.g., Seeger 2009, 3f, who notes that ‘historiographically, there are ample references that demonstrate the importance and authority of the Pali canon in Thai history ... the historical importance of the Pali canon should not, however, disguise the fact that Pali canonical core teachings, like the Four Noble Truths, the Three Characteristics of Being, the Dependent Origination or the Noble Eightfold Path, have not had a major influence on Thai culture and religious life.’ Seeger 2009, 4 quotes the report by a Thai Pali scholar that in numerous monasteries in Thailand the Pali canon is kept in a locked cabinet, which is not opened to preserve the texts from destruction and since, even if it were opened, ‘no-one will understand it anyway’.
23. Somewhat similarly Sucitto 2012, 87 defines Theravāda as a tradition of ‘teachings whose axis is the Pali Canon’; cf. also Bond 1982, ix, who explains that ‘Theravada Buddhism is a “religion of the book.” It has at its center a body of authoritative scripture, the *Tiṭṭaka*. This vast and diverse canon of scripture constitutes the foundation and source of the Theravada tradition.’
24. How this relation is then actually defined is of course subject to differing interpretations; cf., e.g., Seeger 2007 on the case of Thai Theravāda.
25. Skilling 2009b, 65 explains that “‘Sthaviravāda’ and ‘Sthaviravādin’ are ghost words. They are Sanskrit neologisms coined on the analogy of Pali “Theravāda”, and they have not been found in any Sanskrit text.’

taken as invariably involving an implicit claim to being the sole legitimate heir of all Sthavira traditions.

The Pāli canon, and in particular the Pāli *Vinaya*, as what provides a shared sense of identity among monastics of Burma, Sri Lanka and Thailand, etc., is also what enables them to recognize and import ordinations lineages from each other. The validity of ordination is a rather touchy issue in monastic circles and at times has become a matter of dispute among monks living in the same country. Thus the fact that Sri Lankan monks and Southeast Asia monks imported and continued ordination lineages that stemmed from outside of their own countries is a definite mark of a shared sense of institutional identity as an integral aspect of the history of Theravāda Buddhism in these countries.

When evaluating such exchange of monastic lineages, the literalist approach that otherwise characterizes Theravāda monastic attitudes needs to be kept in mind as a contrastive example. An example of this approach can be seen in relation to the canonical instructions that restrict a monastic to possessing only three robes. In order to have more robes without breaking the rule, one simply needs to call an additional robe by another name, naming it a ‘requisite cloth’, since for such cloth no ownership limitations apply.²⁶ This example shows the importance of the canonical scripture as a fixed reference point, as a consequence of which adaptation to changing circumstances takes place only within the scope of what is possible while maintaining the literal form of the canonical injunction.

This in turn implies that the preoccupation with the Pāli canon is not entirely a modern invention caused by Western influence, although this indubitably has had an impact.²⁷ With the basic idea of the centrality of the Pāli canon already evident in the definition given in the *Dīpavaṃsa* of the term *theravāda*, the type of legalist interpretation of the *Vinaya* in the example cited above shows that this was not mere rhetoric, but something of direct importance to actual monastic life.

THE RAVĀDA IN CURRENT USAGE

While there clearly is continuity in the sense of shared identity based on the ‘Sayings of the Elders’, tradition did not consistently use the term *theravāda* to refer to this sense of identity. According to the detailed research by Perreira (2012, 550), the expression ‘Theravāda Buddhism’ as a term covering the Buddhist traditions of Burma, Sri Lanka and Thailand, etc., only becomes noticeable in Western writing in the early twentieth century, replacing the earlier usage of ‘Southern Buddhism’ and ‘Hīnayāna’. Perreira (2012, 554) then identifies the first such occurrence in a publication by the Burma-ordained British monk Ānanda Metteyya and concludes that Ānanda Metteyya ‘was himself the source of our modern use of “Theravāda” — and not a Burmese text or Burmese informant.’

Yet, the sense of Theravāda identity that I have been describing above is evident, for example, in the eighteenth century Burmese work *Vaṃsadīpanī*.²⁸ This work is basically a history of the tradition from the time of the Buddha to eight-

26. The expression to be used is *parikkhāraṇa*; cf. the discussion in Kieffer-Pülz 2007, 35–45; the rule permitting the *parikkhāraṇa* is found at Vin I 296,32.

27. Hallisey 1995, 43 speaks of a ‘productive’ elective affinity’ between the positivist historiography of European Orientalism and Buddhist styles of self-representation.’

28. Cf. also the discussion in Skilling 2012, xx and Perreira 2012, 553f.

eenth century Burma, compiled to give background and authority to the practice that novices should cover both shoulders with the robe when going outside, instead of leaving one shoulder uncovered. In terms of genre, the *Vaṃsadīpanī* stands in a continuity of *sāsana-katikāvata* literature from twelfth century Sri Lanka; its colophon explains that it ‘recounts the lineage of Theravāda luminaries who propagated the noble Sāsana’, ‘so that future generations might easily comprehend the history of those elders who held fast to the rules of discipline laid down by the Blessed One.’²⁹

Pace Ferreira (2012, 553f), the question here is not whether the Burma-ordained monk Ānanda Metteyya had personal acquaintance with a manuscript of this particular work. The point is rather that the *Vaṃsadīpanī* clearly shows that Burmese monks were sufficiently familiar with the conception *theravāda* for it to be employed as a source of authority in a polemical discussion.

Besides the occurrence of the expression in this work, the term *theravāda* in the commentary on the *Kathāvatthu* and in the Ceylonese chronicles does designate the Theravāda tradition as distinct from other Buddhist schools.³⁰ This concept of the Theravāda tradition must have been known in Burmese and Sri Lankan monastic circles, so that Ānanda Metteyya could easily have come to know of it, in some form or another, from his monastic teachers in Burma or during his previous stay in Sri Lanka, when he apparently learned Pāli.³¹

In fact Ānanda Metteyya himself points to the Pāli commentaries, the Ceylonese chronicles and Oldenberg’s introduction to the PTS edition of the *Vinaya* as sources for his usage.³² The report of the schisms in chapter 5 of the *Mahāvamsa*, which uses the term *theravāda* in the sense of a school, was already edited by Turnour (1836, 22) and thus available at a time when academic study of Buddhism in the West was in its beginning stages.³³ In his Pāli dictionary, Childers (1875/1993, 545) discusses the term and points out that Turnour’s rendering of the term *theravāda* was not correct. Oldenberg (1879/1997, xli) then speaks of the Sri Lankan tradition as the Theravādī school.³⁴ Thus Ānanda Metteyya was not the first to use the term Theravāda in the sense of a school, and the sources that apparently inspired his usage were available in the West already before his departure to Asia.³⁵

29. Pranke 2004, 15 and 279.

30. Kv-a 3,13, for the full quote see above note 17.

31. For a biographical sketch of Ānanda Metteyya cf., e.g., Harris 1998; cf. also Harris 2013.

32. Metteyya 1908, 175 note 1 explains that ‘the word Theravāda really means “The Tradition of the Elders”’, followed by referring to ‘the way in which this word is employed in ancient Commentaries and in the Sinhalese Chronicles’ and to Oldenberg’s ‘Introduction to his Pāli Text of the Vinaya, vol. I, p. xli foll.’; Ferreira 2012, 551 was aware of this passage.

33. This has already been noted by Bretfeld 2012, 290, who points out that ‘the word Theravāda in the sense of a parental branch of monastic lineages was already known since 1837, when George Turner published ... the “Great Chronicle”.’

34. Oldenberg 1879/1997, xli in a discussion of the ‘Sinhalese church’ mentions ‘the name Theravādī ... which the followers of this school applied to themselves’, followed by discussing the alternative ‘Vibhajjavādī’. The edition and translation of the *Dīpavaṃsa* by Oldenberg 1879 was published in the same year.

35. Given the precedent from Oldenberg and the fact that Ānanda Metteyya shows clear awareness of the use of the term in the Pāli commentaries and chronicles, I find it only natural that Ānanda Metteyya should refer to the Theravāda as a school (‘l’école Theravada’),

When evaluating the current usage of ‘Theravāda’ as a designation for the sense of shared identity among Buddhists in countries like Burma, Sri Lanka and Thailand, two questions need to be asked: 1) does the same term occur earlier in a related meaning?, and 2) has the sense of identity to which it refers now already been in existence before?³⁶ It seems to me that both questions receive a clear affirmative reply. The term itself is old and what it now refers to is similarly an ancient phenomenon. In other words, the sense of shared Buddhist identity among countries of South and Southeast Asia, to which the expression Theravāda refers, has roots that extend far beyond the beginning of the twentieth century. As pointed out in general by Bretfeld (2012, 275), ‘we have to be cautious that the rhetoric of ‘construction’ and ‘invention’ does not draw our attention only to the historical breaks or make us lose the sight of the continuities as well as the amount of Asian agency and traditional resources involved in these processes.’

The present-day usage of the term has been the object of criticism in recent times. Thus, for example, Assavavirulhakarn (2010, 188) queries ‘can we even use the term “Theravāda Buddhism”, which has been so misunderstood and misapplied in both conceptual and historical contexts?’³⁷ Of course, the possibility of misunderstanding and misapplication is inherent in the limitations that go with any concept. Thus exchanging one concept for another would not necessarily provide a long-term solution. In fact, as pointed out by Skilling (2009b, 80), to ‘propose that we abandon the use of the term Theravāda – that would be absurd.’ Besides being absurd, to propose abandoning the term Theravāda would also require identifying a viable alternative. As pointed out by Nattier (2003, 195 note 3) in a different context, ‘simply arguing against existing scholarly distinctions rather than offering clearly contextualized alternatives ... leaves the waters muddier than before.’

ALTERNATIVE TERMS

In what follows, I briefly survey several terms that have been used as alternatives to the expression Theravāda, listed in the order of the English alphabet as follows: Hīnayāna, Mahāvihāravāsin, Pāli Buddhism, South and Southeast Asian Buddhism or Southern Buddhism, Śrāvakayāna, Tāmraśāṭīya, and Vibhajjavāda.

quoted in Perreira 2012, 550). Pace Perreira 2012, 466, in the publications by Turnour 1836 and Oldenberg 1879/1997 the term Theravāda is not merely ‘used as a technical term signifying the teachings and precepts propounded by the Buddha’, but already carries the sense of a Buddhist tradition or school.

36. As Kirichenko 2009, 25 comments in a paper on a closely related topic, ‘the crux of the question is whether the introduction of new terminology reflected meaningful changes in ideas and practices.’
37. Assavavirulhakarn 2010, 188 explains that for him ‘the problem stems, in part, from the scholarly work done by German and British Indologists and Buddhologists in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. They believed that Theravāda Buddhism was closest to the early or primitive Buddhism taught by the Buddha himself. However, if we examine the early Indian context, there is no “pure” or “primitive” aspect of any of the religions, and certainly no “ism” existed.’ I am not sure why the assumption that Theravāda Buddhism is closer to early Buddhism than other Buddhist traditions is so problematic that this makes the very use of term Theravāda questionable, nor is it clear to me that Indian religions in general or Buddhism in particular would not have gone through a ‘primitive’ (i.e. early) stage.

‘Hīnayāna’, the ‘inferior vehicle’, is clearly a derogatory term, similar in kind to the expression ‘heathen’ used at an early time by Westerners for Buddhists as a whole. Hīnayāna originates from Mahāyāna polemics and is thus not appropriate for use as a classification category in academic discourse.³⁸

‘Mahāvihāravāsīn’ refers to those who are ‘dwellers at the Mahāvihāra’ and thus has its natural place when used in contrast to those who dwell at the Abhayagirivihāra. In such contexts, it is evident that the term refers to the ‘Great Monastery’ at Anurādhapura in Sri Lanka. The term Mahāvihāra used on its own, however, becomes more ambiguous, as in Sri Lanka itself as well as in India several Mahāvihāras were in existence.³⁹ Moreover, usage of the term Mahāvihāra automatically implies that the phenomenon described does not apply to the Abhayagirivihāra,⁴⁰ wherefore its usage is really only unproblematic in contexts where this is indeed the intended meaning.

Usage of the same term is also not entirely straightforward for the period following the reunification of the monastic lineages in the twelfth century by Parākramabāhu, which was preceded in the early eleventh century by Vijayabāhu I reviving higher ordination with the help of monks from Burma and relocating the Mahāvihāra to Polonnaruwa.⁴¹ Skilling (2009b, 71) comments that ‘the relevance and significance of the term [Mahāvihāra] in the post-Polonnaruwa period, when the three Theravādin lineages were merged, remains to be clarified. They were replaced by a system of eight *mūlas*, fraternities or groups’, none of which can be traced back to the Mahāvihāra.⁴²

38. As Rhys Davids 1913, 684 explains, *hīnayāna* ‘means a wretched, bad method, or system, for progress on the way towards salvation’, being ‘a term of abuse ... to stigmatize or depreciate.’ For a more detailed study of the problems involved in the academic usage of *hīnayāna* cf. Anālayo 2014.
39. Skilling 2009b, 71 explains that ‘in India there were many Mahāvihāras, some of which belonged to Sarvāstivādin or other sanghas, and are known from inscriptions, monastic sealings, and textual references ... it is usually assumed that within the Theravāda lineage, and in most Ceylonese documents, the term refers to the ancient institution of the Mahāvihāra at Anurādhapura. But this is not always the case, and there were other Mahāvihāras in later periods.’
40. An example illustrating the problems that arise with the use of the term Mahāvihāra as a referent for the Theravāda tradition in general would be a statement by Skilling 2008, 51 in an otherwise brilliant paper, where he comments on the tale that the Buddha taught the Abhidharma to his mother in Trayastriṃśā that ‘this claim ... is unique to the Mahāvihāra. No other Buddhist school chose to locate the teaching of the *Abhidharma* in the Trayastriṃśā abode.’ The problem with such a formulation is that it gives the impression as if the dwellers of the Abhayagirivihāra did not share this tradition.
41. Cf., e.g., Panabokke 1993, 143–164.
42. Gunawardana 1979, 329 explains that ‘eight monastic establishments, some of which can be traced back to about the seventh century, grew into large fraternities by the time of the death of Vijayabāhu I and replaced the *nikāyas* as the main groups representing the *saṅgha* in religious as well as political activities.’ ‘This does not imply that the threefold division of the *saṅgha* on a *nikāya* basis had been completely forgotten ... the records continue to refer to the three *nikāyas*. But in these later references the term *nikāya* was probably used in a conventional sense, for the *nikāya* had ceased to be an effective unit in the organization of the *saṅgha*.’ According to id. 299f, while ‘four of the five fraternities ... represented the Abhayagiri *nikāya* ... only the Senāpatimūla may be traced back to the Jetavana.’ However, ‘to identify any of the known fraternities as being related to the Mahāvihāra *nikāya* is problematic. In fact, it is difficult to trace the origin of the other fraternities [i.e. the remaining three] to any one of the three *nikāyas*.’ Moreover, id. 321, ‘none of the works which can be reliably dated to the time of the synod even remotely suggests that the reforms amounted to the suppression of

Another problem is that Mahāvihāravāsīn designates a particular monastic lineage, which thus excludes those monks and nuns who were not directly associated with the Mahāvihāra and who for the most part were probably not actively involved in the controversies surrounding the Mahāvihāra. The same holds for laity, who except for the rulers would also not have been actively involved in the conflict between the Mahāvihāra and the Abhayagirivihāra and who would also not have been ‘dwellers at the Mahāvihāra’.

In sum, the expression Mahāvihāravāsīn is probably best employed as a contrast to the dwellers of the Abhayagirivihāra for the period of Sri Lankan history when these two monasteries were actually inhabited and had a position of eminence. The same term does not seem fit to replace the broader category Theravāda,⁴³ which, pace the narrow definition proposed in the *Mahāvamsa* (33.97), can be used as an umbrella term for monks, nuns and laity in general — in Sri Lanka as well as elsewhere in South and Southeast Asia — to the extent that these are followers of the ‘Sayings of the Elders’ (in the sense of the definition proposed in the *Dīpavamsa* 4.6).

‘Pāli Buddhism’ reflects the central role of the Pāli language for the type of Buddhism under discussion. In the commentaries the term *pāli* or *pālī* just means a text, often a canonical text, and it is only a later development that the term comes to refer to the language of these texts.⁴⁴ Nevertheless, what we now refer to as the Pāli language is central to the sense of Buddhist identity in countries like Burma, Sri Lanka and Thailand, wherefore the expression Pāli Buddhism would be a meaningful referent. In fact the original sense of *pāli* or *pālī* as a referent to the canon would be equivalent to the *Dīpavamsa*’s definition of *theravāda*.

Needless to say, the expression ‘Pāli Buddhism’ would only work if it is employed in such a way as to make it clear that this does not exclude vernaculars, whose important role in lived forms of Buddhism in these countries cannot be neglected. A problem with the use of ‘Pāli Buddhism’ is in fact that the current connotation of Pāli as a referent to a language tends to emphasize the language

the Abhayagiri and Jetavana *nikāyas* and the imposition of the authority of the Mahāvihāra.’ Thus, id. 334, ‘the unification of the *saṅgha* which took place in the time of Parākramabāhu I ... was accomplished by reconciling the eight fraternities which had replaced the *nikāyas* as the primary units in the organization of the community of monks ... it did not amount to the victory of the Mahāvihāra and the suppression of the other *nikāyas*, as some later chroniclers and certain modern writers claim.’

43. Sujato 2006, 171 uses expressions like the ‘Mahāvihāravāsīn Dīgha Nikāya’ or the ‘various Mahāvihāravāsīn Abhidhamma books, including the Dhammasaṅgaṇī, Vibhaṅga, Dhātukathā, and Paṭṭhāna.’ It seems to me that such expressions are problematic since we have no evidence that the Mahāvihāra possessed versions of the *Dīgha-nikāya* or of the above mentioned *Abhidhamma* texts that were markedly different from the versions employed by the Abhayagirivihāra or other Sri Lankan monasteries. In other words, the ‘Mahāvihāravāsīn Dīgha Nikāya’ could equally well have been the ‘Abhayagirivihāravāsīn Dīgha Nikāya’, etc. Bechert 1992, 96 points out that ‘we have ample evidence for the fact that the Abhayagirivāsīns used the same collection of sacred scriptures in Pāli which has been handed down to us by the orthodox Theravāda tradition of the Mahāvihāravāsīns’. Cousins 2012, 99 explains that ‘most probably, if we exclude the *Khuddakanikāya* from consideration, the substantive differences between the canonical literature of the two schools [i.e., the Mahāvihāra and the Abhayagirivihāra] did not exceed those we might expect between two distinct manuscript traditions.’ On the disparate conceptions of the *Khuddakanikāya* up to modern days cf., e.g., Abeynayake 1984, 33–46, Collins 1990, 108 note 11, von Hinüber 1996/1997, 42f and Freiburger 2011, 218.
44. Cf., e.g., von Hinüber 1977, Norman 1983, 1f, Pruitt 1987, and Crosby 2004.

of the canon more than the canon itself. Yet, from the perspective of tradition it is the fact that the canon has been preserved in the Pāli language that invests this language with its sacred aura, not the other way around. Had the canon been transmitted to the countries of South and Southeast Asia in a different Prākṛit, the same aura of sanctity would presumably have been attributed to that Prākṛit language.

‘South and Southeast Asian Buddhism’, as well as ‘Southern Buddhism’, are of course useful geographical divisions.⁴⁵ Yet, relying on geographical distinctions alone would only be feasible for the period of early Buddhism up to the time of Aśoka, which took place within the clearly distinct geographical area of the Indian subcontinent. The phenomenon under discussion in the present paper, however, extends over diverse regions in South Asia and Southeast Asia, where at times other forms of Buddhism have been and still are in existence. In modern Thailand, for example, two out of the four recognized monastic lineages originate from China and Vietnam and differ from the Theravāda lineages. Thus a geographical designation is best employed in combination with some other term that specifies the form of Buddhism under discussion.⁴⁶

‘Śrāvakayāna’, ‘the vehicle of disciples’, shares with Hīnayāna the problem of standing in opposition to the path of the bodhisattva. While all Buddhists are of course ‘disciples’, the expression *śrāvakayāna* takes its significance from the context of the three *yānas*,⁴⁷ the alternative two being the *pratyekabuddhayāna* and the *bodhisattvayāna*. Such opposition is problematic, since among the Buddhist populations of Burma, Sri Lanka and Thailand the aspiration to become a Buddha in the future is a recognized aim,⁴⁸ known to have been pursued actively up to the

45. Rhys Davids 1903/1997, 173 argues against using the expression ‘Southern Buddhism’ (earlier used by himself), since ‘there is not now, and never has been, any unity either of opinion or of language, in what is called northern, or in what is called southern Buddhism’; for the background to this statement cf. Perreira 2012, 489f note 17. I would contend that the Pāli canon and language do provide a sufficient degree of unity to warrant the use of a single expression, be this ‘Southern Buddhism’, ‘Theravāda’, or any alternative term. Thus, while in India itself Buddhism did of course not develop into distinct traditions, one of which was found only in the south of India, I do not see a problem in principle with the term ‘Southern Buddhism’ as representing those forms of Buddhist thought, practice and beliefs that came to be of predominant influence in the south of Asia, in contrast to what came to be prevalent in its northern and eastern parts.

46. Guruge 2012, 192 finds ‘Southern Buddhism’ preferable to ‘Theravāda Buddhism’ because the Theravāda tradition has undergone considerable change since its inception. Yet, whatever term we choose, it will have to be able to accommodate some degree of change. Understanding the term Theravāda in the sense suggested by the *Dīpavaṃsa* would leave room for changes, as long as these do not compromise the role of the Pāli canon as the central point of reference.

47. On the expression *yāna* cf., e.g., Gombrich 1992, Vetter 2001, 62–66, Anālayo 2009b and Walser 2009.

48. Cf. Anālayo 2010, 131f. An example for the somewhat eclectic nature of actual Buddhist practice in Sri Lanka, defying neat categories, can be found in Mori 1997/1999, who reports that an eighth to ninth century Avalokiteśvara statue at Dambēgoda in Sri Lanka, after being recently rediscovered in the jungle and restored, has become the object of pilgrimage and worship by Sri Lankan laity and monastics.

present day.⁴⁹ Hence these Buddhist populations could not accurately be characterized as followers of the Śrāvakayāna,⁵⁰ let alone of the Hīnayāna.

‘Tāmraśāṭīya’, ‘coppery red clothed’, is poorly attested.⁵¹ Its usage in Tibetan translation could be the result of a misunderstanding,⁵² and Chinese terminology that has been taken to reflect the term appears to be rather based on *Tāṃraparṇīya* instead.⁵³ The unclear origins and lack of attestation make it advisable to avoid using the term Tāmraśāṭīya.

‘Vibhajjavāda’, ‘the doctrine of analysis’, already makes its appearance in the Pāli discourses, like *theravāda*. The expression occurs in the *Subha-sutta* of the *Majjhima-nikāya* to indicate that the Buddha would expound a particular matter by speaking in an analytical manner,⁵⁴ a similar usage being found also in a discourse in the *Āṅuttara-nikāya*.⁵⁵ A parallel to the *Subha-sutta* in the *Madhyama-āgama* has a similar expression, although with the notable difference that here the interlocutor had asked the Buddha to give such an analytical exposition.⁵⁶ That is, while in the *Subha-sutta* the Buddha himself qualifies his approach as analytical, in the *Madhyama-āgama* discourse the Buddha’s use of this expression comes in reply to a suggestion made by his visitor. The presentation in the Pāli version thus gives slightly more emphasis to the term *vibhajjavāda* as a distinct characteristic of the Buddha’s approach, so much so that he would use the term on his own, without any external prompting.

A well-known instance of the term *vibhajjavāda* features in accounts of the events that lead up to what the Pāli tradition reckons the third *saṅgīti*. According to the commentary on the *Kathāvatthu* as well as the *Mahāvamsa*, Moggalliputta Tissa had told King Aśoka that the Buddha was a *vibhajjavādīn*.⁵⁷ This usage involves a shift of meaning in as much as in the discourse passages the Buddha

49. An example from Sri Lanka would be the venerable Balangoda Ānanda Maitreya; cf. Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1988/1990, 299–313.

50. Katz 1980, 55 points out that the term Śrāvakayāna would only cover part of the Theravāda tradition, being unable to accommodate Theravādins who follow the bodhisattva path. Besides, using the term would also to some degree endorse the condescending attitude in the Mahāyāna traditions towards the goal of arahant-ship.

51. Skilling 1993, 167 notes that ‘no equivalents of Tāmraśāṭīya or Tāṃraparṇīya as names of the Theravāda or any other sect are known in Pāli or in inscriptions from India or elsewhere’, adding (p. 163) that ‘the Sanskrit form Tāmraśāṭīya occurs in only one source: the *Mahāvīyūtpatti*, a Sanskrit-Tibetan translation manual compiled ... at the beginning of the 9th century’; cf. §9083, Sakaki 1926, 581.

52. Cousins 2010, 12; for a detailed survey of occurrences of the term in Tibetan translation cf. Skilling 1993, 155–169.

53. Cheng 2012, 109–115.

54. MN 99 at MN II 197,¹⁰: *vibhajjavādo kho aham ettha* (S^c: *vibhajjavādo*); on the expression *vibhajjavāda* cf. also, e.g., Shwe Zan Aung and Rhys Davids 1915/1979: xl, Rhys Davids 1938/1978: 99, Prasad 1972: 105–113, Jain 1985: 62, Karunadasa 2000, Cousins 2001, Sujato 2006: 137, Abeynayaka 2009: 94–99 and Anālayo 2009a.

55. AN 10.94 at AN V 190,¹⁹.

56. MĀ 152 at T I 667a23: ‘I shall provide you with an analytical explanation’, 我當為汝具分別說.

57. Kv-a 7,¹¹ and Mhv 5.271f; cf. also, in addition to the publications mentioned above in note 54, Oldenberg 1879/1997: xlii and Bareau 1955: 206.

only replies in an analytical manner to a certain topic,⁵⁸ whereas with the present passage this becomes an overall characterisation of his approach.

The expression also occurs in the Sinhalese edition of the *Cullavagga* in a colophon that relates the transmission of this *Vinaya* text to the Vibhajjavādins, the Mahāvihāravāsins of the island of Tambapanni (Sri Lanka),⁵⁹ a sense the term also carries in the *Dīpavaṃsa* (e.g., 18.1). The *Visuddhimagga* concludes with a colophon in memory of the Mahāvihāra monk, best of Vibhajjavādins, who invited Buddhaghosa to compile the work.⁶⁰ The term carries a similar sense in an inscription from Nāgārjunakoṇḍa.⁶¹ Together with the earlier mentioned ‘Pāli Buddhism’, ‘Vibhajjavāda’ would thus be a viable alternative to ‘Theravāda’.

While the term Vibhajjavāda is better attested than Theravāda, the sense it conveys is somewhat less characteristic of the Buddhist tradition under discussion than the idea of having the ‘Sayings of the Elders’ in the Pāli canon as the central point of reference. A problem would also be that the Pāli expression Vibhajjavāda is less easily distinguished from the Sanskrit Vibhajyavāda as a referent to several Buddhist schools,⁶² whereas the Pāli Theravāda marks a clear contrast to the Sanskrit Sthavira (keeping in mind that the expression **sthaviravāda* does not appear to be attested).

CONCLUSION

In sum, it seems to me that the expression Theravāda — being the term that is evidently considered acceptable by the tradition it refers to — is about the best choice one could make. To be sure, when using the term it is important to keep in mind that those who shared this sense of identity have not always called themselves Theravādins. With this proviso, it seems to me that the term Theravāda serves its purpose as a designation for those forms of South and Southeast Asian Buddhism(s), from the time of Mahinda up to modern days, that have as their central point of reference the Pāli canon, the *theravāda* par excellence.

58. Cousins 2001: 133f explains that in the discourses the Buddha ‘is never simply described as a *vibhajja-vāda* or *vibhajja-vādin*; it is always a question of being one who responds critically in a particular matter, as indicated by the pronoun *ettha*. In fact, elsewhere and on other issues, the Buddha’s position is represented as unequivocal ... there would in fact be some support in the *Nikāyas* for calling him [also] an *ekamsa-vādin*. It is true that this exact term is not found, but in the *Porṭhapāda-sutta* (D I 191) we find the Buddha declaring that he has made known *ekamsikā* teachings, namely the Four Noble Truths.’ Abeynayaka 2009: 96f points out that therefore ‘it is not appropriate to think that the Buddha employed only the Vibhajjavāda methodology at all times in relation to all propositions. His answers varied depending on the nature of the questions. His statements were sometimes categorical and at other times analytical. Therefore, the Canonical evidence does not support the traditional claim that the Buddha can be branded as a *Vibhajjavādin*.’

59. C^e edition of the *Cullavagga* p. 330,²⁷ (= vol. 5 part 1 of the Buddha Jayanti edition of the *Vinaya*). The corresponding passage in the E^e edition, Vin II 72,²⁷, instead speaks of the *vibhajjapadānaṃ*, a reading also found in the Chaṭṭha Saṅgāyana B^e edition and in the ‘Red Elephant’ S^e edition; Skilling 2009b, 88 note 45 reports that the Syāmrattḥa edition vol. 6 p. 298, however, has the reading *°vadānaṃ*.

60. Vism 711,²³.

61. Sircar and Lahiri 1960, 250; discussed in Cousins 2001, 140–146.

62. Cox 2004, 506 explains that ‘the name *Vibhajyavāda* might be best characterized as a loose umbrella term for those, excluding the Sarvāstivādins, who belonged to the original Sthavira branch.’

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ABBREVIATIONS

AN	<i>Ariguttara-nikāya</i>
B ^e	Burmese edition
C ^e	Ceylonese edition
DN	<i>Dīgha-nikāya</i>
E ^e	PTS edition
KhP	<i>Khuddakapāṭha</i>
Kv-a	<i>Kathāvatthu-aṭṭhakathā</i>
MĀ	<i>Madhyama-āgama</i> (T 26)
Mhv	<i>Mahāvamsa</i>
MN	<i>Majjhima-nikāya</i>
Pj II	<i>Paramatthajotikā</i>
Ps	<i>Papañcasūdanī</i>
S ^e	Siamese edition
Sn	<i>Sutta-nipāta</i>
Sp	<i>Samantapāsādikā</i>
Sv	<i>Sumāṅgalavilāsini</i>
T	Taishō (CBETA) edition
Vin	<i>Vinayaṭṭhaka</i>
Vism	<i>Visuddhimagga</i>

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