The History of Buddhism in India - Part 1

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 44:33

I had been practicing for about fifteen years in the Vipassana lineage and was very familiar with the Four Noble Truths, the Eightfold Path, and mindfulness of breathing and body. Then I showed up on this Dzogchen retreat, and within two days I was chanting hundred-syllable mantras for golden-hued deities who had been primordially enlightened beyond space and time. I found myself trying to figure out: what is going on here? What am I doing? Is this the same religion? Is it the same philosophy at all? And what sense could I make of the relationship between these two approaches? It brought up a lot of questions for me.

One of the key questions was this notion that Rinpoche was explaining—that the ground is the inseparable union of emptiness and cognizance, meaning that awareness is somehow connected with what is unconditioned. This was not a teaching I had heard in fifteen years of Theravada practice. Where did that come from? Was it true or wasn't it? Many well-known Theravadan teachers were saying, absolutely not true. The realization of the unconditioned comes with no consciousness, no cognizance present whatsoever. And if there's a trace of cognizance there, it's not the real thing.

What was the connection between the Rigpa practice that Rinpoche was teaching and the mindfulness quality that I had been developing all along, rooted in the four foundations of mindfulness from the Theravada? What was the connection to the deities and the mantras and the mandalas and that whole cosmology that Tibetan Buddhism opened up?

These questions really occupied my interest for a long time, and I had to search deeply within my own experience, talk to many different teachers, and read extensively until I felt I had come to a resolution that felt comfortable for me. I found many points of overlap and some points of potential conflict that took me a while to sort through.

Also, as you'll be finding if you're new to this practice, as Rinpoche unfolds it over the next few days, the practice of Rigpa is a subtle practice—one of the most subtle practices I've come across. It was hard for me to find my footing in that kind of very spacious territory. Again, it took me a while to feel I had my feet on the non-ground, or the groundless ground, that Dzogchen is based upon.

And yet I found these teachings opened up a whole new dimension of my understanding and my practice. They were very valuable for me. Many other Vipassana practitioners have felt the same thing. It's out of this shared experience and a love for these teachings that we've invited Rinpoche to come to Spirit Rock. This is actually the third time he has taught here.

The basic motivation on the part of Spirit Rock as an organization is to be able to share these teachings with the Vipassana community that makes their spiritual home here. Of course, at the same time, Rinpoche has many students of his own in the Bay Area, and we also wanted to open the doors for all of you to come and join us. So we have this rather mixed audience for this week, which is part of what makes it an interesting week. Some people come strictly from a Theravadan background, some from a Vajrayana background, some with a mix. So there's a wide range, and I hope to say something meaningful to everyone in the course of the week. But if I don't, I apologize.

My particular interest really is in helping new practitioners, especially from the Vipassana lineage, be able to make a quick and helpful relationship with the Dzogchen teachings. That's the main reason I'm here and the main role that I want to fulfill in these evening talks—to save you some of the struggles that I went through as I was making my wavering way over a number of years into these teachings. I want to do that on both a theoretical level and a practice level.

Tonight, because Rinpoche is keeping his talks mostly on the conceptual level at the beginning, I'm also going to be on the conceptual level. A couple of days later, as we get into more of the experiential pointings of the Rigpa practice, my talks will also move in a more experiential direction.

What I'd like to talk about tonight is a little bit of the relationship of all the Buddhist practices. When Rinpoche and I were first talking about bringing this retreat to Spirit Rock, we thought, what are we going to call it? We ended up calling it a Dzogchen retreat, which I think is the most honest advertisement. But at one point, we thought of calling it "the Dzogchen view of Vipassana and the Vipassana view of Dzogchen retreat," because I think both traditions have something to offer one another. But we settled for simplicity, which I think was helpful.

In addition to all the questions that were raised in terms of the way the teachings differed, I also felt a lot of overlap as I listened to Rinpoche, and I hope you heard that today. From the Theravadan end of things, there was quite a bit of talk about suffering and ignorance, attachment, clinging, impermanence—all those staples, the three poisons, karma, which are solidly within the Theravadan lineage. There were also elements in his teaching that were more particularly Mahayana: the emphasis on compassion, bodhicitta, and the emphasis on emptiness are more commonly associated with the Mahayana strain. And then as he started to get into a description of Dzogpa Chenpo with ground, path, and fruition, we start to move really into the realm of the Vajrayana teachings.

As I started listening to Rinpoche those years ago, I realized that between the Four Noble Truths and Dzogpa Chenpo, a few other things had happened in between. So what I'd like to do over these next two nights is talk about what happened in between. I'm going to title this "A Short History of Buddhism in India: From Parinirvana to Dzogchen." Basically, what took place between the death of the Buddha, which is around 463 BCE, and the development of these more advanced practices.

and the emergence of Dzogchen, which is placed around the 8th century CE in India.

Now a couple of notes on time frames. The common way of talking about historical time in Western cultures is B.C. and A.D., which is based on the life of Christ. Being Buddhists, we don't necessarily want that to be our milestone, so the scholarly way of talking about it is using the term C.E. to stand for Common Era, though it still starts at year zero of the Christian calendar. So typically I'll use CE for the centuries and dates that we're familiar with. We're currently in 2006 of the Common Era, and BCE means before the Common Era. It's simply de-Christianizing the same calendar that we're currently using.

If we were in Thailand right now, we would be in the year 2549, because that follows the Buddhist era. So really, it would be wonderful as Buddhists to speak in terms of the year 2549, but it would be difficult to relate it to all the other history you know, so I won't do that.

As we explore what happened in India from the early teachings to the Mahayana and the emergence of the Vajrayana, one of the most fascinating aspects is the variety of questions that emerged as the schools split. The splitting of the schools took place not so much by geography, but primarily around philosophical questions. These are the same sorts of philosophical questions that we encounter when we try to blend the classical teachings of the Buddha with the Vajrayana teachings. So as you listen to different streams within the Buddhist tradition, these are questions that may naturally arise for you to contemplate. As we explore the unfolding of this history, I think you'll begin to see the origin of these discussions and questions.

The second thing to mention is that I'm going to be presenting the findings and research of scholars—primarily Western scholars, but also some Asian scholars—who trace the evolution of Buddhism through these different schools in a chronological sequence. You may hear from different Asian teachers that all these teachings were spoken by the historical Buddha, but to different audiences. The research of Western scholars suggests otherwise. I don't want to particularly enter into an argument about that. It's really up to you to decide what your own view is. But I'll simply be presenting the way that Western scholars, for the most part, have outlined it based on their historical research, which is generally quite unbiased.

The reason I'm staying focused on India is because Theravada and Tibetan Buddhism share a common foundation, which is Indian Buddhism. When Buddhism migrated further east to China, particularly, and later to Japan and Korea, it transformed completely into Chan and then Zen and took on a very different flavor. In some ways, if you've ever tried, it's difficult to have a philosophical discussion with a Zen master, because they'll hit you with a stick or something equivalent. But the common thread between Theravadins and Tibetans is that we're all willing to discuss how conceptual mind can understand these teachings. Whereas in the Zen tradition, they will often cut short and disallow dialogue about conventional understanding. This goes back to the nature of Indian Buddhism. India is a very philosophically inclined culture, and that has influenced both the Theravadin school and the Tibetan school. So we, in a way, share a common outlook on the role of the conceptual mind.

One of the other things that arise when one addresses a mixed audience and also talks about different traditions is that there may well be differences in views and opinions. And sometimes friendships diverge on the basis of different views and opinions. You may have noticed that with others of your friends. So I hope that we find the great spaciousness of mind that holds all the different views and opinions while still maintaining the underlying spirit of loving-kindness and friendship.

This is from an early Buddhist text from the Sutta Nipata. This is the Buddha speaking:

"This I do now declare. After investigation, there is nothing among all doctrines that such a one as I would embrace. Seeing misery in philosophical views, without adopting any of them, searching for truth, I discovered inner peace. For one who is free from views, there are no ties. For one who is delivered by understanding, there are no follies. But those who grasp after views and philosophical opinions wander about in the world annoying people."

So with that as a preface, in the spirit of loving-kindness and amity, I want to talk about this unfolding of the history of Buddhism.

The early form of Buddhism we could call classical Buddhism, we could call it Pali Buddhism, or we could call it Nikaya Buddhism, because the teachings have come down to us in the form of Pali language texts and collected into gatherings called the Nikayas. So all of these terms can be used synonymously. It could also just be called early Buddhism. So I'll use one of these terms to refer to that early stage.

This early school of Buddhism is considered to have been alive in an unbroken form and transmitted from teacher to disciple since the death of the Buddha over 2,500 years ago. For about 400 years in India, again according to scholars, this was the only form of Buddhism available. There was nothing but Nikaya Buddhism for about 400 years after the death of the Buddha.

And of course, it's also the foundation for the Mahayana. The Mahayana arose in groups who were already steeped in the classical teachings. The Mahayana flourished for hundreds of years, and the Vajrayana arose based on people who were deeply grounded in the Mahayana. So when we listen to Vajrayana teachings, we have to realize they're layered on top of the Mahayana, which is layered on top of the classical teachings. So the classical teachings really are the foundation for all the later schools.

In fact, the Dalai Lama has often said that what unites all Buddhists is our agreement on the teaching of the Four Noble Truths. In a way, we can think of this as our common foundation: the truth of suffering, the cause of suffering, the end of suffering, and the way leading to the end of suffering.

It's interesting that even when you encounter Mahayana texts that attempt to refute some of the classical teachings, they use the same language. When you listen to the Heart Sutra, for example, what it does is negate the five aggregates, dependent origination, and the Four Noble Truths—which are the very cornerstones of Theravadan teaching. You can imagine, as a practitioner reciting the Heart Sutra every day, you're hearing these basic teachings over and over. In many Zen temples, the Heart Sutra is recited

before every meal, so you're constantly hearing about the aggregates, the chain of dependent origination, the Four Noble Truths—letting them really sink into your bones as you go through the ups and downs of intensive meditation practice. Then you hear them negated, and the mind has to make another philosophical turn to understand that. But all these concepts and teachings are living with you all the time in that setting.

After the Buddha died, for about a hundred years, the community lived in considerable harmony. But think realistically—what happens when a charismatic founder dies? If you look back at other spiritual movements, what tends to happen is the followers understand things differently. Disciple A has a different take than disciple B, who differs from disciple C. Eventually they go their separate ways because they want to carve out their own understanding.

A lot of this history is lost, of course. Scholars are still trying to put the pieces together, and how much is lost is unanswerable—but it's a huge amount. One interesting thing about the Tibetan tradition is that it's very literate. Once Buddhism became established in Tibet, detailed records were kept of lineages, teachers, and written teachings. But the Theravadan lineage is just the opposite. For whatever reason, we are not a very literate tradition.

Let me test this with those of you who've had contact with Theravadan Buddhism. Can you name three famous Theravadans who lived after the time of the Buddha and before, say, 1900?

Buddhaghosa. There it ends, right? One literary figure in the whole lineage for 2,500 years. That's pretty astounding. I'll mention a couple of others as we go through, but notice that the Theravadan lineage has been very practice-oriented and not very philosophically oriented. That's just the way it is. If I asked you for Tibetan figures from that same period, you could probably come up with a dozen easily.

So the first hundred years in India were quite harmonious. The followers all got along together, and there was just one school. But let me back up a little. After the death of the Buddha, the first council was called among all the fully enlightened beings who were alive at the time. There were said to be 499 of them, along with the Buddha's attendant from his last 25 years—another bhikkhu named Ananda.

Ananda had followed the Buddha around for the last quarter-century of his life and listened to all his dharma talks. Anytime he missed a teaching, he would ask someone later to repeat what had been said, and he had a fantastic memory. So he was brought to this gathering of 499 arhats, but Ananda was only a stream-enterer—the first stage of enlightenment. He felt very ashamed and embarrassed and didn't know if he should really join the circle.

He thought, "I'd better try really hard. I've got one night before the council meets. Maybe I can become fully enlightened before morning and join them as an arhat." So he practiced intensively all night long—sitting and walking, sitting and walking—but didn't get there. Just before dawn, he gave up. "I can't make it. I'm just going to relax a little bit." As he laid down for a brief rest, thinking "I just can't do it," and

just before his head hit the pillow—full enlightenment.

This says something about the value of relaxation in our practice. May it be so for someone here.

So Ananda came to the First Council and recited from memory all the suttas he could remember, then instructed other people in their memorization. These teachings filled about twenty volumes in the first Pali Text Society edition—in romanized text, all recited by one individual. They weren't written down at the time, likely because the technology of writing wasn't available. They were passed on purely as an oral tradition.

Different schools and different monasteries and nunneries were charged with reciting and memorizing different portions of this entire twenty-volume set. In this way, the oral tradition was handed down for about four hundred years. For the first hundred years, everything remained unified—everybody was still practicing together.

But in the western part of India, around what we now know as Delhi, rumors began to arrive about some rebellious monks on the east coast, perhaps around Calcutta. All of this was happening in the Ganges Valley. These monks were reportedly doing scandalous things—they had started handling gold and silver, which was strictly outlawed in the Vinaya, the code of discipline that was also recited after the Buddha's death. Monks were forbidden to touch money. Yet these monks declared it acceptable to use gold and silver, which greatly upset their western counterparts.

The other troubling development was that these monks began to doubt the authority of the Buddha's discourses as they had been collected. "We don't think that's the whole truth," they said. "We trust our own experience as well. We won't rely solely on the authority of those texts, even if they were the word of the Buddha."

This caused a fundamental split between the westerners, who held to the authority of the suttas—the original discourses—and this new group in the east. A second council was called one hundred years after the Buddha's death to see if they could reconcile their differences, but they could not.

The first great schism occurred at that point. The group that split off called themselves the Mahasangikas, which simply means "great assembly"—there must have been quite a few of them on the east coast, this fringe group. The group that remained faithful to the established form of teachings called themselves the Sthaviravadins, which means "elders." In Pali, Sthavira becomes Theravada. This was likely the true origin of the Theravada school as it continues to this day.

These kinds of questions arise today as well. What is the true source of spiritual authority? Is it our own personal experience? Is it a revered text passed down from a great teacher? Is it the word of your particular teacher? When is it safe to debate such matters? What can get you expelled from a community? One very orthodox Theravada practitioner, when I mentioned the value of Dzogchen teachings, said to me, "But that's corrupting the true teachings. That will lead to the decline of the true Dhamma in time." Divisions happen on

the basis of views like these.

The next phase in Buddhism's evolution was the development of the Abhidhamma. The Abhidhamma is considered the third basket in the Theravada canon, the Pali canon. The first basket contains the Buddha's discourses, the second contains the Vinaya—the monks' and nuns' code of discipline. The third basket is the Abhidhamma.

The Abhidhamma represents a very analytical approach designed to systematize all the lists the Buddha taught—the five hindrances, the five aggregates, the six sense bases, the Four Noble Truths—collecting them together in one place to create a coherent philosophical system. It's fascinating that this development occurred, because it probably didn't happen during the Buddha's lifetime. The Buddha taught skillful means for the sole purpose of liberating beings. After his death, philosophical questions arose: How can we complete this as a comprehensive system? How can we demonstrate to outsiders the coherence and consistency of our school of thought?

The Abhidhamma apparently began forming not long after the Buddha's death. There were certainly traces of it by about one hundred years later. But the form we have today—another seven volumes—didn't emerge, scholars say, until about three hundred years after the Buddha's death.

Now, if you ask an orthodox Theravadin about the Abhidhamma's origin, he'll tell you it was taught by the Buddha himself. They have an elaborate story to explain this. They say it was too extensive to have been taught in one human setting, yet it had to be delivered in one sitting. So what happened was this: during one rains retreat—you know the Buddha established himself each rainy season so the monks and nuns wouldn't trample the crops—during one particular rainy season, the Buddha went up to Tushita heaven and delivered the Abhidhamma over three months to his mother, who was dwelling in Tushita heaven. In the heaven realm, they explain, one could sit for three months without moving.

Do you believe it? Perhaps not. But the story continues: they say he simultaneously transmitted his psychic body back to earth during the same rains retreat and delivered the Abhidhamma teachings to Sariputta.

So that is how Orthodox Theravadans explain the origin of the Abhidhamma as coming from the mouth of the Buddha.

Scholars, however, say that this is not true. They contend that the Abhidhamma in its current form was only assembled three hundred years later, and they have ways to track its origins with some confidence. We'll see this theme emerge again later, because many later teachings, according to scholars, were developed by anonymous authors and attributed to the Buddha to give them greater credibility. We'll return to this important point.

So the Abhidhamma took its current form about three hundred years after the death of the Buddha.

Another significant inflection point occurred around the year 250 BCE, about two hundred years after the

Buddha's passing. At this time, a king named Asoka had come to the throne in northern India. Asoka is one of the most famous kings in both Indian history and Buddhist history.

Initially, he was a warlike, violent conqueror. He had conquered all the neighboring chiefdoms and kingdoms, creating a vast territory under his rule. It's said that after one particularly devastating battle, he stood looking down at the carnage—all the dead soldiers from both his army and the opposing forces—and was stricken with profound guilt that his own ambition had caused such massive death.

In the midst of surveying the battlefield's remnants, he saw a Buddhist monk walking slowly through the bodies. The monk displayed such composure and radiance that something shifted within Asoka. He wondered: "How is it that this monk, who has nothing, is more equanimous and radiant than I, who have everything material?"

It's said that at that moment, his heart turned. He soon thereafter converted to Buddhism and completely transformed his kingdom. He renounced war, sending messages to all neighboring kingdoms that his days of conquest were finished. He wanted to live in peace and harmony. He distributed food and wealth liberally throughout his realm so that people felt secure and confident.

This actually represents one of the few teachings of the Buddha on how an effective government should be organized. The Buddha said that poverty should not exist in a dharmic environment. Asoka began outlawing many forms of animal sacrifice that continued under the Vedic rules followed by the Brahmins. A real sense of peacefulness pervaded his kingdom.

Moreover, he became a great patron of the Dharma, supporting many monasteries and nunneries. The Dharma flourished greatly under Asoka's rule.

Asoka himself convened the Third Council around 250 BCE, likely as a way to bring the Sangha together. However, the result was another split, giving rise to an important school called the Sarvastivadins.

The Sarvastivadins were puzzled by a philosophical question that the Buddha had left unanswered, which Rinpoche alluded to earlier today: Where do karmic effects live? When you perform an action arising from a motivation—whether wholesome or unwholesome—it's said to have a karmic impact that stretches into the future. But how is that effect carried forward? The action, once completed, is done. Whatever mind state was present during the action is impermanent and passes away. Your body moves forward and changes. The other person moves forward and changes. How does karma transmit itself forward?

The Sarvastivadins made the first recorded attempt to answer this question. Their solution seems somewhat risky to me: they decided that past, present, and future all really exist now. The past has never truly gone away, and the future is already here. This was a very radical philosophical stance, but it was their way of addressing the question. They argued that past actions actually still live on, and this is how the past is able to reach in and touch the present.

One of the other innovations from the Sarvastivadins was their emphasis on the paramis. The paramis became a great force in the Mahayana tradition. The Sarvastivadins, who were still within the field of classical Buddhism, were the first to bring them forth and really emphasize them. They're hardly mentioned at all as a list in the Pali Canon—appearing perhaps once, and not from the mouth of the Buddha, but in another volume.

The Mahayana brought the six paramis to the forefront, and Shantideva's guide to the Bodhisattva's way of life crystallized a whole series of teachings around the paramis as a path to enlightenment.

The Sarvastavadins were incredibly influential for several reasons. They tended to migrate to the north and west of India, and their texts and canon were all in Sanskrit. They had their own Abhidharma in Sanskrit as well. As Buddhism spread—and by the way, almost all of Asia was Buddhist at one point or another—it's incredible to look back at the reach of the Buddhist teachings.

Starting in India, Buddhism soon spread to Pakistan, which is said to have been the home of Padmasambhava, who took the Dzogchen teachings into Tibet. It spread into Afghanistan—you probably remember that it was only a few years ago the Taliban knocked down those huge standing Buddhas that had been there for thousands of years. From Afghanistan and Pakistan, it spread into Nepal, where it remains alive today. It traveled into Tibet and China via the Silk Route, which went through Kashmir and then up over the north of Nepal into Tibet. From there it entered China, and later Japan and Korea, transforming into Chan and Zen. Buddhism also spread from India to Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia, down through Indonesia. Essentially all of Asia at certain times was mostly Buddhist.

It's amazing to see this historical reach, and today it's mostly dying. Buddhism is mostly on the decline in Asia. Either communism has gotten it, or what communism hasn't gotten, capitalism is getting. So it's sad from that perspective. We all need to practice hard and hope that it stays alive here.

The Sarvastavadins planted themselves in the northwest and west of India, and therefore it was their teachings that migrated on the Silk Route into Tibet and later China. So it was actually the Sarvastavadan Sanskrit canon that ended up in Tibet, not the Pali Canon. Tibet generally does not have the Pali Canon—it has only survived through being kept alive in Sri Lanka.

What Tibetans know about the early schools, they draw from the Sarvastavadan Canon, which eventually made it into translated Tibetan form. Particularly, they tend to associate the Theravadan schools, which they now call Hinayana, with the Abhidhamma. So a lot of the Tibetans' understanding of what Theravadan practice is about is based on their reading of a Sanskrit Abhidhamma from about 2,000 years ago. There doesn't seem to have been much contact since then. I often find that what Tibetan teachers say about Theravadans doesn't mesh with my experience of what's actually going on in our practice here or in our practice in Asia where we learned it. So I always take it with a grain of salt, and you might want to as well.

The entire Sarvastavadan canon was not preserved in the long run—I don't know whether it fell apart first in India or on the Silk Route—but it is only preserved in part. The only canon that survived in its entirety is the Pali canon, which went down to Sri Lanka first.

Then came another interesting split. The Sarvastavadins were deeply invested in the Abhidhamma—they had modified it from the Pali version, so it was different but had a similar spirit. Another group split off from the Sarvastavadins called the Sautrantikas. The Sautrantikas said, "You're putting way too much emphasis on the Abhidhamma and this analytical definition of how moments of experience arise one after another. You're giving it far too much weight, and in doing so, you're losing the spirit of the Buddha's teachings. The Buddha's teachings have a magnificent, uplifting, expansive, very broad view of spiritual life. The Abhidhamma, because it's so detailed and systematized, takes the heart out of the Buddha's teachings. It's too dry. Considered as a complete system, it doesn't have the juice that the original teachings had."

So the Sautrantikas said, "That's not the essence of the Dharma. You've lost something of the heart of the Dharma. You're relying too much on technicalities. We're going to go back and ground ourselves in the original teachings of the suttas"—or sutras in Sanskrit.

This was another split. The Sautrantikas split off from the Sarvastavadins sometime by the 2nd century of the Common Era. This represents another kind of dispute that is felt today in the Buddhist world between groups that tend to rely on the Abhidhamma as the ultimate authority and those who rely on the classical teachings of the Buddha as final authority.

And for example, when I went to Burma to practice about a year and a half ago, I met one Abhidhamma teacher who told me, "Oh, well, in Burma we regard the Vinaya as the teaching on sīla. We regard the Suttapitaka as the teaching on samādhi, or you could say samatha. And we regard the Abhidhamma as the teaching on paññā, or wisdom." So in their view, the Abhidhamma was the highest of the three books. Of course, we tend to regard the suttas as the source for samādhi and paññā, both. And I trust in the spirit of the suttas more than I do the spirit of the Abhidhamma.

So the next interesting development was King Asoka, in his love of the Dharma, sent missionaries out in many different directions. Most of them didn't really eventually take root. They may have made a temporary inroad, but in the long run they disappeared from the face of Indian Buddhism. But one missionary had a profound effect that lasts to the current day, and that was King Asoka's son, whose name was Mahinda. He sent Mahinda to the island of Sri Lanka.

Mahinda there established a great monastery. It was there about 150 years later that the texts—all the suttas and the vinaya and the abhidhamma—were first written down. Mahinda went to Sri Lanka about 240 BCE, and around another 150 years later, the texts were first written down. They were written down on leaves. Apparently that was the best writing technology that was available at the time.

The amazing thing is that Buddhism was more or less wiped off the face of India. I'll talk about this more tomorrow night, but due to Muslim invasions from the West, Buddhism in India was almost completely obliterated and the texts were destroyed. But the invasion did not reach Sri Lanka, and the Pali texts that were written down 400 years after the death of the Buddha have survived to the present day.

It's quite incredible when you think about it. The twenty-some volumes of words that were spoken 2,500 years ago have come down in a somewhat authentic form. I don't know how authentic, but somewhat authentic because they still liberate people and they're so consistent. In this unbroken and relatively uncorrupted way. It's just mind-boggling to think of the generations of practitioners and scribes and scholars who have done the work to make that available to us today. And now most of that canon is available in pretty well-translated English, pretty readable English today.

So this is the only source for an entire canon from any of the schools of early Buddhism—the Pali texts that were taken to Sri Lanka. Why was it written down in Pali? Scholars are not quite sure. They think either Pali is very close to the language that the Buddha spoke, which was probably Magadhi, but they can't be 100% sure of that. Or one scholar suggested that Pali was the language that Mahinda's mother spoke, and that's why he wrote it down in Pali. But one or another, that's what the text came down in.

It's a near neighbor of Sanskrit, but it's not as elegant as Sanskrit. People who know Sanskrit and then go learn Pali say it's like speaking Sanskrit with marbles in your mouth. So the really elegant language of the Buddhist text was Sanskrit. And some of that has come down, but not very much of it.

So we're up to about 100 BCE. And this is just around the time when the Mahayana starts to arise in India. The origins of the Mahayana are not clear at all. Some scholars say that it originated with groups of lay people. Some scholars say that it originated in the south of India. But the real origins of it are unclear from a scholarly point of view.

One thing that does seem apparent is that it was something of a backlash to the Abhidhamma—to the overly structured, systematic, dry, detailed explanations of the Abhidhamma. And the Mahayana sought to restore the mystic side and the inspiration to Buddhism.

So I think that's where we'll stop tonight, the advent of the Mahayana. Tomorrow we'll talk about the growth of the Mahayana, the arising of the Vajrayana.

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