

Vibhajjavāda

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Vibhajjavāda ([Sanskrit](#); [Pāli](#): *Vibhajjavāda*; [traditional Chinese](#): 分別說部; ; [pinyin](#): *fēnbiéshuō-bù*) is a term applied generally to groups of [early Buddhists](#) belonging to the [Sthavira Nikaya](#). These various groups are known to have rejected [Sarvāstivāda](#) doctrines (especially the doctrine of "all exists") and the doctrine of [Pudgalavada](#) (personalism).^{[\[1\]](#)[\[2\]](#)[\[3\]](#)} During the reign of [Ashoka](#), these groups possibly took part in missionary activity in [Gandhara](#), [Bactria](#), [Kashmir](#), [South India](#) and [Sri Lanka](#). By the third century CE, they had spread in [Central Asia](#) and [South-East Asia](#).^{[\[3\]](#)} Their doctrine is expounded in the [Kathavatthu](#).



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Nomenclature and etymology

The word *Vibhajjavāda* may be [parsed](#) into *vibhajya*, loosely meaning "dividing", "analyzing" and *vāda* holding the [semantic field](#): "doctrine", "teachings".^[4] According to Andrew Skilton, the analysis of phenomena (Skt. *dharma*s) was the doctrinal emphasis and preoccupation of the Vibhajjavādins.^[4]

According to A.K. Warder, they are called "distinctionists" because they make distinctions between dhammas that exist in the present and the past, and dhammas that don't exist in the past and the future (as opposed to [Sarvāstivāda](#)).^[5] This is supported by the explanation given by the 6th century Mahayana philosopher [Bhavaviveka](#).^[6]

According to [Bhante Sujato](#), *Vibhajjavāda* means that the doctrine "distinguishes" (*vibhajanto*) the heterodox and orthodox views, particularly the non-buddhist theory of a self (atman) and also the pudgala theory of the pudgalavadins. The characteristic method used by the Buddha and early Buddhists to break down the idea of self was the method of analyzing (*vibhajjati*) the components of a person and investigating them to find that they do not possess the features that one could ascribe to a self. Thus, it would make sense that the term refers to "the Abhidhamma movement as an analytic approach to Dhamma in general, and as a critique of the 'self' in particular".^[6]

Overview



As per the traditional Theravada account, elder [Moggaliputta-Tissa](#) defended the Vibhajjavāda doctrine under [Aśoka](#) at the [Third Council](#).

The Vibhajjavādins are a group of early Buddhist schools. According to the [Theravada](#) account, this group rejected the Sarvastivada teachings at the [third Buddhist council](#) (however modern scholars question the council narratives).^{[7][8]} The name means "those who make distinctions," and include the [Kāśyapīya](#), [Mahīśāśaka](#) and [Dharmaguptaka](#).^[7] The Vibhajjavādins were strongly represented in south India, where they called themselves *Theriyas*. They survived until the seventeenth century in south India, and in [Sri Lanka](#) they became the [Theravadins](#).^[9]

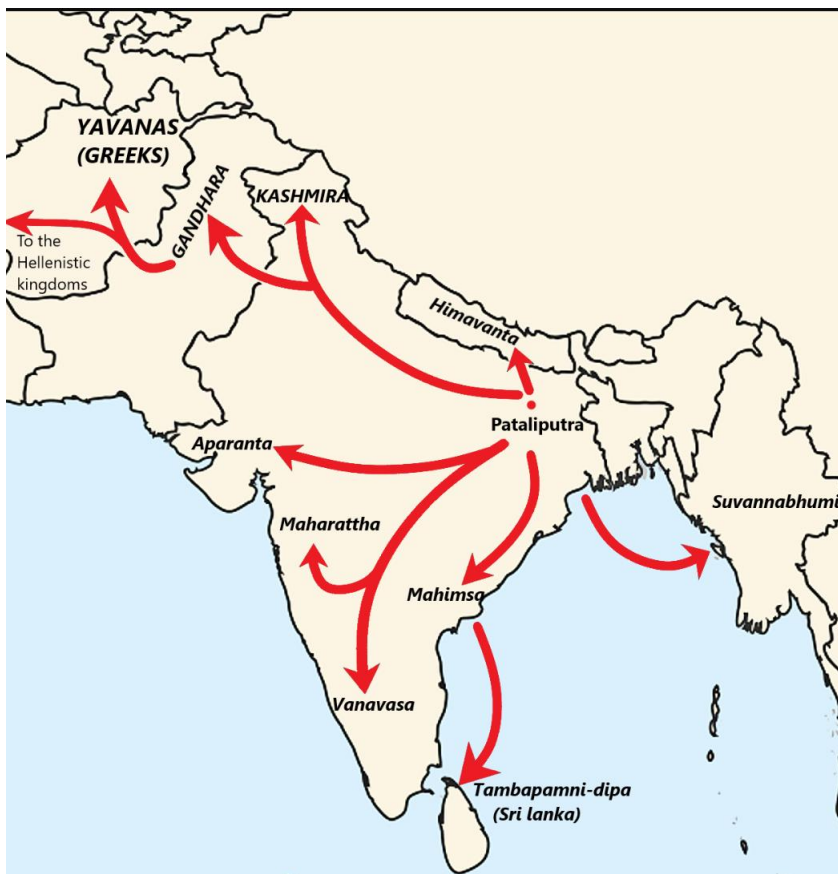
The Vibhajjavādins rejected the [Sarvāstivāda](#) claim that all [dhammas](#) (principles, phenomena) exist in the past, present and future. Instead, they made a distinction between dhammas that "exist" and dhammas that do not exist, hence the name "distinctionists."^[5] The Vibhajjavādins held that dhammas exist in the present, but not that they exist in the future. With regards to past dhammas, those wholesome or unwholesome dhammas that had already brought forth its fruit or effect were said not to exist, but those which had not yet brought forth a karmic effect could be said to have some efficacy.^[10] The [Sarvāstivāda Vi jñānakāya](#) states their position as defended by Moggaliputtatissa as: "The past and future are not; the present and the unconditioned exist."^[11]

The Vibhajjavādins also held that out of all dhammas, only [Nirvana](#) was an unconditioned (*asankhata*) dhamma, against the view of the [Sarvāstivāda](#) which also held that space was an unconditioned dhamma.^[12] Another difference with the [Sarvāstivāda](#) hinged on the issue of gradual versus sudden attainment. The Vibhajjavādins held that at [stream entry](#), understanding of the four noble truths came at once (*ekābhīsamaya*), while the [Sarvāstivāda](#) asserted that this happened only gradually (*anupubbābhīsamaya*).^{[13][14]} Vibhajjavādins also asserted that [arhats](#) could not regress or fall back to a lower state once they attained arhatship.^{[13][15]} The Vibhajjavādins also rejected the doctrine of the intermediate state between rebirths (*antarabhava*).^[15]

Doctrines of the Vibhajjavādins can be seen in the [Kathāvatthu](#), traditionally attributed to elder [Moggaliputtatissa](#) by the Theravada. The earliest layer of this text could date as far as the reign of [Ashoka](#).^{[7][6]} However, neither the Theravādin [Kathāvatthu](#) nor the [Sarvāstivāda Vi jñānakāya](#) contain any reference to Vibhajjavāda as a separate school, indicating that perhaps during the time they were recorded there was not yet a formal schism between the [Sarvāstivāda](#) and the Vibhajjavāda.^{[16][17]}

The [Visuddhimagga](#) of [Buddhaghosa](#), a fifth century Sri Lankan work meanwhile, mentions that the [Visuddhimagga](#) was written at the request of Sanghaphala, "a member of the lineage of the Mahaviharasins, illustrious Theriyas, best of Vibhajjavādins".^[3]

Branches



Map of the Buddhist missions during the reign of [Ashoka](#).

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Asoka%CC%A0_Buddhist_Missions.png#/media/File:Asoka%CC%A0_Buddhist_Missions.png

The Vibhajjavādins are not recorded uniformly by early Buddhist traditions as being a distinct sect, nor being associated with any one period of time.^[16] Some scholars believe that there was no separate “Vibhajjavāda” sect, but that the term *vibhajjavāda* was sometimes affixed to the name of a school to indicate that it differed from the main school on some doctrines.^[18] In this sense, they would be *vibhajjavādins* of that particular school.^[18]

The name was applied to a variety of communities across the Indian subcontinent. The major ones were:^[3]

1. [Dharmaguptaka](#), located mainly in the North-West of the [Indian subcontinent](#) but also spreading along the [Central Asian](#) trade routes. According to Richard Salomon, this school was involved in missionary activity and was dominant in [Gandhara](#) during the first century CE.^[3]
2. [Kāśyapīya](#), probably located in the same area as the Dharmaguptaka.
3. [Mahīśāsaka](#), as above but also in other parts of mainland India.
4. Tambapaṇṇiya ([Skt.](#) Tamraparṇiyas, later known as [Mahāvihāravāsins](#) and [Theravada](#)), established in Sri Lanka (at [Anuradhapura](#)) but active also in [Andhra](#) and other parts of [South India](#) (Vanavasa in modern [Karnataka](#)) and later across [South-East Asia](#). Inscriptional evidence has been found in [Amaravati](#) and [Nagarjunakonda](#).^[3]

Bhante Sujato, in his overview of Dharmaguptaka and Mahāvihāravāsin schools, argues that the split between them was not due to any difference in doctrine or monastic discipline, but due to geographical distance.^[19]

According to [LS Cousins](#), the precursor to these schools was probably involved in missionary activity around the time of [Ashoka](#) into the regions of [Kashmir](#), [Gandhara](#), [Bactria](#), [Andhra](#) and [Sri Lanka](#).^[3] Cousins concludes:

Vibhajjavādins really were the school predominant in Ceylon and Gandhara at an early date, as well as being present, if not predominant, in other parts of Central Asia, China, South India and South-East Asia by around the third century CE at the latest. No other school had a comparable spread at this date.^[3]

Sectarian views

The [Mahavihara Theravādins](#) of [Sri Lanka](#) are descendants of the [Sthavira](#) Vibhajjavādins in [South India](#) who used the [Pali](#) language, differing somewhat from the northern Sthavira schools.^[18] The [Theravādins](#) hold that Vibhajjavāda was the favored doctrine during a [Buddhist council](#) that took place in [Pataliputra](#) under [Ashoka](#). As Gethin notes, the sources are rather confused on this matter however.^[20]

The [Sammatīyas](#) (aka [Pudgalavadins](#)) also mention the Vibhajjavādins.^[16] According to the Sammatīya sect, the Vibhajjavādins developed from the [Sarvāstivāda](#) school.^[16]

The Sarvāstivādin [Abhidharma Mahāvibhāṣa Śāstra](#) describes the Vibhajjavādins as being the type of heretics who “make objections, who uphold harmful doctrines and attack those who follow the authentic Dharma”.^{[21][22]}

The [Mahāsāṃghika](#) saw the Vibhajjavādins as being offshoots from the root schism in Buddhism, which according to them produced three sects: the [Sthaviras](#), the Mahāsāṃghikas, and the Vibhajjavādins.^[16] The Mahāsāṃghikas list the [Mahīśāsaka](#), [Dharmaguptaka](#), [Kāśyapīya](#), and [Tāmraparnīya](#) (Theravada) sects as having descended from the Vibhajjavādins.^[16] The Mahāsāṃghika branch itself, together with the [Prajñaptivāda](#), preferred to be called [Bahuśrutīya](#)-Vibhajjavādins.^[21]

See also

[Early Buddhist schools](#)

References

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Further reading

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External links

- [The Buddhist Council](#)
- [The Pali Text Society's Pali-English Dictionary](#)

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