

VIBHAJYAVĀDA VERSUS SARVĀSTIVĀDA THE BUDDHIST CONTROVERSY ON TIME

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It is well known that it was the Theravāda School of Buddhism that was formally introduced to Sri Lanka in the 3rd century B.C. What is less known, however, is why this same School of Buddhism was also known as *Vibhajjavāda* (Skt *Vibhajyavāda*). What is equally less known and, therefore, what has given rise to a divergence of views not only on the part of modern scholars but also in the Buddhist exegetical tradition itself is the meaning that this term conveys in this particular context. Its meaning as a technical term in the Pali Canon is of course quite clear: *Vibhajjavāda* refers to an analytical explanation or a statement of conditional assertion as against what is called *Ekamsavāda*, which refers to an unqualified or categorical statement either in the affirmative or in the negative.¹ But as another name for Theravāda what does the term, *Vibhajjavāda* really mean? Under what historical circumstances, due to what doctrinal reasons, if any, and during which period in the history of Buddhist thought did these two terms become identical?

What is perhaps the earliest rendering into English of this term is found in George Turnour's translation of the *Mahāvamsa*, where it is translated or rather interpreted as 'the religion of investigated truth'.² Gate Mudaliyar E. L. Wijesinghe who brought out a second edition of this work observes that the term 'analysis' is a more appropriate translation.³ In his well-known *Pali Dictionary* Robert Childers proposes the meaning: 'the religion of Logic or Reason'.⁴ George Grimm in his *The Doctrine of the Buddha—the Religion of Reason and Meditation* not only endorses Childer's interpretation but also adduces it in support of his favourite theory that early Buddhism was a rationalist system of thought.⁵ In his English translation of the *Mahāvamsa*, Wilhelm Geiger, too, remarks that Childer's rendering of the term, *Vibhajjavāda* as religion of Logic or Reason is very appropriate.⁶ This same

1. Cf. *Dīghanikāya* (=D.), PTS., London, 1911, Vol. III, p. 229; *Majjhimanikāya* (=M.), PTS., London, 1920, Vol. II, p. 197; *Anguttaranikāya* (=A.), PTS., London, 1886, Vol. II, p. 46; Vol. V, p. 190.
2. George Turnour, *Mahāvamsa* Translation, Colombo, 1868, p. 22.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 22, n. 8.
4. s.v. *vibhajati*.
5. George Grimm, *The Doctrine of the Buddha—The Religion of Reason and Meditation*, Akademie-Verlag, Berlin, 1958 (Reprinted), p. 49.
6. Wilhelm Geiger, *The Mahāvamsa or the Great Chronicle of Sri Lanka*, Colombo, 1950, (Reprinted), p. 50, n. 2.