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# Cooking the Buddhist Books: The Implications of the New Dating of the Buddha for the History of Early Indian Buddhism

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## Introduction

During the last half-century, scholarly Buddhological inquiry has produced a series of utterly stunning publications on the period immediately following the Buddha's death, focusing especially on the early councils. Through the work of Paul Demiéville, Marcel Hofinger, Erich Frauwallner, Étienne Lamotte, André Bareau, and myself,<sup>1</sup> the once mysterious history of the early Buddhist councils became clearer. Bareau's *Les premiers conciles bouddhiques* and my own "A Review of Scholarship on the Buddhist Councils," carefully detail all the specific events of the first, second, and third councils, as well as the non-canonical council which occurred between the second and third council, and which was the occasion for the beginning of Buddhist sectarianism. Further work by Janice Nattier and me refined Bareau's presumptions in *Les sects bouddhiques du petit véhicule*, and offered what has now become the definitive statement of the beginnings of Buddhist sectarianism, arguing that the initial *sanghabheda* focused solely on matters of *Vinaya*, but rather than representing disciplinary laxity on the

part of the future Mahāsāṃghikas, resulted from attempted *Vinaya* expansion on the part of the future Sthaviras (“Mahāsāṃghika” 237-272).<sup>2</sup>

In 1988, however, all the hard sought certainty that the above research seemingly promised disappeared in the aftermath of a major Buddhist symposium convened by Heinz Bechert at the University of Göttingen. Bechert had become convinced that the widely accepted dating of the historical Buddha, placing his life between 563 and 483 B.C.E., was incorrect. His symposium brought together scholars from throughout the world to examine this issue from every position, discipline, and language imaginable. Anthropologists, sociologists, art historians, philosophers, and historians compared their perspectives. Epigraphical evidence was examined. Although the symposium participants offered dates for the Buddha’s death ranging from 483 B.C.E. down to 368 B.C.E., most participants suggested that the Buddha died within approximately a few decades on either side of 400 B.C.E. Eventually three volumes entitled *Die Datierung des Historischen Buddha* were produced, diligently edited by Bechert.

On the surface, this new dating for the Buddha’s death doesn’t seem terribly earthshaking, either for Indian Buddhist history or for ancillary studies such as a consideration of Upāli and his lineage of *Vinayadharas*. Yet it is. Because of this new date for the Buddha’s demise, virtually everything we know about the earliest Indian Buddhism, and especially its sectarian movement, is once again called into question. Dates for the first, second, and third canonical councils—once thought to be certain—must now be reexamined. Kings who presided at these events must be reconsidered. Most importantly, the role of the great Indian King Aśoka, from whose reign much of the previous dating begins, needs to be placed under the scrutiny of the historical microscope again.

During my research on this topic, I have been in contact with many of the scholars who attended the Göttingen symposium, as well as other leading scholars of early Indian Buddhism. What has slowly emerged from my investigation is an altogether new and revolutionary picture of early Indian Buddhist history. As my work has proceeded, events from previous research

that had hitherto seemed contrary or problematic now appear to be part of a logical historical progression that explains the early Indian Buddhist sectarian movement, and even Upāli's role in it, in a far more plausible way.

This paper explores the above issue in detail, citing all the pertinent, applicable sources, and additionally, investigates the degree to which the traditional Anglo-German and Franco-Belgian schools of Buddhist Studies disagree with each other based on the sources utilized as primary by each group.

### **A Brief Review of the Literature**

It is quite common for publications involving any treatment of the life of the Buddha to refer to the few classic studies of the topic, invariably citing works such as Edward J. Thomas' *The Life of the Buddha as Legend and History*, André Bareau's *Recherches sur la biographie du Buddha dans les Sūtrapitaka et la Vinayapitaka anciens: de la quête du l'Éveil à la conversion de Śāriputra et de Maudgalayāyana*, Alfred Foucher's *La Vie du Bouddha*, as well as several others. These books generally also refer to traditional texts such as the *Dīpavaṃsa*, *Mahāvāṃsa*, *Samantapāsādikā*, *Buddhacarita*, *Mahāvastu*, and other Buddhist sources. However, they rarely delve into the huge corpus of scholarly literature on the topic, and almost completely ignore the immense amount of data—which is invariably inconsistent with itself—that has been published since the beginning of modern buddhological research.

To his credit, Heinz Bechert included an entry titled "Selected Bibliography of Secondary Literature" in the third volume of *Die Datierung des Historischen Buddha*. This meticulous compilation spans an overwhelming forty-eight pages! Almost apologetically, Bechert informs us in the first page that the bibliography *only* contains works published up to 1995, does not list primary sources, and mentions only a few Chinese and Japanese sources. Nonetheless, the listing cites 650 sources. And of course all of the expected resources and scholars are included. In addition to the individuals cited

above, studies by Étienne Lamotte, Hajime Nakamura, P.H. Eggermont, Ganath Obeyesekere, Akira Hirakawa, K.R. Norman, Oskar von Hinüber, Richard Gombrich, David Seyfort Rugg, and many others are considered. Moreover, the paper by Sieglinde Dietz (“Die Datierung des historischen Buddha in der abendländischen Forschungsgeschichte bis 1980”) presented in the second volume of the text offers a remarkable survey of the history of research on the topic.

But the overall list is so much richer, and diverse, than simply the expected resources. What is at least surprising, if not shocking, is that the combination of materials presented in Bechert’s bibliography and the cornucopia of conflicting materials presented at the symposium has not sparked a renaissance of interesting new studies and theories regarding the life of the historical Buddha . . . studies that would question all of our assumptions about the development of the early Indian Buddhist *sangha*.

### **Traditional Chronologies of the Buddha’s Life**

Prior to the Göttingen symposium, there were four basic dating schemas for computation of the Buddha’s historical dates: (1) the long chronology; (2) the “corrected” long chronology; (3) the short chronology; and (4) the “dotted record.” The traditional (uncorrected) long chronology suggests that the date of the Buddha’s death is 544/543 B.C.E. This computation derives from exclusively Theravādin sources such as the *Dīpavaṃsa*, *Mahāvāṃsa*, and *Samantapāsādikā*, and as Heinz Bechert asserts, is “accepted by the Sinhalese Buddhists of Sri Lanka as well as by Theravāda Buddhists in Southeast Asia.” Further, “It is the starting point of the Buddhist Era (Buddhasāsana Era) which is used by all Theravāda communities in South and Southeast Asia” (“Introductory” 2). The uncorrected long chronology is accepted by virtually no modern scholars of Buddhism. The reason for this is that the chronology places the *parinirvāṇa* of the Buddha 218 years before the consecration of King Aśoka, but assumes the date of Aśoka’s coronation to be 326 B.C.E. According to Richard Gombrich, “Aśoka’s dates are approximately estab-

lished by the synchronism between his 13<sup>th</sup> major rock edict, which is dated by scholars in the 13<sup>th</sup> year after his consecration, and the five monarchs of the Hellenistic world named therein as reigning at the time. The date of the edict must be 255 B.C., give or take a year; Aśoka's consecration is accordingly dated 268 B.C." (14). In other words, in Gombrich's terms, there is a "slippage" of sixty years in this chronology which simply cannot be accounted for, although there have been some hypotheses offered on this point.<sup>3</sup> And of course this leads to the second hypothesis, that of the "corrected" long chronology. This notion, first propounded by George Turnour as early as 1837, grew from

a discrepancy of about 60 years between the dates of the Maurya king Candragupta as provided by this tradition, and the date which had been established by the identification of Candragupta with Sandrakottos of the Greek writers, the synchronism discovered by Sir William Jones in 1793. Turnour concluded that the dates of the kings Candragupta and Aśoka were calculated too early in the chronicle, but he accepted the information of the Mahāvamsa that 168 years had elapsed between the death of the Buddha and the accession of Candragupta to the throne, and 218 years between the same event and the consecration of King Aśoka. On this basis Turnour established what was later on termed the "corrected" long chronology. (Bechert "Introductory" 2)

A very useful discussion of the calculations surrounding the "corrected" long chronology can be found in Andr. Bareau's 1953 article "La date du Nirvāṇa," published in *Journal Asiatique* (27-62). In addition, Bechert's additional article "The Date of the Buddha—An Open Question of Ancient Indian History," provides much additional information and data on the "corrected" long chronology (222-236).

On the other hand, the short chronology of the Buddha, which is represented in a large number of early Indian Buddhist texts—primarily in the Sanskrit, Chinese, and Tibetan traditions—suggests that the coronation of King Aśoka took place precisely 100 years after the *nirvāṇa* of the Buddha.

There are even two passages in the *Dīpavaṃsa* (1.24-27 and 5.55-59), as noted by Hendrik Kern, that support the short chronology (108). Nonetheless, there are problems with the short chronology as well. Although nearly all of the canonical and post-canonical texts in the above three traditions count 100 years between the Buddha's death and Aśoka's coronation, the Chinese version of the *Samayabhedoparacanacakra* notes 116 years between these events, and the variant number 160 appears in Bhavya's *Nikāyabhedavibhaṅgavyākhyāna*. In recent times, though, the short chronology has gained supporters primarily because it includes, and is supported by, additional evidence taken from archeological records, data derived from the succession of *Vinayadharas* beginning with Upāli, and historical information gleaned from the Hindu and Jain traditions. Bechert notes that scholars such as Hendrik Kern, E.J. Thomas, G.C. Mendis, and P.H.L. Eggermont "have held the view that the short chronology represented the earliest Buddhist chronology, and that it precedes all other Buddhist chronologies" ("Introductory" 6).

Finally we come to the "dotted record." This account, taken from Chinese sources and referred to initially by Tao-hsüan in the *Ta t'ang nei tien lu* (*Taishō* 2149, chapter 4, page 262b), argues that when Upāli, the first *Vinayadhara*, first collected the *Vinaya* after the Buddha's death, he marked a dot in the manuscript at the end of the *pavāraṇā*, and continued the process in each year thereafter. His successors, Dāsaka, Soṇaka, Siggava, Moggaliputta, Tissa, Caṇḍavajji, and so forth continued the process. Saṃghabhadra, who presumably translated the *Samantapāsādikā* into Chinese, is said to have put the 975<sup>th</sup> dot on the manuscript during a visit to Canton in 489 C.E., thus establishing the Buddha's death in 486 B.C.E. Much of this calculation was surveyed by P.H.L. Eggermont in his book *The Chronology of the Reign of Asoka Moriya* (132-143), but perhaps the definitive study of the "dotted record" was that of W. Pachow (342-349). Given the data, the chronology suggests that the "dotted record" is indeed based on the Theravāda tradition (and particularly with the corrected long chronology), and this was clearly noted by Junjirō Takakusu as early as 1896 (436ff). Further, both Bechert and Pachow explain this association in detail, including its problematics.<sup>4</sup> Despite

the creative explanations of the dating, no modern scholars affirm the validity the “dotted record” theory any longer, and for a highly obvious reason, as Akira Hirakawa notes: “We cannot take seriously the idea that after Upāli compiled the *Vinaya*, he memorialized it and added a dot after the end of the *pavāraṇā*. The reason is that in Upāli’s time the *Vinaya* was still memorized and transmitted verbally...” (289). In other words, there was no manuscript in which to transcribe the imagined dots.

A consideration of the above four theories leaves us in a proverbial quandary. Each of the four traditional theories has some persuasive arguments in its favor, yet each also has serious problems. Which, if any, are we to believe? And how might we affirm any conclusion? It was this dilemma that framed Heinz Bechert’s 1988 symposium, and led him to conclude, probably reluctantly, that “The only way to fix the date of the Nirvāṇa seems to be the use of indirect evidence” (“Introductory” 8). Let us now examine some of the novel theories that emerged from the symposium, commenting on the efficacy and creativity of the most persuasive arguments, eventually offering some unusual and perhaps shocking alternatives that emerge from the overall discussion.

### **New Theories**

In the papers from the symposium I am very much taken by Bechert’s contribution, of course, but more persuaded by the rather logical arguments of Richard Gombrich and Hajime Nakamura. Having utilized an enormous corpus of literature in his work, Bechert is very forthright in stating,

I argue that the available sources do not allow reconstruction of the date of the Buddha exactly, because we have no convincing evidence whatsoever of reliable chronological information being handed down in India before Alexander’s campaign. I am also convinced that the “short chronology” represents the earliest Buddhist chro-



nology found in our sources. This does not, however, imply that it represents reliable chronological information. (“Introductory” 8)

According to Bechert, this sets his conclusion for the Buddha’s dates at 448-368 B.C.E. Lance Cousins, in an insightful review article suggests that “The primary reason for Bechert’s belief does appear to be his acceptance of the claim that there is evidence for the presence of the short chronology in ancient Ceylon, specifically in the *Dīpavaṃsa*.” Cousins goes on to indicate that he believes this argument to be mistaken. In addition, he concludes that the canonical third council would then be dated at eighteen years following the second council, which he dismisses as implausible (57-63). More on this later. Further skepticism regarding the early composition of the short chronology is offered by Lewis Lancaster. He notes that “Perhaps the oldest reference to the time of one hundred years is to be found in the translation in 306 of the *A yü wang chuan* (*Aśokāvadāna*) made by An Fa-ch’in” (455). However, Lancaster also notes “The possible references to the ‘long chronology’ can be found first in a text translated by an unknown person sometime between 265-317. This text, the *She wen kuo wang men chien shih shih ching*, told of the dreams of King Prasenajit and dated Aśoka 200 years after the Nirvāṇa of the Buddha” (456).

If Bechert’s argument is less than convincing and persuasive, Gombrich comes closer to making a strong case for his proposed dating, locating the likely *parinirvāṇa* at 404 B.C.E. The main basis for Gombrich’s argumentation focuses on the pupillary succession of the Buddha’s *Vinaya* disciples from Upāli to Mahinda. This data is preserved in four primary texts: The *Parivāra* (appendix) to the *Vinaya Piṭaka*; the introductory section (*Bāhira-nidāna*) to Buddhaghosa’s *Vinaya* commentary known as the *Samantapāsādikā*; the *Dīpavaṃsa*; and the *Mahāvaṃsa*. I find Gombrich’s argument for the Buddha’s death in 404 B.C.E. quite compelling because he is able to chart the life span of the *Vinayadharas* in a fashion that seems not to contradict other well known dates . . . right up through Aśoka’s coronation and thereafter. He is, therefore, concerned with the data concerning Upāli, Dāsaka, Soṇaka, Sig-gava, and Moggaliputta Tissa, as well as the particular meaning of the phrase “*vinaye pāmokkho*,” which he interprets *not* as an office as Lamotte

and Frauwallner do, but rather as a “leading expert.” He works primarily with the *Dīpavaṃsa* and *Mahāvāṃsa*, focusing on the ages of the above named monks, and whether those ages refer to years from conception, birth, or ordination. His argument is complicated, but he notes that *Dīpavaṃsa* 5.95 cites these ages as: Upāli 74, Dāsaka 64, Soṇaka 66, Siggava 76, and Moggaliputta 80. Initially, he states:

There is an overwhelming argument against interpreting the monks’ stated ages as referring to years since ordination: common sense. Naturally, everyone has noticed that a series of five lifespans in ancient India reading (minimally—if all were ordained at 19) 93, 83, 85, 95, and 105 or 99 is incredible . . . However, since I believe I can show that if these are lifespans everything falls into place, there is no need to go on believing palpable nonsense. (242)

Gombrich goes on to assemble an impressive array of data for all the above figures, including the age of admission to the order, age at death, age at which one became *vinaya pāmokkha*, years as *vinaya pāmokkha*, and age at ordination, eventually presenting his summary in a useful and simple to follow table (251) (which I have slightly abridged):<sup>5</sup>

A.B. (After Buddha)		B.C.E.
0	The Parinibbāna	404
8	Upāli admits Dāsaka to the Order	398
10	Dāsaka learns <i>Vinaya</i> by heart at 12	394
16	Upāli 60, ordains Dāsaka; Dāsaka 20	388
30	Upāli dies at 74	374
33	Dāsaka 37 admits Soṇaka 15 to the Order	371
40	Soṇaka learns the <i>Vinaya</i> by heart at 22	364
41	Dāsaka ordains Soṇaka	363

56	Soṇaka admits Siggava 18 to the Order	348
58	Siggava learns the <i>Vinaya</i> by heart at 20	346
58	Soṇaka 40 ordains Siggava 20	346
60	Dāsaka dies at 64	344
60	Soṇaka dies at 66	344
98	Siggava admits Tissa 16 to the Order	306
100	Tissa learns the <i>Vinaya</i> by heart at 18	304
102	Siggava 64 ordains Tissa; Tissa 20	302
114	Siggava dies at 76	290
136	Tissa 54 at Aśoka's inauguration; Mahinda 14	268
142	Tissa 60 admits Mahinda to the Order and ordains him	262

Now, however, Gombrich is obligated to complete his *tour de force* by applying the above data to the dating of the councils, and this is where his argument becomes rather obtuse, resulting in what appears to me to be a “cooking of the Buddhist books” or, to borrow one of Gombrich’s own phrases, “making mountains without molehills.” That is to say, once he has offered a highly plausible new date for the Buddha’s death, one cannot help but be curious about how that date impacts our traditional knowledge of the dating of the early councils, the rise of Indian Buddhist sectarianism, and the historical relationship of those issues to the reign of King Aśoka. Gombrich concludes, with Bareau and others, that the first Buddhist council presumed to have been held in Rājagṛha, is essentially legendary (16). Virtually all scholars affirm the historicity of the second council, held at Vaiśālī, but given Gombrich’s dating, the traditional notion that the first and second councils were separated by 100 years, would place the Vaiśālī council in 304 B.C.E., a date far too close to Aśoka’s coronation in 268 B.C.E. to comfortably suit any respectful Theravāda scholar. As such, Gombrich

argues that the time span between the first and second councils could not have been the traditional 100 years that all the texts maintain, and offers instead a span of 60 years between the councils. His reasons for this conclusion do not seem altogether clear, and I'm not convinced that the *Dīpavaṃsa* references he cites actually support his claim. Nevertheless, the crux of his argument for a 60 year time span between the two councils seems to rest on the convenience of the number 100, which he considers a round number rather than an exact number, and the ages of some of the leading figures of the second council, such as Sarvagāmin who, by Gombrich's calculation, would have been 140 years old. Admittedly, he agrees that although it is "absurd to accept such figures, it is reasonable to assume that tradition preserved the names of the monks involved in the dispute and those of their teachers" (17). It is noteworthy that he never considers any alternative possibilities: that 100 years actually *does* mean 100 years, and that the names of some of those monks presumed in attendance were appended to the account—despite their outrageous ages— to supply needed authority to the mechanics and results of the proceedings, and *not* because they actually were in attendance. Certainly this latter possibility is no less reasonable than Gombrich's, and it does not require altering a date presumed in nearly every Buddhist account of the second council.

If we accept Gombrich's date of 404 B.C.E. as reasonable in the light of the above argument, but reject his supposition of 60 years between the first and second councils, some intriguing possibilities emerge. For example, it is interesting to note, as K.R. Norman does, that none of the canonical *Vinaya* accounts of the second council mention the king who was reigning in Magadha at the time of the council (304-306). The *Dīpavaṃsa* (5.25), however, does, identifying him as Asoka, son of Susunāga. In addition, the *Mahāvāṃsa* (4.8) refers to him as Kālāsoka, son of Susunāga; and Buddhaghosa refers to him as Kālāsoka Susunāgaputta in the *Samantapāsādikā* (33.20).<sup>6</sup> This would tally with some early Buddhist texts which argue that Aśoka and Kālāśoka were, indeed, the *same* individual. Additionally, if we consult Bhavya's *Nikāyabhedavibhaṅgavyākhyāna*, list 2 (a presumed Saṃmitīya list) 37 years is postulated between the canonical second council and another non-

canonical council—curiously held in Pāṭaliputra. And of course the date of that non-canonical council would be 267, a date almost coincident with Aśoka’s coronation. More importantly, this non-canonical council is precisely the one which André Bareau associates with the beginning of Buddhist sectarianism (*Sectes* 89). Such a supposition would place King Aśoka squarely in the midst of the initial rise of Indian Buddhist sectarianism, a notion which would be totally foreign to all Theravāda scholars. Going one step further, if the canonical third council, convened by Aśoka in Pāṭaliputra truly did take place 18 years into his reign, one might conclude that 18 years was a time span sufficient for real problems—sectarian hostilities and disagreements, possibly even doctrinal ones—to emerge in the now multivalent *sangha*, thus requiring Aśoka, by now a Dharmarāja, to resolve the dispute with a council. Petra Kieffer-Puelz, who attended the conference and was heavily involved in the three-volume publication, has confided to me in an e-mail that she privately wonders whether Gombrich’s argument was based on the fact that the historical events simply didn’t fit in with his image, or Bechert’s, of what happened at Aśoka’s time. She said: “Perhaps it did not fit in with their image of what happened in Aśoka’s time? I earnestly would not exclude that.” She goes on: “I had the impression that Bechert’s critique of Gombrich’s work was caused to a greater part by some personal cause, and not so much by objective reasons.” Finally: “During the conference I received the impression that the gap between those who worked with Pāli sources and the others who worked with the Japanese, Chinese, Tibetan, etc., became even wider.”<sup>7</sup>

Moving on now to a consideration of the viewpoints of the Japanese scholars, who largely rely not on the Pāli sources, but rather those of the Sanskrit, Chinese, and Tibetan traditions, and whose views largely coincide with what has been called the Franco-Belgian School of Buddhology, these views can largely be characterized by the positions of Hajime Nakamura and, to a lesser extent, Akira Hirakawa.

Hirakawa relies largely on the tradition of the *Aśokāvadāna*, *Avadānaśataka*, and *Mūlasarvāstidin Vinaya*, all of which support the contention that King Aśoka’s coronation would occur 100 years after the Buddha’s

*parinirvāṇa* in affirming the short chronology. Based on the date of Aśoka's coronation affirmed by virtually all scholars, that would establish the Buddha's death in 368 B.C.E. This date would then postulate that the second council was held in 268 B.C.E., coincident with Aśoka's coronation, which seems an unlikely, though not impossible, possibility. Unfortunately for our purposes here, Hirakawa muses far less on the date of the Buddha's death than he does on critical issues that flow forth from that event: the date and focus of the councils, the rise and spread of the various early sects (especially the Mahāsāṃghikas), and the relation of the sects to Aśoka's reign (252-295).

Nakamura's date for the Buddha's death is 383 B.C.E., based on the Sanskrit, Chinese, and Tibetan traditions. However, he relies almost exclusively on two Chinese versions of Vasumitra's *Samayabhedoparacanacakra*, which gives "the number of years that passed between the death of the the Buddha and the appearance of Aśoka as '116 years.'" (299). By Nakamura's reckoning, the second council would then occur around 283 B.C.E. (provided the 100 year gap between councils is maintained). Curiously, this tradition also offers a time of 116 years after the Buddha's death for the first schism in Indian Buddhism. Given the circumstances of the council, and the materials presented in the *Śāriputrapariṣcchā-sūtra*, which offers a plausible alternative to the usual explanations of the schism, focusing not on Mahāsāṃghika laxity but rather *Vinaya* expansion on the part of the future Sthaviras, 16 years would not be an unreasonable time frame in which to disrupt the concord of the second council and create the occasion for sectarianism to emerge (Prebish and Nattier 265-272). Moreover, 16 years between the second council and the beginning of Buddhist sectarianism, would place that event at the beginning of Aśoka's reign, just as we have seen above. Astonishing though it may seem, the turn of events suggested above might explain why the presumed non-canonical council from which sectarianism arose and Aśoka's "third" council both occur in Pāṭaliputra, and an 18 year gap between the two events might concur well with Aśoka's reasoning for holding the third council in the first place: in the two decades since his co-

ronation, sectarianism had become rampant, and his notion of “orthodoxy” needed to be reestablished.

## Conclusions

Where does all of the mathematical meandering cited above leave us? Is it possible to conclude with any certainty which dates really do provide an accurate portrayal of Buddha’s lifespan? Could it even be possible that the date of 160 years after the Buddha’s death for the first great schism, rejected by almost everyone as manifestly aberrant, but affirmed by Ryūsho Hikata as recently as 1980 (187-202), could be accurate?

What can we say with some degree of certainty? First, all the texts examined agree that a first council was held in Rājagṛha during the first rainy season following the Buddha’s *parinirvāṇa*. Many scholars suppose that this event may have been fictitious, invented upon the occasion of the second council so as to lend authenticity to the sequence of events following the Buddha’s death, but all the texts do affirm its occasion. Second, all the texts affirm that a second council was held in Vaiśālī, 100 years following the first council (except the Sarvāstivādin and Mūlsarvāstivādins texts, which cite 110 years), and virtually all scholars acknowledge the historicity of this event. Third, a non-canonical council at Pāṭaliputra is postulated some years later (generally being presumed to be either 16 or 37 years following the second council), resulting in the first schism in Indian Buddhist history, separating the Sthaviras and the Mahāsāṃghikas.<sup>8</sup> Fourth, Aśoka is consecrated in 268 B.C.E. Fifth, a third canonical council is mentioned in Pāṭaliputra, 18 years following Aśoka’s coronation, but the record of this council appears only in the Pāli sources. Beyond that, little can be said that finds agreement among scholars.

What seems logical to suppose from the above is that if we are to arrive at a real consensus of the events following the Buddha’s death, we should use all the sources available to us, and not just those that affirm a hypothe-

sis that is convenient to our suppositions and anticipated expectations. In other words, we have the occasion and opportunity to access canonical and non-canonical texts from all the traditions, and in a variety of languages, why not use them? If we can use the *Dīpavaṃsa*, *Mahāvāṃsa*, *Samantapāsādikā* and other Pāli sources, why not equally consult, for example, the various *Vinayas* of the sects, as well as the *Aśokāvadāna*, *Samayabhedoparacanacakra*, *Nikāyabhedavibhaṅgavyākhyāna*, *Śāriputrapariṣcchā-sūtra*, and other texts in Sanskrit, Chinese and Tibetan translations (as the case may be)? That is to say, we should not “cherry pick” which data we use and which not. Because the vast majority of the speculations offered by the scholars attending the 1988 Göttingen symposium place the date of the Buddha’s *parinirvāṇa* between 368 and 404 B.C.E., directly or indirectly utilizing primarily the so-called “short chronology” mentioned above, why not call the new postulations, insofar as we can affix any title to this process, the “corrected short chronology?” Further, because the extreme dates cited—368 B.C.E. and 404 B.C.E.—invariably place the beginnings of Buddhist sectarianism squarely in the period of Aśoka’s reign, we should acknowledge that no “cooking the Buddhist books” by changing scripture and amending the time span between the first and second councils can alter this circumstance.

If we emphasize either the suggestion of Hajime Nakamura or Richard Gombrich, it is virtually impossible to avoid some very unsettling conclusions. As stated above, Nakamura’s date of the *parinirvāṇa*, 383 B.C.E., would place the second council in 283 B.C.E. Following the suggestion of the *Samayabhedoparacanacakra* of Vasumitra, dating the schism at 116 years after the Buddha’s death would make the beginnings of Buddhist sectarianism coterminus with Aśoka’s coming to power. It would explain why the non-canonical council that occasioned that event was held in Pāṭaliputra, and would explain why some texts identify this council with Kālāśoka, recognized by some texts and individuals as the *same* person as Aśoka. Furthermore, given the tumultuous events that must have resulted from the great schism, it would explain why a third council was necessary shortly thereafter to reaffirm Buddhist orthodoxy amidst a now multivalent Buddhist *sangha*.



If we follow Gombrich's chronology, placing the Buddha's death in 404 B.C.E., but adhere to the traditional date for the second council, that event would occur in 304 B.C.E. I simply cannot affirm Gombrich's alteration of the time span between the first two councils. With the exceptions noted above, all other texts indicate 100 years between the councils. If the texts meant to say 60 years, as Gombrich prefers, they could easily have said 60 years (or 50 years, or 70 years, or half-a-century). Wouldn't it be reasonable to suppose we could find even just one text that would offer a hint of Gombrich's speculative date? We can't. In presenting his exhaustive argument for 404 B.C.E. as the proper date of the Buddha's death, Gombrich offers very specific numbers (37, 60, 64, 66, 74, 76, etc.) for various events involving the *Vinayadharas*. I believe he only "cooks" the figure of 100 years because it doesn't coincide with his understanding of Theravādin history. Once we change scripture to suit his suppositions, where do we draw the line? Should we suppose, for example, that the *Śatasāhasrikā-prajñāpāramitā-sūtra* was really only 60,000 versus instead of 100,000 verses? Applying the dating of Bhavya's *Nikāyabhedavibhaṅgavyākhyāna* (list 2, a Saṃmitīya tradition) for the rise of sectarianism to the second council's 304 B.C.E. date offered above puts the rise of Buddhist sectarianism at 267 B.C.E., squarely in Aśoka's reign...just as in Nakamura's supposition. And as above, holding a canonically identified third council 18 years later would not be an unreasonable outcome of the beginnings of Buddhist sectarianism.

Do the similarities between the creative and persuasive arguments for dating the historical Buddha offered by Hajime Nakamura and Richard Gombrich resolve the issues entertained by Heinz Bechert's remarkable Göttingen symposium? Hardly! But their postulated dates for the Buddha suggest that much new work on this topic is both necessary and required if we are to have a clearer understanding of the first centuries of Indian Buddhist history. Considering the enormous importance of the history of the councils, the work and mission of the *Vinayadharas*, and the role of the great Indian King Aśoka in early Indian Buddhism, we have little time to lose.

## Notes

1. See: Demiéville, Paul. “À propos du concile de Vaiśālī,” *T'oung Pao* 40 (1951), 239-236; Hofinger, Marcel. *Étude sur la concile de Vaiśālī*. Louvain: Bureaux de Muséon, 1946.; Frauwallner, Erich. *The Earliest Vinaya and the Beginnings of Buddhist Literature*. Rome: Instituto per il Medio ed Estremo, Oriente, 1956.; Lamotte, Étienne. *Histoire du Bouddhisme Indien des origines à l'ère Śaka*. Louvain: Publications Universitaires, 1958.; Bareau, André. *Les premiers conciles bouddhiques*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1955.; and Prebish, Charles “A Review of Scholarship on the Buddhist Councils,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 33, 2 (February 1974), 239-254.
2. See also: Prebish, Charles. “Śaikṣa-dharmas Revisited: Further Considerations of Mahāsāṃghika Origins,” *History of Religions* 35, 3 (February 1996), 258-270.; and Bareau, André, *Les Sectes bouddhique du Petit Véhicule*. Saigon École Française d'Extrême-Orient, 1955.
3. See, for example, Mendis, G. C. “The Chronology of the Early Pāli Chronicles,” *University of Ceylon Review* 5 (1947), 39-54.
4. See Bechert, Heinz. “The Date of the Buddha—An Open Question of Ancient Buddhist History” 228-229; and Pachow, W. “A Study of the Dotted Record” 343-346.
5. I have removed the textual references to the *Dīpavaṃsa* and *Mahāvāṃsa* for each event, but these are included in Gombrich's text.
6. Norman too, like the other Theravāda scholars, seems obliged to alter the traditional 100 years between the first and second councils, postulating a span of 30 and 70 years as possibilities.
7. Personal e-mail from Petra Keiffer-Pulz; September 13, 2005.
8. The results theorized by Janice Nattier and me in our 1977 article “Mahāsāṃghika Origins: The Beginnings of Buddhist Sectarianism” remain intact, arguing that the root cause of the first schism was not Mahāsāṃghika disciplinary laxity, but rather *Vinaya* expansion on the part of the future Sthaviras. We rely heavily on the *Śāriputrapariṣcchā-sūtra* in coming to this conclusion. Gombrich, in “Dating the Budd-

ha: A Red Herring Revealed,” (255) conveniently calls this text's dating of the Buddha to be coincident with his merely “a coincidence.”

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