

## **A Note on the Use of the Word Hīnayāna in the Teachings of Buddhism**

Arvind Sharma

Eastern Buddhist Society – Vol. 9, Issue 2, 1976

### I

To the objective and sensitive teacher of Buddhism, the use of the word Hīnayāna poses a problem because of its pejorative connotation, as it is “a contemptuous term almost amounting to abuse”<sup>1</sup> To be sure, when the word is used in the specific context of the situation which describes what Māhāyanists thought of those Buddhists who were not Māhāyanists its use is certainly justified in that specific situation, as a Māhāyanist (as distinguished from an objective) statement of the situation. Then the word is used with recognition that Hīnayāna is the “name given by the followers of Māhāyana (Greater Vehicle) Buddhist tradition in ancient India to the more orthodox, conservative schools. The name reflected the Māhāyanists’ evaluation of their own tradition as a super method, surpassing the others in universality and compassion...”<sup>2</sup>

But sometimes the word has been used to label the non- Māhāyana Buddhism generally, without the scholarly scrupulousness of regarding it as a Māhāyanist designation of non-Māhāyana schools.<sup>3</sup> When this is done, several objections arise, apart from the pejorative nature of the appellation. For one thing, although the Māhāyanist called the non-Māhāyanist Hīnayānist “the name was not accepted by the conservative schools as referring to a common tradition,”<sup>4</sup> Moreover “there arose too, a third method or ‘vehicle’ of salvation, called ‘The Middle Method’ (Madhyama Yāna). This, however, is not so well known, and, being a compromise between the other two, never gained many adherents, though it is still recognized in Tibet – the Tibetians often speaking of Tri-Yāna, or ‘the three vehicles.’”<sup>5</sup> Lumping all non-Māhāyana schools together obscures this fact.

Largely because of the pejorative connotation of the term Hīnayāna, however, sensitive scholars have turned to using the word Theravāda, and the view that though sometimes “we use the term Hīnayāna or Lesser Vehicle to designate these teachings, but a more appropriate term would be Theravāda, or Doctrine of the Elders”<sup>6</sup> is now<sup>7</sup> widely accepted.<sup>8</sup>

### II

This changeover from the term Hīnayāna to Theravāda is, of course, commendable and desirable inasmuch as the traditions should be represented on their own terms and not how others label them – evaluatively and not descriptively.

However, once the term Hīnayāna is dropped, a problem in Buddhist studies arises. The problem is that once the name Hīnayāna is dropped “there is no other current term that designated the whole set of sects that arose between the first and the fourth centuries after the Parinirvāna.”<sup>9</sup> For if we use the word Theravāda as a general term to describe

the whole set of sects we would be overlooking the fact that “the modern upholders of the ancient tradition are Theravādins (followers of the Way of the Elders), who are but *one* of the 18 ancient schools.”<sup>10</sup> So that whereas one can draw up a chart to depict the various schools as follows:

Hīnayāna	
Theravāda	Sarvastivādins, etc
One cannot do so with the Theravāda on top:	
Theravāda	
Vaibhāsikas	Sautrāntikas, etc.

Or perhaps one can: but then this would imply that all the other schools of Buddhism splintered from Theravāda.<sup>11</sup> This may be true. But many of these schools trace their origins right back to the inner circle of Buddha’s disciples<sup>12</sup> and to that extent the above mentioned portrayal at least does injustice to those claims.<sup>13</sup> There are problems then with both words – Theravāda and Hīnayāna.

### III

It is clear, therefore, that on one hand the term Hīnayāna is undesirable as it is a pejorative; on the other hand it is useful academically as referring to the pre-Māhāyana schools collectively. Indeed the key issue is: ho does one refer to these schools collectively?

One may now focus on this question sharply, and discuss some of the suggestions which have been made explicitly and tacitly to get around this difficulty.

(1) One obvious way is to use the term pre-Māhāyana, for “in one sense, all of the so-called 18 schools of ancient Buddhism are Hīnayānist, in that they predate the emergence of Māhāyana ideas as a separate doctrine.”<sup>14</sup> Another argument in its favour would be that the name Hīnayāna “was not accepted by the conservative schools as referring to a common tradition.”<sup>15</sup> Besides, since historians of religion made the distinction between Māhāyana and other schools on historical rather than purely doctrinal grounds as the Māhāyanists did (though they might have used a historical framework)<sup>16</sup> the use of the term in the context of modern academics would be justified.

(2) Another approach could be to continue using the word Hīnayāna (with single quotation marks perhaps to indicate that it is used in a Pickwickian sense) and to hope, with Richard Robinson, that “continued usage will doubtlessly expunge all derogatory connotations of the term. ‘Quaker,’ ‘Mormon,’ and even ‘Christian’ started out similarly as labels sarcastically attached by outsiders.”<sup>17</sup>

(3) A third possibility emerges from the remarks by Edward J. Thomas. He points out “all the other schools...are usually grouped together and referred to as Hīnayāna. This is a term which has become popularized as the translation of a phrase used by the Chinese pilgrims, whoseem to not have known it as a convenient name for all schools which are not Māhāyana. But this is not the way the term is used in the Sanskrit texts. The texts

when referring to the definite schools always speak of *śrāvaka-yāna* and *pratyeka buddhayāna*, but *hīnayāna* which very rarely occurs, is used generally for ‘low or base career.’”<sup>18</sup> If such be the case then the words *śrāvaka-yāna* or *pratyeka buddhayāna* may be used as generic terms to cover the eighteen schools.

#### IV

To conclude: in the context of the discussion of Buddhist sects in the pre- Māhāyana period the use of the words Hīnayāna and Theravāda both pose a problem – one on account of its pejorativeness, the other on account of its onesidedness. The options are to continue to use the word Hīnayāna in a non-pejorative sense or to use new words – either Sanskrit terms like *śrāvaka-yāna*, etc., to do duty for the same. The solution which ultimately emerges will of course depend on the consensus that emerges by the spontaneous independent decisions teachers and scholars in the field take over the course of time.<sup>19</sup> The purpose of this paper was to highlight some of the elements that might be involved in these decisions.

---

#### Notes:

<sup>1</sup> Kenneth W. Morgan, ed., *The Path of the Buddha* (New York: The Ronald Press Company, 1956), p. 40.

<sup>2</sup> *The New Encyclopedia Britannica*, Micropaedia Vol.v (Chicago: William Benton, 1974), p. 49. Even here there is need for caution. For instance if the situation is described thus: “The first sign of this development and adaptation appears in the schism between what has been called Hīnayāna and Māhāyana (or the small vehicle and the large vehicle). The first school looked upon the salvation of the individual as goal, whereas the other school took the salvation of all beings as its aim. The first is thus a lower (hīna) aim than the second.” (R.C. Majumdar, ed., *The Age of Imperial Unity* [Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1968], p. 373)– it is not clear from this statement whether this is being made as a Māhāyanist statement or as a general statement of “objective” fact.

<sup>3</sup> See Nalinaksha Dutt, *Aspects of Māhāyana Buddhism in its Relation to Hīnayāna* (London: Luzac Co., 1930), passim; Vishwanath Prasad Varna, *Early Buddhism and Its Origins* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1973), pp. 275, 430.

<sup>4</sup> *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Micropaedia Vol. v, p. 49.

<sup>5</sup> Monier-Williams, *Buddhism*: (London: John Murray, 1890), p. 159.

<sup>6</sup> Kenneth K. S. Ch’en, *Buddhism: The Light of Asia* (New York: Woodbury, 1968), p. 30.

<sup>7</sup> The move in this direction was suggested at least as early as 1928: “The world of Buddhism is, broadly speaking, divided into two great schools of thought, known usually to European scholars as the Northern and Southern Schools. Members of the former have called the later ‘Hīnayāna’ or ‘smaller vehicle,’ reserving for themselves the name of ‘Māhāyana’ or ‘greater vehicle.’ The Southern School, however, prefers to be known as the Thera Vāda, or ‘Teaching of the Elders’ (for reasons which will appear later).” *What is Buddhism?* (London: The Buddhist Society, 1947 [first published 1928]), p. 156

<sup>8</sup> It is interesting to note that in R.C. Zaehner, ed., *A Concise Encyclopedia of Living Faiths* (London: Hutchinson, 1959), the chapter on Theravāda Buddhism avoids the word Hīnayāna while the chapter on Māhāyana employs it.

<sup>9</sup> Richard H. Robinson, *The Buddhist Religion* (Belmont, California: Dickenson Publishing Co. Ltd., 1970), p. 49 fn. 1.

<sup>10</sup> *The Encyclopedia Britannica*, Micropaedia Vol. v, p. 49, emphasis added. This is well illustrated by the fact that as soon as A.L. Basham drops the use of the word Hīnayāna, he has to speak of “the Sthaviravādins and kindred sects” (*The Wonder that was India* [London: Sidgwick & Johnson, 1956], p. 264).

<sup>11</sup> See Edward J. Thomas, *The History of Buddhist Thought* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1933), Appendix II.

---

<sup>12</sup>E.g., the Santāntrikas “trace their school back to Ānanda, a close disciple of the Buddha”, *The Encyclopedia Britannica*, Micropaedia Vol. III, p. 378.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, see chart on p. 377.

<sup>14</sup>*The New Encyclopedia Britannica*, Micropaedia Vol. v, p. 49.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup>See Wm. Theodore de Bary, ed., *The Buddhist Tradition in India, China and Japan* (New York: The Modern Library, 1969), p.185.

<sup>17</sup>Richard H. Robinson, op. cit., p. 49, fn. 1

<sup>18</sup>Richard H. Robinson, op. cit., p. 49, fn. 1

<sup>19</sup>It is interesting to note that Hinduism faced a similar stipulation. The term Hinduism is one given by outsiders the collectivity of sects which comprise it, just as Hīnayāna was a term given by outsiders to the collectivity which comprise it. (See Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion* [New York: The Macmillan Co., 1963], p. 64 ff, 256, 258, 259). It may also be that, like Hīnayāna, Hinduism may have been a pejorative term, the Hindus being equated with idolators whom the Muslims detested. It is one of the interesting asides of history that name-calling sometimes leads to ‘christening’!