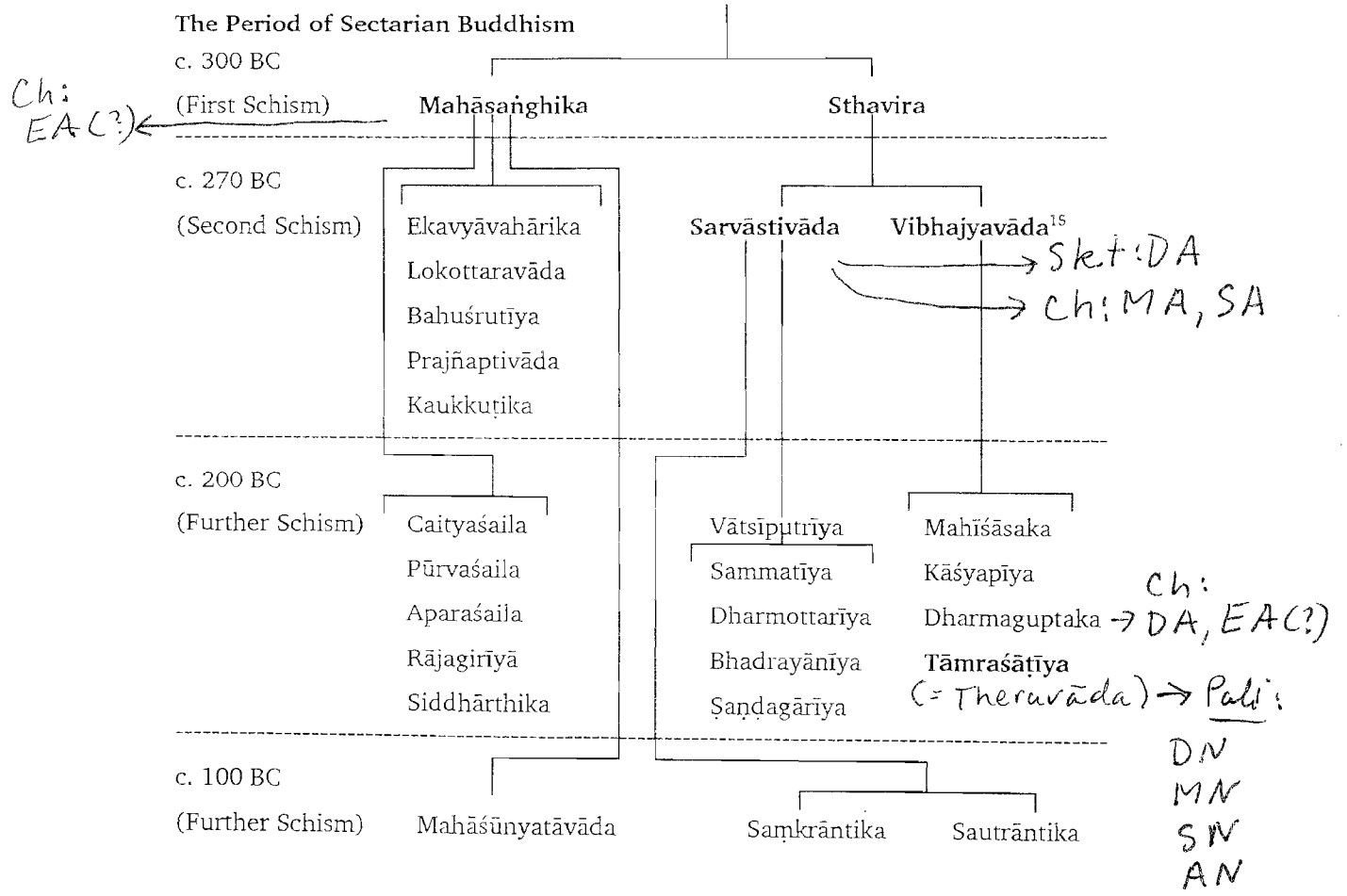


The First Five Centuries of Buddhism

- c. 508 BC Birth of the Buddha
- The Period of Original Buddhism**
- c. 473 BC Enlightenment of the Buddha
- c. 428 BC Death of the Buddha
- The Period of Early Buddhism (unified Saṅgha)**
- c. 428 BC First Council
- c. 328 BC Second Council



15 "Third Council", 251 BC (Pāli Buddhism).

Sources for the Earliest Buddhist Teachings

I. Canonical scheme of classification: the ninefold Dhamma

1. *Sutta*: discourses in prose
2. *Geyya*: mixed prose and verse e.g., *Sagāthāvagga-saṃyutta*, parts of *Sutta-nipāta*
3. *Veyyākaraṇa*: explanations, the Buddha or a great disciple answers questions
4. *Gāthā*: texts entirely in verse—now in *Theragāthā*, *Therīgāthā*, much of *Sutta-nipāta*
5. *Udāna*: “inspired utterances” of the Buddha, now collected into a separate book
6. *Itivuttaka*: “Thus it was said,” original significance unclear, now designates a separate book in Pāli *Sutta-piṭaka*
7. *Jātaka*: probably originally stories of past lives in the suttas, later a separate collection of verses about “birth stories,” though the stories come in the Commentary on the verses (not in the canon itself)
8. *Vedalla*: original significance unclear, perhaps “analytical” suttas; now in Pāli Canon designates two suttas in *Majjhima Nikāya*
9. *Abbhūtaḍḍhamma*: stories of “wonderful and marvelous” events; assigned to MN 123, 124 of Pāli Canon.

II. Ninefold Scheme replaced by Piṭakas (Baskets, Compilations) and for Suttas, by Āgamas-Nikāyas

III. Our Present Sources for the Early Buddhist Teachings

A. The Pāli Canon

Transmitted by the *Theravāda school*, consists of four main *Nikāyas*, in ancient times also called *Āgamas*.

1. *Dīgha Nikāya*: the Long Discourses, 34 suttas
2. *Majjhima Nikāya*: the Middle-Length Discourses, 152 suttas
3. *Saṃyutta Nikāya*: the Connected Discourses, appx. 3,000 short suttas in 56 chapters, called ‘saṃyuttas’, groups of thematically connected texts
4. *Aṅguttara Nikāya* (also called *Ekuttara Āgama*): the Numerically Expanding Discourses, appx. 2,400 short suttas arranged according to a numerical scheme from “Ones” to “Elevens,” each chapter called a *nipāta*.
5. *Khuddaka Nikāya*: an “umbrella” category for a multitude of short texts: the *Dhammapada*, *Suttanipāta*, *Theragāthā-Therīgāthā*, *Udāna*, *Itivuttaka*; later texts are distinctly *Theravādin*: *Niddesas*, *Paṭisambhidāmagga*.

B. The Chinese Tripiṭaka

Contains four *Āgamas* from different early schools, translated into Chinese around 5th century C.E., from *Prakrit* and *Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit* originals.

1. *Dīrghāgama* (counterpart of DN): from *Dharmaguptaka*, 30 sūtras
2. *Madhyamāgama* (counterpart of MN): from *Sarvāstivāda*, 222 sūtras
3. *Saṃyuktāgama* (counterpart of SA): also from *Sarvāstivāda*, but a different branch or different period than MA. There is also another partial translation of SA, called “the other *Saṃyutta Āgama* translation.”

4. *Ekottarāgama* (counterpart of AN): most scholars think it stems from Mahāsāṅghikas, though A.K. Warder (following some Japanese scholars) conjectures it might stem from the Dharmaguptakas

The Chinese Canon also contains numerous translations of individual sūtras not assigned to the Āgama scheme. Additionally it contains four Dharmapada translations (two strictly of Dhammapada, two of Udānavarga, a work of the Dharmapada type), one chapter of the Suttanipāta, the Theragāthā, and other texts from the early period. The Vinaya and Abhidharma treatises also often quote from the early sūtras, and the Chinese Canon includes five Vinaya Pitakas and numerous Abhidharma treatises.

C. Tibetan Kanjur: Individual sūtras translated into Tibetan (but no complete Āgamas).

D. Works recovered in Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit and Prakrit.

Sometimes works in early Indian languages are found in excavations in northern or central Asia: fragments from Chinese Turkestan, the Gilgit manuscripts (now Pakistan), a rich batch of texts that included the massive Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya, a Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit text, with many stories and sūtra citations. Works sometimes turn up in the “antiques market,” found hidden inside urns and pots: the Gāndhāri Dharmapada, the Sanskrit Dīrghāgama (Sarvāstivāda), the recent (1994) cache of Gāndhāri texts now being studied at the University of Washington.

IV. The comparative study of early Buddhist texts

1. Relations between the different canonical collections
2. Implications for understanding the process of text formation in Early Buddhism
3. The “myth” of the First Buddhist Council
4. The role of the “bhāṅakas”: the reciters of the collections
4. A more probable account: a *gradual and dynamic* process of textual formation and organization over several generations

V. The special value of the Pāli Nikāyas

1. All belong to a single school: consistency of style
2. Preserved in a Middle Indo-Aryan language related to those the Buddha might have used
3. Still serves as the authority for a living Buddhist school
4. English translations most widely available