

# Ādiyāna: an alternative to Hīnayāna, Śrāvakayāna and Theravāda

*Suwanda H. J. Sugunasiri*

The term Hīnayāna, meaning ‘Lesser Vehicle,’ is a pejorative term, created to distinguish it from Mahāyāna or ‘Great Vehicle’. To avoid the embarrassment of history, some scholars have opted for the term Theravāda, meaning the ‘Teachings of the Elders.’ While this does solve the political problem, it creates other linguistic and doctrinal concerns.

Linguistically, the suffix ending -vāda does not match with -yāna, the ending of the label for the other two schools with which it is contrasted, Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna. By its very difference, it stands out as a stepchild of the yānic family, the very thing intended to be avoided by rejecting the pejorative term.

The doctrinal problem is that Theravāda is only one of eighteen plus schools of Buddhism that precedes Mahāyāna. As the only surviving representative of that variety of Buddhism in the world today (primarily in Sri Lanka, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Thailand), Theravāda is certainly the most dominant. However, to use the Theravāda label to identify this early variety is akin to using Zen as a label for Mahāyāna, or dGe-lugs-pa, the most dominant of the ‘four hats’ in Tibetan Buddhism and the one the Dalai Lama belongs to, for Vajrayāna.

How about Śrāvakayāna ‘Disciple Vehicle,’ a historically respectable label used by some scholars? While it clearly finds its membership in the yānic family, it too has pejorative connotations. Its ideal of Arhanthood is seen to be somehow lower, or lesser, than Bodhisattvahood, the ideal of later Buddhism. Also it is a Sanskrit term, the language of later Buddhism, and not Pali.

In order to overcome such issues, we have coined the term Ādiyāna, meaning ‘Early Vehicle.’ If the ending visually links it back to the family, so to speak, the prefix ādi- is reflective of the reality of being the chronologically primitive variety of Buddhism including Theravāda. This objective term thus removes any pejorative connotations.

Finally, and most importantly, from a doctrinal and pedagogical perspective, by distinguishing Theravāda from Ādiyāna, we come to see Theravāda, too, as an interpretation of the Buddha’s Teachings, *Buddha Vacana*. This allows us to place it in its historical context and to study the variations within it. For example, one can easily discern the differences between Sinhalese (Sri Lanka) Buddhism, where it has endured for 2,300 years - making it the longest surviving Buddhist tradition in the world - and Thai Buddhism, which shows more Hindu influences reflecting its later origin. It is in this context that Nalanda labels the foundational course *Buddha Vacana*, and its extension in the second semester as *Ādiyāna, Mahāyāna, Vajrayāna Adaptations & Interpretations*.

*(Excerpted from Nalanda News, June 2003 Volume 1 No. 1)*