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PALI ORAL LITERATURE

L.S. Cousins

1. The *nikāyas* as oral literature

Early Buddhist literature is an oral literature. Such a literature is not without its own characteristic features. A widespread use of mnemonic formulae is one of the most typical of these. I would refer to the considerable body of research on the nature of oral epic poetry.[1] In such poetry the formulae are used both as an aid to actual performance and to maintain the continuity and form of the epic tradition.

Both these features are certainly present in the *sutta* literature.[2] In the first place many suttas are clearly designed for chanting. We should assume that, then as now, their chanting would produce a great deal of religious emotion — the *pāmojja* and *pīti-somanassa* of the texts. The difference of course would be that the language of the suttas would still be directly comprehensible to the hearers. In these circumstances suttas would be chanted by individual monks both for edification and for enjoyment. We may compare the recitations attributed to Ananda and Upali in accounts of the First Council. In practice they would have to be tailored to the needs of the particular situation — shortened or lengthened as required. An experienced chanter would be able to string together many different traditional episodes and teachings so as to form a coherent, profound and moving composition.

It has been clearly shown that in many cases a traditional oral singer does not have a fixed text for a particular song. He can for example be recorded on two different occasions. The result may vary greatly in length. He will insist that he has sung the same song. In fact his viewpoint is quite reasonable and in many ways defensible. If one is asked to recount an incident which has taken place, one may tell the story very briefly to someone met on the street and at much greater length to someone else over lunch. One might well not admit that the account of the matter was different on the two occasions, although the length of the story would certainly differ. Of course in practice a tape recorder might very easily show that the two versions were to some extent inconsistent or contradictory.

There is more to it than this; for an epic singer might reply that all the material in both songs was traditional apart from a little ornamentation. 'But,' says the historian, 'only in the second version did the Sultan travel via Dubrovnik. You have invented this and falsified history.' 'Not so,' says the singer. 'It is normal for heroes to travel via Dubrovnik. Many songs tell of this.' It is easy to see that such an approach is un-historical. Nevertheless we should note that it is an extremely traditional and conservative approach. The important thing is to preserve the matter of tradition. The application of this in a given situation may vary greatly and *should do*. The measure of the experience, talent and versatility of the performer is his capacity so to adapt his material.

The sutta literature shows all the marks of such an approach. It is quite evident that if we compare the Pali recension of the nikayas with other surviving versions, the differences we find are exactly those we might expect to discover between different performances of oral works. The titles tend to change, the location may alter, material is abridged here, expanded there. Even within the existing canon we find a great deal of this kind of thing. Indeed the four great nikayas often read as if they were simply different performances of the same material. Many of the episodes of a composition such as the *Mahāparinibbāna-sutta* are to be found scattered over the other three nikayas, often more than once.

The tradition itself was far from unaware of this and the problems raised by it. The Mahaparinibbana-sutta in fact preserves an account of the four *mahāpadesa*, also found as a separate discourse in the *Anguttara-nikāya*.[3] *Apadesa* signifies the pointing out or citing of someone as a witness or authority — in this case for some teaching. The four which are cited are the Buddha, a community with elders, several learned monks and just one learned elder. The passage rejects the decisiveness of the appeal to such authorities. It proposes instead that those phrases and syllables should be carefully learnt and then brought into sutta and compared with *vinaya*. If they do not enter into sutta and they do not match with vinaya, they should be rejected. In the converse case they should be accepted as the utterance of the Lord. A rather developed situation is obviously envisaged with established residence of communities and monks in settled abodes.

Obviously in such an oral tradition with a widespread body of monks and a considerable oral literature problems of authenticity are bound to arise. The procedure envisaged here is interesting. If something does not match with vinaya (*vinaye sandissanti*), it should be rejected. This suggests an established and relatively defined set of vinaya rules such as we know to have existed from the comparative study of surviving vinaya works of various schools. Similarly something should be rejected if it does not enter into sutta (*sulle otaranti*). This is an unusual expression; it is best interpreted in the light of the *Peṭakopadesa* tradition where *otaraṇā* is one of the sixteen *hāras*.[4]

It may there be taken as a particular method of exegesis which links a given discourse into the teaching as a whole by means of one of the general categories

of the teaching. The Petakopadesa in fact specifies six possibilities: aggregates, elements, spheres, faculties, truths, dependent origination.[5] Any of these can be used to analyse the content of a discourse and their use will automatically place it in its context in the teaching as a whole. Something on these lines, if perhaps a little less defined, is surely intended in the mahapadesa passages.

What is envisaged for sutta is not then a set body of literature, but rather a traditional pattern of teaching. Authenticity lies not in historical truth although this is not doubted, but rather in whether something can accord with the essential structure of the *dhamma* as a whole. If it cannot, it should be rejected. If it can, then it is to be accepted as the utterance of the Buddha. We may compare from the later commentarial tradition: 'Whosoever ... might teach and proclaim the dhamma, all of that is accounted as actually taught and proclaimed by the Teacher.'[6]

Obviously there are dangers to the maintenance of the continuity of an oral tradition. Indeed the sutta tradition assumes that it will not prove possible to maintain it in the long run. The *saddhamma* will eventually decline and finally disappear, to await rediscovery by a future Buddha. Such an awareness is of course likely to provoke attempts to delay or prolong the decline. A present day example of this is of course U Narada's assiduous promulgation of the *Paṭṭhāna* precisely *because* of the commentarial tradition that the loss of the Patthana will initiate the loss of the *Tipiṭaka*.

It may be suggested that a number of ancient attempts were made to fix the tradition, already during the sutta period. One of the earliest of these may have come down to us as the *Saṅgīti-suttanta* of the *Dīgha-nikāya*.[7] This of course consists of mnemonic lists given in groups in ascending numerical order from one to ten; significantly it is attributed not to the Buddha but to Sariputta. It can be viewed as a mnemonic summary of the contents of the nikayas. Many of its lists must derive from suttas found only in the Anguttara-nikāya. It is obviously a work of some authority; it is used as the basis for one of the seven canonical *abhidharma* works of the *Sarvāstivāda*.[8] So far as I know, it has not actually been suggested that it may well have been recited at one of the Councils. Yet its name clearly indicates that it is intended for chanting together and this surely means at a *Saṅgīti*.

If this is correct, it is not surprising that it could be referred to as a recital of the dhamma and seen as referring to the nikayas at large. From one point of view this is hardly false if the Sangiti-suttanta is seen as a summary work or mnemonic index. One might venture rather tentatively to suggest that the Second Council would seem particularly appropriate. This does seem to have been a period in which an attempt was being made to define some aspects of the tradition more precisely.[9] Even if the tradition of the Councils which we have is rejected in toto, it would still seem that the procedure of holding a Sangiti to chant together the dhammavinaya is firmly fixed in oral consciousness. Presumably this has some historical basis. Perhaps then the Sangiti-suttanta is the best evidence we have as to what one such council actually did?

The process of organizing for mnemonic purposes did not stop here. Other individual suttas developed later for the same purposes, most notably the *Dasuttara-suttanta*.[10] The folk genre of riddle and answer was also utilized.[11] On a larger scale the actual structuring of the nikaya collections shows evidence of the same concern. If we consider the division of the first two collections into long and medium discourses and recall the commentarial references to the different views on certain matters of the two schools of *Dīghabhāṇakas* and *Majjhimabhāṇakas*, this distinction on grounds of size seems rather remarkable. At first sight it is difficult to see how it could have arisen. However if we consider the matter from the standpoint of oral performance, it becomes clearer. What we have is schools of monks specializing in recitals of different lengths. The convenience of this is obvious — one could invite a particular monk or group of monks according to the length of chanting required. One length would be appropriate for an *uposatha* day or for the occasion of some *saṅgha* meeting. Another length would perhaps be more suitable for an evening event. Such considerations might also account for some differences of content e.g. the great mythic and ritual suttas of the long collection.

Every monk would need a stock of small pieces for chanting when visiting the sick or for recitation after receiving food at the house of a layman. So we have no school of *Cūḷabhāṇakas*. The corresponding material does of course exist; it is this which has been collected or rather organized into the third and fourth nikayas. These have been arranged according to mnemonic principles. The Anguttaranikaya follows a straightforward numerical approach. This is not as unsophisticated as might appear at first sight; we should no doubt assume that numerological symbolism of some kind is involved. The *Saṃyutta-nikāya* adopts the alternative method of trying to establish groups of mnemonically linked discourses arranged in five larger meaningful sections. In some places therefore it tries to develop interconnections based upon the structure of the dhamma, but often it is satisfied with a simple mnemonic link or mere association of ideas.

Both these collections are however clearly oral compositions. We may suppose that after the original introduction of these two organizational methods they were continued in the tradition and probably did not take an absolutely fixed form until the specific occasion on which they were set in writing. In fact one might expect a considerable transitional period with both oral and literary approaches remaining concurrent. No doubt the oral tradition had by this time become rather fixed in comparison to the earlier period. Even so we should assume that the same monk would not have set a given work down in writing in the same way on two successive occasions.

This model of the development of the nikaya literature is well in accord with the historical evidence. The kind of divergence and variation in the oral tradition suggested here is not simply an inference from the pattern of most but not all forms of oral literature so far studied.[12] It has a much firmer basis. It is precisely this kind of variation which is actually found in the different versions of the four

nikayas preserved by various sects and extant today in Pali, Sanskrit, Chinese and Tibetan. These divergences are typically greatest in matters of little importance — such items as the locations of suttas, the names of individual speakers or the precise order of occurrence of events. Only very rarely are they founded on doctrinal or sectarian differences. They are too frequent to arise from the natural variation of a manuscript tradition or even from a rigidly memorized oral tradition. Yet the works concerned are clearly not independent compositions. They are very similar in their substantive content.

This kind of divergence must go back to an early period, probably the time of the first sectarian divisions of the Buddhist community or soon thereafter. By contrast there is much less divergence *within* the later *Theravādin* and *Sarvāstivādin* traditions. Evidently by the time of the later canonical abhidharma works in these two schools the precise content of the nikayas had become much more firmly fixed. This would suggest a subsequent stage in the development of oral tradition in which a relatively rigid memorization becomes established due to the religious authority of the works in question. There is evidence to suggest that this has occasionally taken place in other oral literatures.[13]

2. The rise of *abhidhamma*

The later tradition describes the difference between the sutta and *abhidhamma* methods in several ways. One of the oldest is perhaps to distinguish the first as *pariyāya-desanā* and the second as *nippariyāya-desanā*. This distinction appears to be first recorded in the Anguttara.[14] Two *vaggas* are almost completely given over to it. Significantly these suttas are nearly all attributed to Ananda and Udayin. The first serves as the model for the others. The formulaic phrase '*sambādhe okāsādhigamo*' is taken as a base. The sensory realm is seen as the crowded or oppressive place, while the first *jhāna* is the open space or opportunity. The first jhana is then a crowded place in relation to the second jhana and so on. Each of these statements is qualified as *pariyāyena*. The final stage of *arahat*-ship 'was referred to by the Lord as obtaining room in a crowded place *nippariyāyena*'. The series of suttas which follows applies the same distinction using other phrases and also a series of synonyms for *nibbāna*.

It is possible to interpret the intended difference in several ways. It is sometimes taken as the distinction between something which requires further exposition for clarity and something which does not need any further explanation. This is very similar to another commentarial differentiation: sutta describes such things as the aggregates in part (*eka-desen'eva*), while abhidhamma explains them in full (*nippadesena*), i.e. not restricting its explanation to a single aspect.[15] Often however, pariyaya seems to indicate a particular arrangement of the teaching for some particular purpose — tantamount to a skilful means of teaching.[16]

Such a distinction implies that the second way is in some sense higher or more direct: the teaching in itself rather than the teaching in application. The early abhidhamma literature does not explicitly make such a claim, but it certainly contrasts abhidhamma and *suttantika* methods. Presumably, the very use of the term abhidhamma must be intended to claim some higher or distinct teaching.

The nature of the difference can perhaps be indicated more precisely from the contents of the earlier abhidhamma works. The key feature is, I think, that these works seek to describe specific events or occasions using the categories which the suttas rather employ to refer to sequences or processes. To take an example. The eightfold way is usually intended in the suttas to show the path or process leading to enlightenment. No doubt it was conceived of as cyclic or at any rate as having many levels; not just a linear progression. With the abhidhamma it is seen as existing as part of a single event on particular occasions e.g. at the moment of enlightenment. Prior to that point it would also be present at least in embyro — obviously the states which lead to enlightenment must have some resemblance to the enlightened state itself.

It is this distinction between a sequential and a momentary approach which is the most characteristic difference between sutta and early abhidhamma. In these terms many suttas obviously contain abhidhammic features: it may also be that the *mātikā* were originally simply lists of states present on a given occasion. It is of course quite possible that the proposition that a sequential list could also be interpreted as a momentary list was present from an early stage. In this sense the abhidhamma approach may be older than appears.

It may be suggested that the origin of the abhidhamma literature lies in two converging tendencies. The first would be this shift from a sequential process orientation to a momentary or event orientated standpoint. The second would be the growing need to fix the oral tradition more firmly as the community grew in numbers and geographic dispersal. If lists of momentary states were already current, it would not be difficult to see that such an approach could help to solve the problem of possible divergence from the tradition.

The early abhidhamma works are then an attempt to fix the structure of Buddhist thought in terms of momentary events. After all, given the proposition that sequential teachings are convertible into momentary ones, and given also the complex and structured network of teachings in the later sutta period, it would quite reasonably follow that the whole pattern of Buddhist dhamma would be expressible in momentary terms. Of course there is no reason to suppose that an event would yet be seen as a philosophical point-instant in the way in which it is perhaps conceived in some schools of the later abhidhamma.

From a historical point of view this raises some questions. One would expect such an enterprise to bristle with difficulties. A new formalization of this kind could only be entirely successful if the original was both completely understood and contained no contradictory or incomplete elements. This seems improbable. In the circumstances it is hardly surprising that a number of distinct schools of abhidhamma interpretation arose.

For the tradition of course it would seem otherwise. Indeed if the momentary

approach was already accepted, then the abhidhamma would seem to be doing little more than to bring out the less obvious implications of the teaching. It could be taken for granted that the Buddha would already be aware of them. This is no doubt what the tradition of the commentaries is saying when it attributes the matika and the *naya* to the Buddha and supposes that the actual expansion was made by Sariputta, a figure often used to symbolize wisdom.

3. The *Dhammasaṅgaṇi*

A striking feature of the Dhammasangani (Dhs), as also of some other abhidhamma and exegetical works, is the frequent use of standard mnemonic registers of apparent synonyms to define particular mental or material phenomena. The Dhammasangani is both the first and probably also the oldest work in the *Abhidhamma-piṭaka*. So the use of these mnemonic registers may well originate here.

The Dhs, itself in the main an oral work, was composed for hearers who would have had a mass of sutta material committed to memory. For such listeners each term in a particular register would recall a number of set contexts and the significance of the dhamma concerned would be in part determined by those contexts. In this way the Dhammasangani could organize the sutta traditions and place them in the wider and more embracing framework of abhidhamma.

It follows that if we are to understand the definitions of terms given in the Dhammasangani, we must reverse the process and seek out the sutta contexts from which the registers are compiled. Of course we cannot assume that the composer of Dhs was familiar with the precise set of sutta material now extant in Pali. It is possible therefore that some of the terms used may refer to sutta contexts no longer in existence or available only in Chinese or Tibetan. The redundancy of much of the material in the Sutta-pitaka should guard against this to a considerable extent; indeed this is obviously part of the purpose of such multiple redundancy in an oral tradition.

Some examples will illustrate this approach. In the register for *vicāra* the term *upavicāra* is obviously based upon the nikaya formula sometimes referred to as the eighteen *manopavicāra*: 'after seeing a visible object with the eye one frequents a visible object which is the basis for pleasant feeling'[17] — the number eighteen is reached by utilizing three types of feeling in conjunction with six senses. A number of examples occur in the register for *paññā*. The term *bhūri* is based upon the interpretation of Dhp 282. *Pariṇāyika* perhaps refers to the seventh treasure of the *cakkavattin* king. *Paññā-sattha* is a reference to the *Vammīka-sutta*.[18] *Paññā-pāsāda* probably refers to the *dhamma-mayam* of the Request of Brahma.[19] The group *paññā-āloka*, *paññā-obhāsa* and *paññā-pajjota* is clearly based upon A II, 139–40, while *paññā-ratana* must derive from S I, 36–7.

A quite remarkable example is the group *sallakkhaṇā upalakkhaṇā paccupalakkhaṇā* which can only be taken from S III, 261, where these three terms occur in a negative form (*asallakkhaṇā*, etc.) in the titles and content of three

successive suttas. Eight further synonyms for absence of knowledge occur in a similar manner in the same section of the Samyutta-nikaya. All eight are found in the Dhs register for *moha*, although the three previous terms are not found there.[20]

Of course the process would also work in reverse. A preacher coming to a term known to him from a Dhs register in his exegesis of a sutta would be able to expound it accordingly. In this way even a minor reference would enable him to show the structure of the dhamma and thus give a more profound and inspiring significance to the context.

Conclusion

Consideration of the oral nature of the nikayas offers several profitable lines of historical investigation. In the early period it affords the possibility of a strong improvisatory element. This can be confirmed by comparison between the surviving versions derived from different sects. It suggests the gradual fixation of the material at a later period, thus accounting for many features of Pali literature and some aspects of its development. The constraints of oral performance may be a significant factor in the formation of the four great collections. Moreover mnemonic considerations played an important part in their arrangement and structuring.

The development of abhidhamma may then be accounted for in terms of two converging tendencies. In the first place there was a move away from interpreting the traditional formulae of the teaching as sequential processes. Greater emphasis was now placed on understanding many of them as describing particular events. Secondly there was an attempt to fix the structure of the teaching more precisely. This would serve two different purposes. It would both sharpen individual comprehension and insight while at the same time securing more firmly the historical continuity of the tradition. Various devices were used for this purpose, but particular reference may be made to the abhidhamma registers and table of contents as well as to lists expounding the contents of a given state of consciousness.

One striking feature of much oral literature is the way in which formulae are employed in larger themes. This has not been discussed here, but it could well prove fruitful to analyse Pali literature in terms of its thematic structure. This and other approaches derived from consideration of its oral nature could quite possibly advance our understanding of its form and development considerably.

Notes

Abbreviations as in the Critical Pali Dictionary.
1 The Parry-Lord theory of oral literature; see Albert B. Lord, *The Singer of Tales* (Cambridge, Mass. 1960).
2 As far as I know the application of the above theory to Pali literature has only been

suggested by R. J. Corless: 'The Garland of Love: A History of Religious Hermeneutic of Nembutsu Theory and Practice', in A. K. Narain, *Studies in Pali and Buddhism* (in Honour of Bhikku Jagdish Kashyap) (Delhi 1979, p. 64.

3 D II, 123–6; A II, 167–70; Nett 21; Nett Trsl. p. 37 n.

4 Pet II; 98–101; 157, etc.; Nett 21–2; 63–70; 107; Nett Trsl. pp. xl; 1; 37 n. 125/1.

5 E.g. Pet 98.

6 Mp 1, 123.

7 D III, 207–71.

8 L. de La Vallée Poussin, *L'Abhidharmakośa de Vasubandhu*, reprinted MCB XVI (1971) Vol. I, Introd., p. XLII.

9 Even if it is now clear that the schism between *Mahāsanghika* and *Sthaviravāda* is not connected with the Second Council, it cannot have been long after. I would incline to suppose that it was indeed due to attempts at greater precision in vinaya matters.

10 D III, 272 to end; this is an interesting variation which tries to utilize meaningful mnemonic linking.

11 Khp IV; A V, 50–4; 54–8.

12 J. D. Smith, '*The Singer or the Song*: a Reassessment of Lord's "Oral Theory" *Man* (N.S.) 12 (1977), pp. 141–53.

13 A. B. Lord, 'Perspectives on Recent Work on Oral Literature', in J. J. Duggan, *Oral Literature* (Edinburgh 1975), p. 14 ff.

14 A IV, 449–56.

15 Dhs-a, 2–3, etc.

16 Cf BHSD.

17 D III, 244–5; M III, 216–7; S IV, 232; A I, 176; cf. Vibh, 381.

18 M I, 144.

19 Vin I, 5; D II, 39; M I, 168; S I, 137; It 33.

20 Dhs, 390, etc.

6

THE DATING OF THE HISTORICAL BUDDHA

A review article*

L.S. Cousins

In the fifteenth century the author of the Blue Annals wrote: "In general (it must be observed) that there exists a great disagreement in the statements of scholars regarding the years of the Birth and Nirvāṇa of the Teacher."[1] Presented with well over a thousand pages on the subject in two volumes (with a third to come), one might be excused for supposing that not much has changed in the last half millennium. In fact that would be somewhat illusory. Even if we have not yet been able to fix the exact dates of the Buddha and Mahāvīra, considerable progress has of course been made, as even a cursory look at the traditional dates of the past makes quite clear.

Within the Eastern Buddhist tradition of China, Vietnam, Korea and Japan (especially the latter two countries) the traditional date for the Mahāparinibbāna (death) of the Buddha was 949 B.C., although a variant giving 878 B.C. is also possible. Earlier and down to the fifth century A.D. a date of 686 B.C. seems to have been fairly common. Although they may in part have been motivated by a desire to place the Buddha earlier in time than Lao-tse, these and other such dates were created by relating such events in the life-story of the Buddha as the earthquakes mentioned in various texts to phenomena found in Chinese records – a clear enough testimony that no very definite chronological information was brought to China by the early Buddhist missionaries.

In the Northern Buddhism of the Tibeto–Mongolian cultural area the Mahāparinibbāna was officially dated to 881 B.C., although other ninth-century dates are also known. This is based upon the, probably mythical, chronology of Shambhala associated with the Kālacakra system. At an earlier stage Tibetan authorities seem to have tended to dates in the twenty-second century B.C., the origin of which is not clear. Both Chinese and Tibetan scholars were, however, well aware that many other dates had been advanced. This is in sharp contrast to the Southern Buddhist tradition, which has retained no memory of