JIABS

Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies

Volume 27 Number 1 2004

Book Review

THE ORAL TRANSMISSION
OF EARLY BUDDHIST LITERATURE[1]

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Two theories have been proposed to explain the oral transmission of early Buddhist literature. Some scholars have argued that the early literature was not rigidly fixed because it was improvised in recitation, whereas others have claimed that word for word accuracy was required when it was recited. This paper examines these different theories and shows that the internal evidence of the Pāli canon supports the theory of a relatively fixed oral transmission of the early Buddhist literature.

1. Introduction

Our knowledge of early Buddhism depends entirely upon the canonical texts which claim to go back to the Buddha's life and soon afterwards. But these texts, contained primarily in the Sūtra and Vinaya collections of the various sects, are of questionable historical worth, for their most basic claim cannot be entirely true — all of these texts, or even most of them, cannot go back to the Buddha's life. There are at least two reasons for believing this. Firstly, although the different Buddhist sects claim that their canons were compiled at the first council of Rājagṛha (shortly after the Buddha's death), there is a general disagreement about the extent and classification of this canon. Because of this, Lamotte has commented: 'It would be absurd to claim that all those canons were fixed at the very beginnings of Buddhism'.[2] And secondly, it is hard to believe that all the doctrinal teachings of the various Sūtra-piṭakas could go back to the same teacher, or even the same period, for they include diverse and sometimes mutually exclusive ideas.[3]

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[1] I would like to thank Professor Richard Gombrich for reading an earlier version of this paper.

[2] Lamotte pp. 129-130.

[3] For discussions of some of the different doctrinal strands, see La Vallée Poussin, Schmithausen 1981, Bronkhorst 1985 and 1993, Gombrich 1996 (in particular, chapter 4:

In these circumstances, it is clear that an accurate history of early Buddhism depends upon the stratification of the canonical texts. But the Buddhist literature is oral, and before we attempt to stratify it, we must have some idea about how it was composed and transmitted. This is not a straightforward task. The stratification of literature based on a manuscript tradition is relatively straightforward, for with written documents we can assume an original text that may have been altered for various reasons. But with the literary remnants of an oral tradition, we are denied even this most basic premise. For it may be the case that the early Buddhist tradition produced a sort of literature very different from one that is based on the written word, i.e. one that never had an 'original' text. If so, the stratification of the early Buddhist literature would be difficult, and perhaps even impossible.

2. Theories of oral composition and transmission in early Buddhism

Theories of the oral composition and transmission of the early Buddhist literature fall into two categories. Some have emphasised the role of improvisation, and argued that the early Buddhist literature was changed and adapted according to the particular conditions of performance. This theory is based upon Parry and Lord's study of Homeric epic literature in Yugoslavia,[4] and has been formulated by L.S. Cousins as follows:

> 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 in length.[5]

If the early Buddhist literature was formed in this manner, it is hard to see how it could be stratified. For what appear to be different strata according to the text critical method may in fact have been formed through the

'Retracing an Ancient Debate: How Insight Worsted Concentration in the Pali Canon') and Wynne 2002.
    [4] See Albert B. Lord, *The Singer of Tales* (Cambridge, Mass. 1960).
    [5] Cousins p. 1.

vicissitudes of oral performance, perhaps because of a singer's inclination on any given day.

Against this theory, others have argued that the early Buddhist literature is different in many ways from the sort of oral material that is formed in performance. Norman has pointed out the following:

> The great majority of Pāli canonical texts, however, are in prose, and complete accuracy of reproduction is required at each recitation. In these circumstances the findings of modern investigators of oral epic literature seem to have little relevance.[6]

In addition to this, Gombrich has pointed out that the peculiar nature of the early Buddhist literature makes it likely that precise wording mattered in its transmission:

> The early Buddhists wished to preserve the words of their great teacher, texts very different in character from the general run of oral literature, for they presented logical and sometimes complex arguments. The precise wording mattered.[7]

According to this view, verbatim accuracy would have been the norm when the early Buddhist literature was composed and transmitted. If so, it would indeed seem that stratification of the early Buddhist literature is possible. But what evidence is there in the early texts to support these different views? The views of Gombrich and Norman seem to be based on intuition rather than the internal evidence of the literature itself. Cousins too does not adduce much textual evidence to support his claim, but he does present some arguments. For example, he proposes that the material in the Suttapiṭaka was formed by singers performing orally on 'uposatha day or for the occasion of some *saṅgha* meeting', or 'when visiting the sick or for recitation after receiving food at the house of a layman'.[8] But these suggestions hardly exhaust all the possible ways in which the early Buddhist literature could have been recited, and in any case, textual support for them is noticeably lacking. The only textual evidence that is presented by Cousins comes in the form of his interpretation of the four

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[6] Norman 1997 p. 49.
[7] Gombrich 1990 p. 21.
[8] Cousins pp. 4-5

mahāpadesa-s, the four means of establishing the authenticity of an early Buddhist text as described in the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta*.[9]

3. The four sources of canonical authenticity (*mahāpadesa*)

The compound *mahāpadesa* means great 'source' or 'authority',[10] and refers to the sources from whom a teaching might be accepted as the teaching of the Buddha. They are: the Buddha himself, a whole monastic community (along with its elders and experts)[11] dwelling in a particular monastery,[12] certain learned monks dwelling in a particular monastery,[13] or just one learned monk dwelling in a particular monastery.[14] Although there are four possible sources from whom it is said that a teaching may be accepted, in each case the method of establishing the authenticity of the teaching in question is the same. So in the case of a teaching said to have been received directly from the Buddha, the following is advised:

> Here, *bhikkhus*, a *bhikkhu* might say: 'I have heard [and] grasped this, venerable sir, directly from the Blessed One; *this* is the doctrine, *this* is the discipline, *this* is the instruction of the teacher.' O *bhikkhus*, what is spoken by that *bhikkhu* ought not to be welcomed, it ought not to be scorned. Not welcoming and not scorning [it], those words and letters (*padavyañjanāni*), having been learnt correctly (*sādhukaṃ*), ought to be put (*otāretabbāni*) into Sutta [and] compared (*sandassetabbāni*) with Vinaya. If, when being put into Sutta and compared with Vinaya, they do not enter into Sutta and do not compare with Vinaya, the conclusion on the matter ought to be understood (*gantabbaṃ*) [as follows]: 'Clearly this is not the speech of the Blessed One, the *bhikkhu* has understood it badly (*duggahītaṃ*).' Thus, *bhikkhus*, you ought to abandon it. If, when being put into Sutta and compared with Vinaya, they enter into Sutta and compare with Vinaya, the conclusion on the matter ought to be understood [as follows]: 'Clearly this is the speech of the Blessed

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[9] D II.123.30ff (= A II.167.31ff).

[10] DOP s.v. *apadesa*.

[11] It is possible that the word *pāmokkha* refers to experts in the Vinaya, if it is an abbreviation of the expression *vinaye pāmokkho*. On the latter expression, see Gombrich 1992 pp. 247-251.

[12] D II.124.21: *amukasmiṃ nāma āvāse saṃgho viharati satthero sapāmokkho*.

[13] D II.125.5: *amukasmiṃ nāma āvāse sambahulā therā bhikkhū viharanti bahussutā āgatāgamā dhammadharā vinayadharā mātikādharā*.

[14] D II.125.24: *amukasmiṃ nāma āvāse eko thero bhikkhu viharati bahussuto āgatāgamo dhammadharo vinayadharo mātikādharo*.

One, the *bhikkhu* has understood it correctly.' *Bhikkhus*, you ought to consider this to be the First Great Authority.[15]

This passage does not state what was to be done with the *dhamma* or *vinaya* which was accepted as the Buddha's words (*bhagavato vacanaṃ*). But because it is stated that the rejected teachings were to be abandoned, we can suppose that the opposite was to be done with what had been accepted as the Buddha's words, i.e. if it was thought to agree with what had already been collected under the heading of 'Sutta' and 'Vinaya', it was to be added to them. According to Cousins, the passage shows that there were different methods for collecting the Sūtra and Vinaya material. He interprets the passage as follows:

> 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 (*sutte 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*.
> 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 teaching. The Peṭakopadesa in fact specifies six possibilities:

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[15] D II.124.3ff: *idha bhikkhave bhikkhu evaṃ vadeyya*: *sammukhā me taṃ āvuso bhagavato sutaṃ sammukhā paṭiggahītaṃ, ayaṃ dhammo ayaṃ vinayo, idaṃ satthu sāsanan ti. tassa bhikkhave bhikkhuno bhāsitaṃ n'eva abhinanditabbaṃ na paṭikkositabbaṃ. anabhinanditvā appaṭikkositvā tāni pādavyañjanāni sādhukaṃ uggahetvā sutte otāretabbāni vinaye sandassetabbāni. tāni ce sutte otāriyamānāni vinaye sandassiyamānāni na c'eva sutte otaranti na vinaye sandissanti, niṭṭhaṃ ettha gantabbaṃ: addhā idaṃ na c'eva tassa bhagavato vacanaṃ, imassa ca bhikkhuno duggahītan ti. iti h'etaṃ bhikkhave chaḍḍeyyātha. tāni ce sutte otāriyamānāni vinaye sandassiyamānāni sutte c'eva otaranti vinaye ca sandissati, niṭṭhaṃ ettha gantabbaṃ: addhā idaṃ tassa bhagavato vacanaṃ, imassa ca bhikkhuno suggahītan ti idaṃ bhikkhave paṭhamaṃ mahāpadesaṃ dhāreyyātha.*
The same four sources of canonical authenticity are found in the Sanskrit fragments of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra*, in almost exactly the same words as the Pāli text — although there is no Sanskrit version of the Pāli *mahāpadesa* (Waldschmidt p. 238ff). If we accept Frauwallner's theory that Buddhism spread to the far north-west of India because of the Aśokan missions (Frauwallner pp. 22-23: 'The mission of Kassapagotta, Majjhima and Dundubhissara gave origin to the Haimavata and Kāśyapīya. The mission of Majjhantika led to the rise of the Sarvāstivādin. The Dharmaguptaka school is perhaps issued from the mission of Yonaka-Dhammarakkhita… And the community of Ceylon owes its origin to the mission of Mahinda.'), the coincidence of the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta* and *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra* implies that this method of establishing canonicity preceded 250 B.C.

> aggregates, elements, spheres, faculties, truths, dependent origination. Any one 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.
> 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 *dhamma* as a whole.[16]

For Cousins, then, the difference between the verbs *sandissati* (in the phrase *vinaye sandissanti*) and *otarati* (in the phrase *sutte otaranti*) is that *sandissati* means 'match' and implies that the 'Vinaya' with which some new teaching was to be matched was relatively fixed, whereas *otarati* means 'enter into' and implies that the 'Sutta' with which a new teaching was to be compared was 'not a set body of literature, but rather a traditional pattern of teaching'. Therefore, Cousins implies that doctrinal coherence rather than historical truth was the motivating factor of those who put together the collection of doctrinal discourses called 'Sutta'.

Is this an accurate estimation of this passage? The difference between the verbs used to describe the act of comparing teachings with either 'Sutta' or 'Vinaya' is certainly of some significance. Cousins' suggestion that *otarati* ought to be interpreted in the light of the *Peṭakopadesa* definition of *otaraṇā* makes good sense. It probably means, as Cousins indicates, that the doctrinal content of a new teaching under consideration was to be compared with the doctrinal content of a body of oral literature called 'Sutta', in one of the six categories of *otaraṇā*.[17] Of course this means that the body of literature called 'Sutta' is not a 'set body of literature', for the passage is concerned precisely with the supplementation of the existing body of literature called 'Sutta'. But the fact that 'Sutta' was not fixed during the time when the method of the four *mahāpadesas* was applied says nothing about how the individual works of that body of literature were composed and transmitted. In fact, if we follow the wording of the passage, the implication is that the works comprising 'Sutta' were transmitted word for word. We can deduce this because we

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[16] Cousins pp. 2-3.
[17] Be and Ne (D II.66.8) both use the verb *osarati*. This is probably incorrect, for the Sanskrit version of the text uses the verb *ava* + √*tṝ* throughout (Waldschmidt p. 238), and thus corresponds to the PTS editions which are based mainly on Sinhalese manuscripts.

are told that the 'words and letters' (*padavyañjanāni*) of the teaching under consideration were to be 'learnt correctly' (*sādhukaṃ uggahetvā*) before judgement was passed. If attention was to be paid to the words and letters of proposed teachings, it implies that the content of what was known as 'Sutta' was also transmitted by paying a similar attention to its words and letters, i.e. that it was transmitted word for word. The passage therefore shows that the accuracy with which a body of literature called 'Sutta' was meant to be transmitted was very high, down to the letter. It was not a fixed body of literature, for it could be supplemented by comparing its already established doctrinal content with the doctrinal content of new teachings, which could then be added to it. But the early Buddhists at least attempted to transmit it accurately.

Exactly the same observations apply to the way in which the Vinaya was formed. It cannot have consisted of an 'established and relatively well defined set of vinaya rules', as Cousins supposes, because the issue in question seems to have been the supplementation of an existing body of literature called 'Vinaya' by comparing new teachings pertaining to discipline with it. Contrary to what Cousins thinks, the verb *sandissati* cannot mean that the set of Vinaya rules was relatively fixed. Instead, it seems that the verb *sandissati* was used because it was the standard verb used to state that a person conforms to certain ethical or religious practices,[18] or that certain practices are found 'in' a person or persons.[19] It is understandable, therefore, that in the passage in question, it is asked if the words and letters of the teaching 'conform' (*sandissanti*) to the 'Vinaya', for this

[18] D I.102.10: *api nu tvaṃ imāya anuttarāya vijjācaraṇasampadāya sandissasi sācariyako ti*?

D II.75.27ff (=A IV.17.8, A IV.20.20, A IV.22.7, A IV.22.24, A IV.23.9): *yāvakīvañ ca brāhmaṇa ime satta aparihāniyā dhammā vajjīsu ṭhassanti, imesu ca sattasu aparihāniyesu dhammesu vajjī sandissati.*

M III.163.23ff (=S V.177.19, S V.397.7, S V.345.17, S V.345.29, S V.407.28): *saṃvijjante te ca dhammā mayi ahañ ca tesu dhammesu sandissāmī ti.*

A V.340.31: *yān' imāni bhante bhagavatā saddhassa saddhāpadānāni bhāsitāni, saṃvijjanti tāni imassa bhikkhuno, ayañ ca bhikkhu etesu sandissati.*

[19] Sn 50.18: *sandissanti nu kho bho Gotama etarahi brāhmaṇā porāṇānaṃ brāhmaṇānaṃ brāhmaṇadhamme ti*?

D III.82.11ff: *ye 'me dhammā akusalā…khattiye pi te idh' ekacce sandissanti… [brāhmaṇe pi… vesse pi…] sudde pi te idh' ekacce sandissanti.*

A III.221.11ff: *pañc' ime bhikkhave porāṇā brāhmaṇadhammā etarahi sunakhesu sandissanti no brāhmaṇesu.*

is the verb that was to be used when considering a thing's conformity to religious practices. There is no implication that the Vinaya was fixed.

Although Cousins argues that the passage on the four *mahāpadesa-s* shows variability in the fixing of Suttas but not the contents of the Vinaya, there is in fact no such implication. Instead, we are told that the early Buddhist literature consisted of primitive collections called 'Sutta' and 'Vinaya', and we can deduce that both of these were periodically expanded by the addition of new material. In order for new material to be accepted into these collections, they were learnt word for word and then compared with the content of the existing collections. If the comparison showed that the new agreed with the old, it was added to it, and no doubt transmitted word for word. If the passage on the four *mahāpadesa-s* reflects the actual practice of early monastic Buddhism, it is hard to imagine that improvisational methods of oral transmission could ever have been used, for such methods do not guarantee the accuracy to the letter demanded by the passage on the four *mahāpadesa-s*.

4. Other arguments for improvisation

Other arguments to support the theory of an improvisational method of composing and transmitting the early Buddhist literature have been proposed by Rupert Gethin. He has suggested that the use of mnemonic lists allowed for a certain amount of flexibility in the composition of the early literature:

> [T]he lists not only aid mechanical memorization (learning by rote), but act as a kind of flowchart for the composition of a discourse. They indicate the various paths and themes that the composer can choose to follow and expand as she feels appropriate. The matrix of interconnecting lists provides a form or structure within which she can improvise.
> The Pāli canon has come down to us as a fixed literary text, but clearly was not always so. Given the model of interlinking lists, one can easily see how there might be a version of a sutta mentioning the four applications of mindfulness as a bare list, and another version mentioning them with a brief exposition, and yet another version that goes on to give a very full exposition. Such a state of affairs highlights the difficulties about entering into arguments about the "original" version of a Sutta, for example, in the context of comparative research between the Pāli Nikāyas and Chinese Āgamas. The *peyyāla* or "repetition" sections of the Saṃyutta and Aṅguttara Nikāyas are particularly interesting in this respect. Here the texts, as we have them,

indicate an initial pattern or formula that is to be applied to various items in succession. The result is a text with quite radical abbreviations. Indeed, it is not always clear from the manuscripts and editions we have just how much we are meant to expand the material to get the "full" text. Perhaps a certain freedom is intended here; the *peyyāla* sections of the *Saṃyutta* and *Aṅguttara* Nikāyas can appear to read more like the guidelines for oral recitation and composition than a fixed literary text.[20]

Gethin assumes, then, that interconnecting lists formed flowcharts for the composition of Suttas. But it can be objected that not many Suttas appear to have been composed in this manner. Instead, it seems that most of the Suttas in the Dīgha and Majjhima Nikāyas are narratives which employ lists but are not formed out of them. This is perhaps less obvious for the Suttas contained in the Saṃyutta and Aṅguttara Nikāyas, (and perhaps a few of the Dīgha and Majjhima Suttas)[21] in which narrative elements are limited, whereas lists and other mnemonic aids more often provide the textual structure. So perhaps it is possible to imagine a period of oral composition when many Suttas were composed in the way imagined by Gethin. On top of this, Gethin is saying that Suttas built around interlinking lists could have been contracted or expanded at will, meaning that they were never exactly fixed throughout their early transmission. If so, it is difficult to make any suppositions about a Sutta's original form. By using this model, Gethin explains the differences between the Pāli, Sanskrit (Sarvāstivādin and Dharmaguptaka) and Chinese (Sarvāstivādin) versions of the *Daśottara Sūtra*:

> [W]e should not think in terms of an "original" or "correct" version of such a text. Rather, what we have here is a mnemonic association and progression; this technique and system goes beyond mere learning by rote, yielding a structure within which, provided one knows what one is doing, it is perfectly legitimate to improvise as one feels appropriate.

If correct, this would mean that a text was continually modified by improvisation after it had been inherited by Buddhist sects in the North-West and South of the Indian subcontinent.[22] But whatever the truth of

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[20] Gethin 1992 p. 156.

[21] E.g. the *Dasuttara Sutta* and the *Saṅgīti Sutta*, on which see below.

[22] According to Frauwallner, this would have been after the Aśokan missions c.250 B.C. See n.15 above.

this claim, it must be remembered that the *Daśottara Sūtra* represents an extremely rare style of Sūtra composition; only the *Saṅgīti Sutta* has been composed in a similar way. As Gethin notes, the structure of these two texts recalls the Aṅguttara Nikāya's numerical method of composition,[23] but no other individual Suttas are quite like them. In other words, we have here an important example of genre difference between different sorts of Sutta, and generalisations about the composition of the mass of early literature ought not to be made on the basis of a couple of unusual Suttas. The various versions of the *Daśottara Sūtra*, as well as the *Saṅgīti Sutta*, should not be the standard against which the rest of the early literature is judged. In any case, Gethin's explanation of the different versions of the *Daśottara Sūtra* is not the only one. The differences could just as easily have been produced by the natural variations of a relatively fixed oral transmission, in which case the early sectarian redactors would have been responsible for them. This point is overlooked by Gethin — he does not say that we have a choice of two models to explain the differences between the sectarian versions of the *Daśottara Sūtra*. Which model is more likely to reflect the truth?

Both views are theories purporting to explain a certain state of affairs, i.e. the extant forms of the various versions of the *Daśottara Sūtra*. Unless any supporting evidence is presented, there is very little to choose between them. But the theory of Gethin has no evidence to support it. On the other hand, there is evidence to support the notion of a relatively fixed oral transmission. The passage on the four *mahāpadesa-s*, which appears to represent compositional conditions in pre-sectarian Buddhism, suggests that improvisation was not likely once the early *saṅgha* had begun the task of collecting the early literature. If this evidence reflects historical facts, it is hard to imagine that oral improvisation in the transmission of literature was the norm in the early period of sectarian Buddhism.

So what are we to make of Gethin's model of interconnecting lists? If we look at the Suttas which use lists extensively, it is hard to imagine that they reached their extant form through improvisation. Many of the Saṃyutta and Aṅguttara Suttas, for example, use lists and matrices extensively and methodically, but they involve such heavy repetition that it is hard to

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[23] Gethin 1992 p. 157.

imagine that they were improvised, let alone performed. And I do not think that the *peyyāla* sections of the Saṃyutta and Aṅguttara Nikāyas 'appear to read more like guidelines for oral recitation and composition than a fixed literary text.' In my experience, the content of a *peyyāla* section is usually obvious. Even in the Saṃyutta and Aṅguttara Nikāyas, which use the technique most extensively, the numerous *peyyāla* sections usually come after one preliminary Sutta which spells out word for word the pattern which is to be understood for the Suttas that follow. This hardly allows for free improvisation. For example, p. 359ff of the PTS edition of the *Saḷāyatanavagga* (*Saṃyutta Nikāya* IV) marks the beginning of the *Asaṅkhata-saṃyutta* (S Book XLIII = S IV book IX). This *vagga* consists of forty-four Suttas[24] squeezed into less than fifteen pages, precisely because of the abbreviations achieved by the *peyyāla* method. But the pattern for all the Suttas is given in full in the first and last Suttas of the *vagga*, and we are never in any doubt about the content of the *peyyāla* sections.[25] This is in fact the general rule of the *peyyāla* sections of the Saṃyutta and Aṅguttara Nikāyas. It can hardly have been the case that there were Buddhist monks in ancient India who chanted *pe* during communal recitation, when they could not be bothered to recite the full version of a Sutta. Nor were the *peyyāla* sections of the extant texts the product of oral composers, or early scribes, who shortened texts in order that oral reciters might improvise around the skeleton structure of the text left. They were simply the product of later scribes who found the job of writing out lengthy sections of repetition tedious.

The lack of evidence to support the theory that the early Buddhist literature was composed by free improvisation means that we should instead examine the textual evidence for the alternative view in more detail. A preliminary step in this direction has already been taken with the study of the passage on the four *mahāpadesa-s*; as we have seen, this supports the claims of Norman and Gombrich, i.e. that verbatim accuracy was

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[24] The PTS editor, L. Feer, counts only forty-four Suttas in thie section of S IV, but as he points out in his introduction to the edition, the total amount of Suttas would come to 1463 if each section was printed in full. This is perhaps the most extreme example of abbreviation attained by the *peyyāla* method.

[25] In fact the full pattern, or most of it, is given in Suttas 1, 12(1), 12(45) and 44.

required in the transmission of the early Buddhist literature. If more com-
pelling evidence for this sort of transmission can be found, then we must
accept that this theory is closer to the truth than the alternative theory for
which there appears to be no evidence.

5. The evidence for a relatively fixed oral transmission

5.1. *The Bhikkhu- and Bhikkhunī pātimokkhas*

It is at least clear that certain parts of the early Buddhist literature must
have been transmitted word for word in the earliest times. The *Bhikkhu-*
and *Bhikkhunī-Pātimokkhas*, for example, can hardly have been subject
to an improvisational method of oral transmission, for their content
(monastic rules) is hardly the sort of material suitable for improvisation
and/or performance. The following passage on the qualities of a 'knower'
of the Vinaya (*vinayadhara*) shows that the *Pātimokkhas* were probably
always transmitted verbatim:

> Endowed with seven qualities, *bhikkhus*, is a *bhikkhu* a knower of the *dhamma*.
> Which seven? He understands what is a transgression and what is not, he
> understands what is a trifling transgression and what is a serious one, both
> *pātimokkha-s* are well learnt (*svāgatāni*) by him in detail, well analysed,
> [they] are well set out [and] are well determined, down to the Sutta (*suttaso*),
> down to the letter (*anuvyañjaso*); he attains the four *jhāna-s*, higher states of
> mind, pleasant abidings in this life, when he desires, easily [and] without dif-
> ficulty, [and] because of the fading away of the corruptions, he passes his
> time having realised, witnessed [and] attained for himself, in this very life,
> the corruptionless release of mind, the release through insight.[26]

At a very early date then, the *Bhikkhu-* and *Bhikkhunī-Pātimokkhas*
must have been memorised and transmitted word for word. Both these

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[26] A IV.140.18ff: *sattahi bhikkhave dhammehi samannāgato bhikkhu vinayadharo hoti.*
katamehi sattahi? āpattiṃ jānāti, anāpattiṃ jānāti, lahukaṃ āpattiṃ jānāti, garukaṃ
āpattiṃ jānāti, ubhayāni kho pan' assa pātimokkhāni vitthārena svāgatāni honti, suvibhat-
tāni suppavattīni suvinicchitāni suttaso anuvyañjaso, catunnaṃ jhānānaṃ abhicetasikānaṃ
diṭṭhadhammasukhavihārānaṃ nikāmalābhī hoti akicchalābhī akasiralābhī, āsavānaṃ
khayā anāsavaṃ cetovimuttiṃ paññāvimuttiṃ diṭṭhe va dhamma sayaṃ abhiññā sacchikatvā
upasampajja viharati.

The pericope, or the most important part of it from *ubhayāni* to *anuvyañjaso*, is found
at: A IV.142.12, A IV.279.25; A V.71.20, A V.72.17, A V.73.8, A V.80.25, A V.201.9;
Vin I.65.6, Vin I.68.20, Vin I.81 (×2); Vin II.95.37, Vin II.249.18, Vin IV.51.28.

texts are examples of a genre of early Buddhist literature not governed by the conventions of improvisation and/or performance.

5.2. *Word for word recitation of the dhamma in the Bhikkhu-pātimokkha*

Further evidence supports the idea that the conventions governing the transmission of not just the *Pātimokkhas*, but also most of the early Buddhist literature, similarly involved word for word repetition. For example, one of the *pācittiya* rules in the *Bhikkhu-Pātimokkha* forbids a *bhikkhu* from teaching the *dhamma* 'word for word' to someone who has not received full monastic ordination:

> If any *bhikkhu* should make someone who is not ordained (*anupasampannaṃ*) recite (*vāceyya*) the Dhamma word by word (*padaso*), there is an offence entailing expiation.[27]

The word *dhamma* is often contrasted with the word *vinaya* in the Pāli canon to distinguish the doctrinal discourses from the ecclesiastic law,[28] and so it seems that in this *pācittiya* rule, the word refers to the doctrinal teachings included in the Suttapiṭaka rather than the Vinaya rules. This much is obvious, for the law forbids the instruction of a non-monastic in a certain way: if non-monastics were taught in certain ways by members of the *saṅgha*, they cannot have been taught the Vinaya rules, but only the doctrinal discourses, i.e. *dhamma*. And if a non-monastic was not supposed to recite the *dhamma* word for word, it suggests that this was exactly how monastics did recite it. This evidence suggests that the Sutta portions of the early Buddhist literature were learnt verbatim among the ordained. While the extent of the material covered by the word *dhamma* is not made clear, and although the passage does not rule out the use of improvisational methods, we have important evidence showing that the basic literary training in early Buddhism consisted of word for word repetition, and that some portion of the Suttapiṭaka was transmitted in this manner.

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[27] The Pātimokkha p. 46.13 (*bhikkhupātimokkha*, *suddhāpācittiyā* 4 = Vin IV.14.20ff): *yo pana bhikkhu anupasampannaṃ padaso dhammaṃ vāceyya pācittiyaṃ.* (Norman's translation in Pruitt and Norman 2001 p. 47).

[28] See PED s.v. *dhamma*, *vinaya*; Oldenberg p. x.

5.3. *The Kinti Sutta*

Further evidence for the word for word transmission of the early Buddhist literature is provided in a number of places. In the *Kinti Sutta*, the course of action to be taken when there is disagreement about the meaning (*attha*) and letter (*vyañjana*) of the doctrine (*abhidhamme*)[29] is outlined. In the exhaustive style that is so characteristic of early Buddhist texts, the Buddha describes four possible sorts of disagreement (*nānā-vādā*):

1. Disagreement over meaning and letter (*atthato c'eva nānaṃ byañjanato ca nānaṃ*).
2. Disagreement over meaning but not letter (*atthato hi kho nānaṃ byañjanato sameti*).
3. Agreement over meaning but not letter (*atthato hi sameti byañjanato nānaṃ*).
4. Agreement over meaning and letter (*atthato c'eva sameti byañjanato sameti*).

The method of working out these four sorts of disagreement is more or less the same in all cases. So for the first sort of disagreement (over meaning and letter), the Buddha advises the following:

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[29] Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi translate this compound as 'about the higher Dhamma' (p. 848). According to von Hinüber, in the earlier parts of the Pāli canon it means 'things relating to the teaching' (p. 64). DOP defines it as: 'as regards the doctrine, as regards dhammas'; it lists references where the term appears next to the term *abhivinaye*, where it is clear that we are dealing with the basic dyad *dhamma-vinaya*. The *dhamma* in the text in question consists of the list of thirty-seven 'factors conducive to awakening' (*bodhi-pakkhiyā dhammā*), and is what Bronkhorst calls 'an early, perhaps the earliest, list of of the type that came to be called *mātṛkā*/p. *mātikā* and formed the basis for the later Abhidharma works.' (1985, p. 305). Although it stands at the beginning of the Abhidharma tradition, I doubt that the word *abhidhamma* refers to the beginning of Abhidharma teachings here. Gethin (2001 p. 232) has pointed out that the *Kinti Sutta* belongs to a group of four Suttas in which the *bodhi-pakkhiyā dhammā* are said to encapsulate 'the essential teaching and practise of Buddhism'; the other Suttas are the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta*, the *Samāgama Sutta* and the *Pāsādika Sutta*. It seems that at the stage of oral composition represented by these texts, there was a concern to fix the syntax and semantics of the Buddhist doctrine. The Sutta is concerned with the fixing of the Buddha's *dhamma*, not its extension into *abhidhamma*, and must predate the start of the Abhidharma proper. Thus the prefix *abhi-* probably does not mean 'higher', as Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi think, but simply means 'as regards to the doctrine', as defined by DOP.

In this case, you ought to approach a *bhikkhu* whom you consider to be particularly easy to speak to; having approached him, you should address him thus: 'There is a difference among you, Venerable Sirs, over both meaning and letter. The Venerable Sirs ought to know that it is because of *this* (*aminā*) that there is a difference over both meaning and letter. Let not the Venerable Sirs get into a dispute (*vivādaṃ*).'

Then, you ought to approach a *bhikkhu*, belonging to the other faction of *bhikkhus* on the other side (*ekato*), whom you consider to be particularly easy to speak to; having approached him, you should address him thus: 'There is a difference among you, Venerable Sirs, over both meaning and letter. The Venerable Sirs ought to know that it is because of *this* (*aminā*) that there is a difference over both the meaning and letter. Let not the Venerable Sirs get into a dispute.'

Thus what has been badly understood (*duggahītaṃ*) ought to be held [by all concerned] as badly understood (*duggahītato*), [after which] the *dhamma* and the *vinaya* ought to be spoken.[30]

Exactly the same process of regulation is described for all four cases, although it is not clear how there could be a dispute if two parties agree on the meaning and letter. The process of arbitration seems to involve a neutral group of *bhikkhus*, i.e. the *saṅgha* at large, mediating between the two factions, in each case appealing to the most reasonable or moderate among them. The speaker for the *saṅgha* at large outlines the reason for the difference ('it is because of *this* that there is a difference…'), and then appeals to what would have been one of the most basic sentiments of the early Buddhist *saṅgha*, that is, not to let a difference break out into a dispute (*vivāda*), which might possibly lead to schism.[31] The brief sentence at the end of the passage is not exactly clear ('Thus what has been

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[30] M II.239.7ff: *tattha yaṃ bhikkhuṃ suvacataraṃ maññeyyātha, so upasaṃkamitvā evam assa vacanīyo: āyasmantānaṃ kho atthato c'eva nānaṃ byañjanato ca nānaṃ. tad aminā p'etaṃ āyasmanto jānātha, yathā atthato c'eva nānaṃ byañjanato ca nānaṃ. mā āyasmanto vivādaṃ āpajjitthā ti. athāparesaṃ ekato pakkhikānaṃ bhikkhūnaṃ yaṃ bhikkhuṃ suvacataraṃ maññeyyātha, so upasaṃkamitvā evam assa vacanīyo: āyasmantā-naṃ kho atthato c'eva nānaṃ byañjanato ca nānaṃ. tad aminā p'etaṃ āyasmanto jānātha, yathā atthato c'eva nānaṃ byañjanato ca nānaṃ. mā āyasmanto vivādaṃ āpajjitthā ti. iti duggahītaṃ duggahītato dhāretabbaṃ; duggahītaṃ duggahītato dhāretvā yo dhammo yo vinayo so bhāsitabbo.*

[31] The early Buddhists were well aware of this danger. For example, in the *Saṅgīti Sutta*, at the death of Nigaṇṭha Nātaputta a vicious dispute is said to have broken out among the Jains (D III.210.3: *vivāda*), and in response Sāriputta is said to have appealed to the Buddhist *saṅgha* that this should not happen to them.

badly understood …'), but it seems to imagine a scenario where the two factions have been made to acquiesce to the decision of the mediating body not involved in the dispute. Although it is said that the letter is 'trifling' (*appamattakaṃ*) when there is a disagreement about the letter alone,[32] the same process of mediation and resolution is described. The letter mattered.[33]

We do not know if this evidence records historical actuality, but the pragmatic approach envisaged in the text suggests that the early *saṅgha* would have resolved literary disputes in such a way. Of course, it is only to be expected that some differences were not resolved, but that is beside the point. The point of interest here is that the text shows that disagreements about the exact wording of the early literature were potentially serious affairs. Differences certainly arose, and some of them were probably not resolved, but this passage shows that a common presupposition accepted by all Buddhists was that teachings should be transmitted to the letter.

In the light of this evidence, it is hard to see how improvisational methods could have been used in the transmission of the early Buddhist literature. The learning of the *Pātimokkhas* down to the letter, instruction involving word for word recitation of the *dhamma*, and regulatory processes which rejected wrong wording all preclude improvisation. We have also seen that the arguments for the possibility of improvisation are not convincing. The evidence studied thus far is particularly one-sided. But to come to a more exact understanding of the matter, we must consider in greater detail the genre of the early Buddhist oral literature.

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[32] M II.240.10/16: *appamattakaṃ kho pana' etaṃ yadidaṃ byañjanaṃ.*

[33] On this passage, Gethin (2001 p. 236) comments: 'Disagreement over *attha* is a potentially more serious affair. The solution proffered here seems to be that the two sides in a dispute over *attha* should accept that some matters may be hard to grasp (*duggahīta*) others easy (*suggahīta*).' But the word *duggahīta* in Pāli canonical texts always means 'badly grasped/understood', and not 'hard to grasp/understand'; for example, as it is used in the *Alagaddūpama Sutta* at M I.133.30. Gethin goes on: 'I take it that this implies that since difference of opinion over the *satipaṭṭhānas* and so on ultimately concern quite subtle matters of practical experience, *bhikkhus* should guard against attachment to particular interpretations of their theoretical formulation.' But the differences envisaged in the passage nowhere refer to different interpretations of personal experience, and its point was not to warn against being partial to doctrine seen in the light of personal experience. The matter is simply about the transmission of sacred literature, in its meaning and letter. As we have seen, there is a concern not only for semantic accuracy, but also for syntactical accuracy, and this of course has nothing to do with practical experience.

6. Genre in the early Buddhist literature

Genre can be defined as follows:

> A *Gattung* or genre is a *conventional pattern*, *recognizable by certain formal criteria* (style, shape, tone, particular syntactic or even grammatical structures, recurring formulaic patterns), which is *used in a particular society in social contexts which are governed by certain formal conventions*.[34]

According to this definition, the genre of a composition depends upon certain formal criteria, such as style or recurring formulaic patterns, and it is determined to a large extent by the conventions of the society in which it functions. If we consider the early Buddhist literature in this way, what do its genres tell us about its transmission? The issue of style seems to be a quite simple one — the Buddhist texts are solemn compositions which can hardly have been transmitted in performance. The internal evidence of the early Buddhist literature suggests exactly this. In the following passage from the Aṅguttara Nikāya, which comments on the reasons for the future disappearance of the Dhamma and Vinaya, the doctrinal discourses are viewed as sacred utterances rather than compositions to be performed:

> Moreover, *bhikkhus*, there will be *bhikkhus* in the future, undeveloped in body, discipline, mind [and] insight. Being of this nature, the *Suttantas* spoken by the Tathāgata — profound, with profound meaning, transcendent, connected to emptiness — they will not desire to listen [to these] when they are being spoken, they will not lend their ears [to them], they will not direct their minds towards understanding [them], and they will not think that those teachings ought to be learnt and accomplished. But the Suttantas which are poetic, fashioned by poets, with ornamental syllables and letters, heretical [but] spoken by disciples, they will desire to listen [to these] when they are being spoken, they will lend their ears [to them], they will direct their minds towards understanding [them], and they will think that those teachings ought to be learnt and accomplished.[35]

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[34] Barton p. 32.

[35] A III.107.11ff: *puna ca paraṃ bhikkhave, bhavissanti bhikkhū anāgataṃ addhānaṃ abhāvitakāyā abhāvitasīlā abhāvitacittā abhāvitapaññā, te abhāvitakāyā samānā abhāvitasīla abhāvitacittā abhāvitapaññā, ye te suttantā tathāgatabhāsitā gambhīrā gambhīratthā lokuttarā suññatāpaṭisaṃyuttā, tesu bhaññamānesu na sussusissanti, na sotaṃ odahissanti, na aññācittaṃ upaṭṭhapessanti, na ca te dhamme uggahetabbaṃ pariyāpuṇitabbaṃ maññissanti. ye pana te suttantā kavikatā kāveyyā cittakkharā cittavyañjanā bāhirakā sāvakabhāsitā, tesu bhaññamānesu sussusissanti, sotaṃ odahissanti, aññācittaṃ upaṭṭhapessanti, te ca dhamme uggahetabbaṃ pariyāpuṇitabbaṃ maññissanti.*

This is evidence, surely, that the early *saṅgha* was suspicious of a poetic style of Sutta composition. And if we conclude from this that most of the early Buddhist texts were not considered to be poetic compositions, it vastly reduces the chances that they were somehow improvised. Schmithausen has suggested that the Sutta in which this evidence is contained may be later than other Suttas found in the same *vagga*,[36] but the point it makes about the style of enunciating Suttas is corroborated by further canonical evidence. The *Gītassara Sutta*, for example, warns against the dangers of singing the *dhamma* in a drawn out voice (*āyatakena gītassarena*);[37] one of these dangers is that householders will think that *bhikkhus* sing (*gāyanti*) just like they do.[38] This advice against reciting the *dhamma* in the style of non-monastic singing corresponds to an episode in the Vinaya where the Buddha forbids the *dhamma* to be sung in a drawn-out voice:

> At that time, six *bhikkhus* were singing the *dhamma* in a drawn out voice. People were offended, vexed [and] annoyed [saying]: 'Just as we sing, so do these ascetic followers of the Sakyan sing the *dhamma*, in a drawn out voice.'[39]

The Buddha goes on to sanction such singing by defining it as a *dukkaṭa* offence.[40] It seems that style mattered to the early *saṅgha*, who did not wish their literature to be transmitted in the poetic style of non-monastic bards. This is not surprising, for the early Buddhists were attempting to transmit sacred literature; they were more concerned with preserving important teachings than with taking into consideration the needs of their audience. It seems to me that this stylistic consideration rules out the possibility that performance based methods, which perhaps included elements

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[36] Schmithausen 1992 p. 117.

[37] A III.251.1ff (=*Pañcakanipāta CCIX, Kimbilavagga IX*): *pañc' ime bhikkhave ādīnavā āyatakena gītassarena dhammaṃ bhaṇantassa. katame pañca?*

[38] A III.251.4ff: *gahapatikā pi ujjhāyanti: yath'eva mayaṃ gāyāma, evam ev'ime samaṇā sakyaputtiyā gāyantī ti.*

[39] Vin II.108.5: *tena kho pana samayena chabbaggiyā bhikkhū āyatakena gītassarena dhammaṃ gāyanti. manussā ujjhāyanti khīyanti vipācenti: yath'eva mayaṃ gāyāma, evam ev'ime samaṇā sakyaputtiyā āyatakena gītassarena dhammaṃ gāyantī ti.* (On this, see Collins 1992 p. 25).

[40] Vin II.108.21: *na bhikkhave āyatakena gītassarena dhammo gāyitabbo. yo gāyeyya, āpatti dukkaṭassa ti.*

of improvisation, can have been the means for the transmission of the early Buddhist literature. In addition, there is evidence that the formal conventions of oral transmission were affected and moulded by the communal patterns that operated within the early *saṅgha*. The evidence suggests that communal recitation was the norm, and this has important ramifications for the transmission of the early literature. Such evidence is seen, for example, in the *Pāsādika Sutta*, where the Buddha is reported to have advised communal recitation in response to the Jain quarrels after the death of Nigaṇṭha Nātaputta:

> Therefore, Cunda, as regards the teachings I have taught to you through understanding, meeting together again and again, [comparing] meaning with meaning (*atthena atthaṃ*), [comparing] letter with letter (*byañjanena byañjanaṃ*), you should recite communally and not argue, so that the holy life will be long lasting and endure long, which will be for the benefit of the many, for the happiness of the many; [do it] out of compassion for the world, for the purpose, welfare [and] happiness of gods and men.[41]

This evidence suggests that the early Buddhists used the example of the Jain quarrels about their literature in order to ensure the accurate transmission of their early teachings. There are important implications if communal recitation was the foremost means of oral transmission in the early Buddhist *saṅgha*, as has been noted by Mark Allon:

> [C]ommunal or group recitation or performance requires fixed wording. It is not possible for more than one individual to perform at the same time in the manner described by Parry-Lord without producing utter chaos, for in that method, each individual creates his compositions anew each time he performs.[42]

If the Buddha's words in the *Pāsādika Sutta* were taken seriously, it means that the formal conventions of group chanting would have ruled out the ability of individuals to improvise in the manner of a single oral performer. The various genres which make up the early Buddhist literature would all have been subject to group recitation at some point, and

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[41] D III.127.15ff: *tasmāt iha cunda ye vo mayā dhammā abhiññā desitā, tattha sabbeh' eva saṃgamma samāgamma atthena atthaṃ vyañjanena vyañjanaṃ saṃgāyitabbaṃ na vivaditabbaṃ, yathayidaṃ brahmacariyaṃ addhaniyaṃ assa ciraṭṭhitikaṃ tad assa bahujanahitāya bahujanasukhāya lokānukampāya atthāya hitāya sukhāya devamanussānaṃ.*

[42] Allon p. 366.

this involved social conditions very different from those in which improvisational and performance based methods could have functioned. The evidence for group recitation is not limited to the *Pāsādika Sutta* — similar evidence is found in the *Saṅgīti Sutta*,[43] a name which perhaps indicates that it was composed at a major communal recitation.[44] If this was the case, it is likely that the same compositional conditions applied to the very similar *Dasuttara Sutta*, which would rule out Gethin's suggestion that differences in its various sectarian versions were produced by the oral improvisation of individual chanters.

7. The historical value of circumstantial evidence

I have thus far cited canonical evidence suggesting word for word accuracy in the transmission of the early Buddhist literature, as well as evidence suggesting that stylistic and social conditions precluded improvisational methods of oral transmission. This evidence requires further scrutiny, however. Should we assume that the canonical evidence is an accurate record of historical events? Or should we assume that this evidence is normative and only permits conclusions to be drawn about the ideals, but not deeds, of the early Buddhists? Many scholars today incline towards the opinion that the early Buddhist texts contain hardly any reliable historical information. This view has been articulated by Gregory Schopen as follows:

> Even the most artless formal narrative text has a purpose, and that in "scriptural" texts, especially in India, that purpose is almost never "historical" in our sense of the term…
> Scholars of Indian Buddhism have taken canonical monastic rules and formal literary descriptions of the monastic ideal preserved in very late manuscripts and treated them as if they were accurate reflections of the religious life and career of actual practising Buddhist monks in early India.[45]

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[43] D III.211.3: *tattha sabbeh' eva saṃgāyitabbaṃ na vivaditabbaṃ*. This is exactly the same pericope as that found in the *Pāsādika Sutta*, but minus the section *saṃgamma samāgamma atthena atthaṃ vyañjanena vyañjanaṃ*.

[44] This point has been made by Cousins (1983 p. 4): '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*.'

[45] Schopen 1997 p. 3.

But it is surely naïve to treat the entire contents of the canonical literature in this way. It cannot be doubted that much of the canonical literature is normative, but this does not warrant the assertion that it contains no descriptive or historical elements. In fact, some quite simple steps can be taken to separate normative from descriptive material. We must differentiate direct evidence from indirect or circumstantial evidence. In legal parlance, circumstantial evidence is not the direct evidence of a witness who claims that he saw or heard something, but is a singular fact that can be used to infer another fact. In other words, circumstantial evidence is the indirect, unintentional evidence which affords a certain presumption. In the context of the early Buddhist literature, circumstantial evidence is not the direct evidence contained in the Buddhist texts, e.g. that the Buddha said such and such a thing on such and such an occasion (which may be true or false), but consists of the indirect facts from which other facts can be inferred. So, for example, the Buddha's advice in the *Kinti Sutta* on how to resolve potentially schismatic disputes is direct evidence that can neither be substantiated or denied;[46] we do not know if the Buddha said such a thing, or if the *saṅgha* followed the ideals said to have been set out by him on that occasion. This is the normative evidence of which Schopen is so suspicious. But the circumstantial evidence contained in this passage consists of the fact that the early *saṅgha* imagined that there could be disputes about the precise wording of the early oral literature. From this we can infer that a priority of the early *saṅgha* was the precise wording of the literature, and that efforts were made to transmit the early Buddhist compositions accurately, to the letter. If this was not the case, the text would never have said that disputes could arise over the letter.

In a similar vein, all the other evidence that I have presented is circumstantial and from it we can infer that the early Buddhists really did attempt to transmit the early Buddhist literature with verbatim accuracy. So in the passage on the four *mahāpadesa-s*,[47] the way new teachings were said to be compared with the existing collections of 'Sutta' and 'Vinaya' means that these existing collections must have been transmitted verbatim —

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[46] See section 5.3.
[47] See section 3.

otherwise it would never have been said that the words and letters of the
new teachings had to be learnt correctly (*sādhukaṃ*). The description of
the *vinayadhara* is surely an ideal,[48] but the ideal of learning both the
Pātimokkha-s to the letter reflects the fact that this was how the early
Buddhists attempted to transmit it in early times. The Vinaya rule for-
bidding non-monastics permission to be taught the *dhamma* does not
allow us to conclude that such things never happened,[49] but the rule would
not have stipulated that the teaching was not to be 'word by word'
(*padaso*) unless that was how monastics were in fact taught. And the
Pāsādika Sutta would never have said that when *bhikkhus* should gather
together to recite communally,[50] the recitation should be 'letter by letter'
(*byañjanena byañjanaṃ*) unless that was how the early Buddhists attempted
to transmit the literature.

The worth of this circumstantial evidence should not be underesti-
mated. But it follows from the rule of drawing inferences from circum-
stantial evidence that the prohibitions against *bhikkhus* singing the *dhamma*
in a drawn out voice,[51] and the evidence warning that in the future there
will be those who compose poetic sorts of Suttas,[52] imply that there were
bhikkhus who sang their compositions in drawn out voices and who com-
posed poetic sorts of Suttas. This must indeed be so, but Suttas which may
have been sung in a 'drawn out voice' are not evidence that improvisa-
tional methods were used in the transmission of literature; in any case,
this passage shows that even this prohibited recitation was communal
and therefore not improvisational (the offenders were the six *bhikkhus*).
Moreover, as far as I can tell, there are no Suttas in the early canonical
collections that could be described as poetic with 'ornamental syllables
and letters'. And the important issue, surely, is the correct determination
of the methods by which the extant texts were transmitted, not texts which
may have existed. Even if others can find some of these 'heretical' Suttas
in the early literature, there can be no evidence that they were composed
through improvisational means.

[48] See section 5.1.
[49] See section 5.2.
[50] See section 6.
[51] See section 6.
[52] See section 6.

8. Aśoka's Calcutta-Bairāṭ edict

There is one final point I wish to make. In his Calcutta-Bairāṭ edict, Aśoka names some texts, the study of which he considers advantageous.[53] The general consensus seems to be that what Aśoka calls *Munigāthā* correspond to the *Munisutta* (Sn 207-21), *Moneyasūte* is probably the second half of the *Nālakasutta* (Sn 699-723), and *Upatisapasine* may correspond to the *Sāriputtasutta* (Sn 955-975).[54] The identification of most of the other titles is less certain,[55] but Schmithausen, following Oldenberg before him,[56] identifies what Aśoka calls the *Lāghulovāda* with part of a prose text in the Majjhima Nikāya, the *Ambalaṭṭhika-Rāhulovāda Sutta* (M no.61).[57] It is hardly likely that Aśoka knew these texts in exactly the same form as they are found in the extant Suttapiṭaka, but this does not matter. What matters is that Aśoka was able to name texts, and this surely means that their content was more or less fixed. I doubt whether the regular audience of an individual oral performer would have been able to put together the connected events of any given oral performance and refer to it by a single title. The early Buddhist literature known to Aśoka must have contained works that were relatively fixed, and this means that the works in the collections of literature that belonged to the missionaries sent out in his time were also relatively fixed. This claim is supported by the fact that the passage in the Pāli *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta* on the four *mahāpadesa-s* is almost identical to the corresponding Sanskrit version,[58] implying that the method of word for word recitation of a text was pre-sectarian, and therefore to be dated before the middle of the third century B.C. The early Buddhists of the fourth and third centuries B.C. must have been composing texts which were, as far as they were concerned, fixed. Differences in the corresponding passages of the extant sectarian literature cannot, therefore, be the result of oral improvisation.

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[53] Hultzsch p. 173: *Vinaye-samukase Aliya-vasāṇi Anāgatha-bhayāni Muni-gāthā Moneya-sūte Upatisa-pasine e chā Lāghulovāde*.

[54] Norman 2001 p. xxxiii.

[55] See Schmithausen 1992 p. 116-117, Jayawickrama pp. 230-32.

[56] Oldenberg p. xl.

[57] Schmithausen 1992 p. 115: 'It must refer to a prose text'.

[58] See p. 101 n.15 above.

9. Conclusion

Although the early Buddhist texts include information on their own transmission, there is no canonical evidence to suggest that improvisation in performance was a factor in their transmission, and it would seem that the arguments for it have been overstated. Cousins, for example, has commented: '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. It has a much firmer basis. It is precisely this kind of variation which is actually found in the different versions of the four nikāyas preserved by various sects and extant today in Pali, Sanskrit, Chinese and Tibetan'.[59] But no evidence to support this claim is presented, and we are forced to conclude that this argument is precisely an inference based upon 'the pattern of most but not all forms of oral literature so far studied'. In a similar vein, Gethin has said that 'The earliest Buddhist literature was composed orally and built up around lists',[60] lists which 'provide or form a matrix within which she [the composer] can improvise.'[61] He argues that the differences between the various versions of the *Daśottara Sūtra* have been caused by this sort of improvisation. But this argument also seems to be an inference based on the study of other oral literatures, rather than a study of the early Buddhist evidence. As far as I can tell, there is in no clear evidence in the Pāli canon which supports these claims, and much that goes against them, as I have attempted to show.

The evidence on the literary history of early Buddhism presented here concerns only the transmission and not the composition of the extant texts. Furthermore, we must admit that this evidence reflects a well developed literary tradition, and not the conditions which existed at the beginning of Buddhist composition. So how were the texts composed in the first place?

No one can deny that there must have been a period of free literary transmission at the beginning of Buddhism. After the Buddha's death, every *bhikkhu* or *bhikkhunī* would have remembered a number of stories about the Buddha's life and teaching, some of which they witnessed themselves,

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[59] Cousins 1983 p. 5
[60] Gethin 1992 p. 166.
[61] Ibid. p. 156.

and others which they heard second-hand. In the beginning it is likely that such stories and teachings, based on the collective memory of the early *saṅgha*, were not fixed and circulated freely. Does this mean that it was a period when improvisational methods were used? Possibly, but if so, the improvisational methods would have been very different from those studied by Parry and Lord. The techniques studied by Parry and Lord presuppose a developed literary tradition which utilises fixed building blocks, i.e. set phrases and pericopes (strings of words conveying various ideas), around which a composition could be strung. These building blocks would not have been known in a period of free transmission, and so it seems that the methods studied by Parry and Lord simply cannot have been used at this time. But what about the situation at the beginning of a developed literary tradition, which would have been initiated by the appearance of oral building blocks, and which eventually produced the extant texts?

We can imagine that in an early period when the composition of such oral building blocks had begun, there may well have been a period when they were used by individual singers in improvised performances. Indeed, Mark Allon has commented that stylistic features of some these pericopes could have functioned as compositional aids 'within a tradition of composing material during the performance in an improvisational manner and in a tradition of composing fixed texts which were to be transmitted verbatim.'[62] At the same time, he points out that the gross repetition found in the Dīgha Nikāya Suttas, although based on the use of these pericopes, cannot reflect a tradition of improvisational performance.[63] But there are many more Suttas which are shorter and which use the same pericopes without the same level of repetition — could they be the product of improvisation in performance? This seems to be most unlikely, for a very simple reason.

It is clear that the building blocks of the early Buddhist texts must have been composed in a collaborative effort. Mark Allon's detailed study of the pericopes used in the Dīgha Nikāya shows a literary tradition of great complexity and sophistication. The mnemonic techniques used to

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[62] Allon p. 365.
[63] Ibid. p. 365.

compose the pericopes from which the extant texts were fashioned can hardly have been the work of individual composers working in isolation from one another. It must have been a joint effort. And if we are to suppose that a joint effort was required to compose these building blocks, we must imagine that the communal factor which determined communal recitation and word for word transmission would have come into existence at the very beginning of Sutta composition. In other words, I am suggesting that if there was collaboration from the beginning, it can hardly have been the case that the collaborators composed oral building blocks and then went off, leaving the pericopes they had fashioned to be used by individuals as they liked. Surely it was the case that the various pericopes, the building blocks of the early Buddhist texts, were fashioned by committees in order to turn a growing body of loose material into a form that could be more easily remembered. It must have been a joint project involving many participants, and this implies that not only the pericopes but also their distribution within texts would not have been a matter of improvisation.

Of course, once a sophisticated literary tradition — one that uses oral building blocks — is up and running, then it is quite likely that new material would have been composed using these building blocks. New composers, perhaps who wished to say new things, would have fashioned new texts out of the building blocks which had already been composed. But this does not necessarily mean that these new compositions would have been subject to an improvisational method. As we have seen, the method of integrating the new into the old suggested by the passage on the four *mahāpadesa-s* does not allow any room for an improvisational method. Any new composition would have been presented to the *saṅgha* as a whole, and, if accepted, transmitted verbatim by the collaborative method of the early *saṅgha*.

Group recitation and word for word accuracy does not mean that composition and transmission were carried out in a mechanistic and regimented fashion, producing closed and canonised texts. On the contrary, as long as the canon was not closed, and as long as oral composition and transmission continued, some degree of variation could not have been prevented, especially when Buddhism was spreading to the far corners of the Indian subcontinent and beyond. Every measure was taken to ensure

that the early literature was as fixed and accurate as it could be under the circumstances, but it was never written in stone. Variation in the parallel texts of the different sects was only to be expected, for many variables existed in the post-Aśokan age. The parallel texts of the different sects show us that the arrangement and even the language of compositions could vary considerably,[64] and from the amount of texts unique to certain sects, it seems that there was an ongoing composition of new texts which could be incorporated into the Nikāyas/Āgamas. In such circumstances, we must imagine that the ancient guardians of the early Buddhist literature in the post-Aśokan period had a significant amount of redactional authority. This redactional authority allowed some freedom in dealing with the sacred literature, and it is because of this freedom that the differences in the parallel texts of the different sects appeared.

The model of oral composition and transmission which I am suggesting can be summed up as follows:

> Generally speaking we may envisage things as follows. At the beginning there is a time of free transmission, during which the text is rendered in free words from memory. Memorial sentences, mostly couched in the form of verses, probably came early to the help of the memory. This sort of transmission has always been employed with less important texts. I recall, e.g. how the Jains fixed down by means of memorial sentences the contents of the legends which they inserted in their sermons, but left the execution in detail to the reciter.[65] The passage to an established tradition is marked by the appearance of fixed formulae. These are known to everybody from the Buddhist and Jaina tradition. Wherever a subject of common recurrence is treated, it is treated in the same words. Also the descriptions regularly repeated in the Jaina canon belong to this class. This gradually leads to an established tradition, which fixes the text in a certain version. But even such an established tradition is never rigid as with the Vedic texts. Chiefly with the Buddhists we remark even later frequent modifications of redactional nature. To these belong the above discussed levelling tendencies, which led to the uniforming of the verbal expressions of similar texts in the various

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[64] As pointed out by Allon p. 367.

[65] This method may explain the composition of the Jātakas, where canonical verses are separated by long tracts of non-canonical prose commentary. Such a method of transmission is exactly what one would expect under the conditions of an improvisational model of free transmission. But the prose passages in the Jātakas that may have been left to the whim of the reciter are not considered to be canonical in the Theravāda tradition, and there is of course no evidence that they were ever transmitted with a degree of improvisation.

canonical collection, or to the transfer of missing texts from one collection into another… These modifications, however, were hardly left to the arbitrary care of single individuals. In my opinion they were carried out in synods of the communities and thus rendered obligatory for further transmission.[66]

These observations of Erich Frauwallner, made almost half a century ago, seem to me to be supported by my interpretation of the textual evidence presented here.

My main concern in this paper has not been to formulate a theory about the composition of the early Buddhist literature. I have attempted to use the internal evidence of the Pāli canon in order to draw some conclusions about the methods of oral transmission that rendered the texts in their extant form. My purpose in doing this has been to assess whether or not the early Buddhist literature is such that the methods of higher criticism can be applied to it. And I think that the evidence leads to a unanimous conclusion: philological, conceptual, and narrative oddities in the early Buddhist texts are likely to be significant — not produced by the random variation of an oral tradition, but by causes that in theory can be discovered. It seems to me that there are indeed many different conceptual and chronological strata within the various collections of early Buddhist literature, the identification of which is a necessary prerequisite for an advanced understanding of the history of early Buddhism. The fact that there was a period of free transmission at the beginning of Buddhism probably prevents the possibility of ever recovering the first version of a Sutta. But it does not prevent the possibility of finding different strata in the literature, and hence earlier versions of the texts, on the basis of textual peculiarities. It is the job of the historian of religion to identify and explain these differences. But at least we can safely assume that the texts can be studied critically, which means that in principle they can be stratified, and a more accurate history of early Buddhism written.

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[66] Frauwallner pp. 173-74.

Abbreviations

A   Aṅguttara Nikāya
Be   Burmese edition
D   Dīgha Nikāya
DOP   Dictionary of Pāli (= Cone)
M   Majjhima Nikāya
Ne   *Nālandā-Devanāgarī-Pāli-Series*. Kashyap, Bhikkhu J.; Bihar: Pāli Pub-
         lication Board.
PED   Pali English Dictionary (= Rhys Davids and Stede)
PTS   Pali Text Society
S   Saṃyutta Nikāya
Vin   Vinaya Piṭaka

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