

Early Buddhist Texts

Early Buddhist Texts (EBTs), **Early Buddhist Literature** or **Early Buddhist Discourses** refers to the parallel texts shared by the Early Buddhist schools. The most widely studied EBT material are the first four Pali Nikayas, as well as the corresponding Chinese Āgamas.^{[1][2][3][4]} However, some scholars have also pointed out that some Vinaya material, like the Patimokkhas of the different Buddhist schools, as well as some material from the earliest Abhidharma texts could also be quite early.^{[5][6]}

Besides the large collections in Pali and Chinese, there are also fragmentary collections of EBT materials in Sanskrit, Khotanese, Tibetan and Gāndhārī. The modern study of early pre-sectarian Buddhism often relies on comparative scholarship using these various early Buddhist sources.^[7]

Various scholars of Buddhist studies such as Richard Gombrich, Akira Hirakawa, Alexander Wynne and A.K. Warder hold that Early Buddhist Texts contain material that could possibly be traced to the historical Buddha himself or at least to the early years of pre-sectarian Buddhism.^{[8][9][10]} According to the Japanese scholar Akira Hirakawa, "any attempt to ascertain the original teachings of the historical Buddha must be based on this literature."^[11]

In Mahayana Buddhism, these texts are sometimes referred to as "Hinayana" or "Śrāvakayāna" texts and are not considered Mahayana works.

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Overview

Different genres comprise the Early Buddhist Texts, including prose "suttas" (Skt: sūtra, discourses), various forms of verse compositions (such as gāthā and udāna), mixed prose and verse works (geya), and also lists (matika) of monastic rules or doctrinal topics. A large portion of Early Buddhist literature is part of the "sutta" or "sutra" genre, these are usually placed in different collections (called Nikayas or Agamas) and constitute the "Sutta Pitaka" (Skt: Sūtra Pitaka, "Basket of sutras") section of the various early Buddhist Tripitakas ("Three Baskets"). The suttas generally contain doctrinal, spiritual and philosophical content.

These texts were initially transmitted through oral methods. According to Marcus Bingenheimer,

After the death of the founder, Buddhist texts were transmitted orally in Middle Indo-Aryan dialects (Prakrits). While the southern tradition eventually settled on one of these dialects, Pāli, as its canonical language, in India and Central Asia Buddhist texts were successively Sanskritized and/or translated into other languages such as Chinese, Tokharian, Khotanese, Sogdian, and Tibetan. Also, new Buddhist texts in India, from at least the third century onward, were directly composed in standard Sanskrit. Manuscripts from the northern tradition, especially those of Central Asian provenance, are therefore often in Prakrit (especially Gāndhārī) or some nonstandard form of Sanskrit, sometimes called Buddhist Sanskrit, an intermediate stage between some Prakrit and standard Sanskrit.^[12]

An important feature of the Early Buddhist texts are formal characteristics which reflect their origin as orally transmitted literature such as the use of repetition and rhetorical formulas.^[13] Early Buddhist texts are believed to have been transmitted by lineages of bhāṇaka, monks who specialized in memorization and recitation of particular collections of texts,^[14] until they were eventually recorded in writing after the 1st Century BCE. As noted by Alexander Wynne:

Although there is no evidence for writing before Aśoka, the accuracy of oral transmission should not be underestimated. The Buddhist community was full of Brahmins who knew that the Vedic educational system had transmitted a mass of difficult texts, verbatim, in an increasingly archaic language, for more than a thousand years. Since the early Buddhists required a different means of oral transmission, for quite different texts, other mnemonic techniques were developed, based on communal chanting (saṅgīti). The texts explicitly state that this method was to be employed, and their actual form shows that it was, on a grand scale.^[10]

Some scholars such as Wynne and Analayo generally hold that these texts were memorized in fixed form, to be recited verbatim (in contrast to other forms of oral literature, such as epic poetry) and that this was affirmed during communal recitations (where there is little room for improvisation), while others argue that they could have been performed in more poetic and improvisational ways (L.S. Cousins, Rupert Gethin) through the use of basic lists or formulas.^[15]

According to Oskar von Hinüber the main purpose for the composition of the EBTs was to "preserve and to defend an orthodox tradition" and that this literary effort was influenced by the Vedic prose of the Brāhmaṇas.^[16] As noted by von Hinüber, these collections also contain the first ever Indian texts to commemorate historical events, such as the Mahāparinibbānasuttanta, which recounts the death of the Buddha. The early suttas also almost always open by introducing the geographical location of the event they depict, including ancient place names, always preceded by the phrase "thus have I heard" (evaṃ me sutaṃ).^[16]

The textual evidence from various traditions shows that by the 1st century BCE to the fourth century CE, slight differences developed among these parallel documents and that these differences reflected "school affiliation, local traditions, linguistic environment, nonstandardized scripts, or any combination of these factors."^[17]

According to Alexander Wynne,

The corresponding pieces of textual material found in the canons of the different sects... probably go back to pre-sectarian times. It is unlikely that these correspondences could have been produced by the joint endeavour of different Buddhist sects, for such an undertaking would have required organisation on a scale which was simply inconceivable in the ancient world.^[18]

Also, Wynne notes that the Edicts of Ashoka (see the Minor Rock Edict #3) mentions some Buddhist texts which have been identified and which might show that at the time of Ashoka (304–232 BCE) these were already fixed.^[19] Other Indian inscriptions from the 1st and 2nd century CE include terms such as dharmakathika, peṭṭakī, and suttantika, indicating the existence of a Buddhist literature during this time.^[10]

Regarding the setting, the EBTs generally depict the world of the second urbanisation period, which features small scale towns and villages, and small competing states (the mahajanapadas) with a lower level of urbanisation compared to that of the Mauryan era.^[10] The EBTs also depict a small scale local economy, during a time before the establishment of the long distance trading networks, as noted by Brahmali and Sujato:

King Pasenadi of Kosala is said to have used kāsī sandalwood (MN 87.28), indicating that even the highest social strata used locally produced luxuries. This situation is perhaps to be expected given the political divisions in North India at the time, which may have complicated long-distance trade.<ref*Sujato, Bhante; Brahmali, Bhikkhu (2015), *The Authenticity of the Early Buddhist Texts* (<https://ocbs.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/authenticity.pdf>) (PDF), Chroniker Press, p. 23, ISBN 9781312911505</ref>

As noted by von Hinüber, the omission of any mention of the Mauryas in EBTs such as the *Mahāparinibbānasuttanta*, in contrast to other later Buddhist texts which do mention them, is also evidence of its pre-Mauryan date:

Given the importance of the rise of the Maurya empire even under Candragupta, who is better known for his inclination towards Jainism, one might conjecture that the latest date for the composition of the *Mahāparinibbānasuttanta*, at least for this part of it, is around 350 to 320 BC.^[16]

Extant material

Most modern scholarship has generally focused on the Pāli Nikāyas (which have been fully translated into Western languages) and the Chinese Āgamas (only partially translated). As early as the late 19th century, it was known that the Nikāyas and the Āgamas contain a great number of parallel texts. In 1882, Samuel Beal published his *Buddhist Literature in China*, where he wrote:

The Parinibbāna, the Brahmajāla, the Sigalovada, the Dhammacakka, the Kasi-Bhāradvadja, the Mahāmangala; all these I have found and compared with translations from the Pali, and find that in the main they are identical. I do not say literally the same; they differ in minor points, but are identical in plot and all important details. And when the Vinaya and Āgama collections are thoroughly examined, I can have little doubt we shall find most if not all the Pali suttas in a Chinese form.^[20]

During the 20th century various scholars including Anesaki Masaharu and Akanuma Chinzen began critical studies of these correspondences. Probably the most important early works in the comparative study of these two collections are Anesaki's *The Four Buddhist Āgamas in Chinese – A Concordance of their Parts and of the Corresponding Counterparts in the Pāli Nikāyas* and Akanuma's *The Comparative Catalogue of Chinese Āgamas and Pāli Nikāyas*.^{[21][22]}

Over time this comparative study of these parallel Buddhist texts became incorporated into modern scholarship on Buddhism, such as in the work of Etienne Lamotte, who commented on their close relationship:

However, with the exception of the Mahāyanist interpolations in the Ekottara, which are easily discernable, the variations in question [between the Nikāyas and Āgamas] affect hardly anything save the method of expression or the arrangement of the subjects. The doctrinal basis common to the Nikāyas and Āgamas is remarkably uniform. Preserved and transmitted by the schools, the sūtras do not, however, constitute scholastic documents, but are the common heritage of all the sects.^[23]

According to some Asian scholars like Yin Shun, Mizuno Kogen and Mun-Keat Choong, the common ancestor of the Samyutta Nikaya and the Samyukta Agama is the basis for the other EBTs.^[2]

Recent work has also been done on other more fragmentary materials surviving in Sanskrit, Tibetan and Gandhari collections.

Pāli EBTs

The Pāli Canon of the Theravada school contains the most complete fully extant collection of EBTs in an Indic language which has survived until today.^[24] According to the Theravada tradition, after having been passed down orally, it was first written down in the first century BCE in Sri Lanka.^[25]

While some scholars such as Gregory Schopen are skeptical of the antiquity of the Pali texts, Alexander Wynne notes that:

Canonical fragments are included in the Golden Pāli Text, found in a reliquary from Śrī kṣetra dating to the late 3rd or early 4th century AD; they agree almost exactly with extant Pāli manuscripts. This means that the Pāli Tipiṭaka has been transmitted with a high degree of accuracy for well over 1,500 years. There is no reason why such an accurate transmission should not be projected back a number of centuries, at the least to the period when it was written down in the first century BC, and probably further.^[10]



Burmese-Pali Palm-leaf manuscript.

The Early Buddhist material in the Pāli Canon mainly consists of the first four Pāli Nikāyas, the Patimokkha (basic list of monastic rules) and other Vinaya material as well as some parts of the Khuddaka Nikāya (mainly Sutta Nipata, Itivuttaka, Dhammapada, Therīgatha, Theragatha, and the Udana).^{[26][27][28]}

These texts have been widely translated into Western languages.

Chinese EBTs

The EBTs preserved in the Chinese Buddhist canon include the Āgamas, collections of sutras which parallel the Pali Nikāyas in content as well as structure.^[29] There are also some differences between the discourses and collections as modern comparative studies has shown, such as omissions of material, additions and shifts in the location of phrases.^[29] These various Agamas possibly come down to us from the Sarvastivada (the Samyukta and Madhyama Agamas), Dharmaguptaka and Kasyayipa schools.^[30] The Mahasamghika Vinaya Pitaka also survives in Chinese translation.^[31] Some of the Agamas have been translated into English by the Āgama Research Group (ARG) at the Dharma Drum Institute of Liberal Arts.^[32]

The language of these texts is a form of Ancient Chinese termed Buddhist Chinese (*fójiào Hànyǔ* 佛教漢語) or Buddhist Hybrid Chinese (*fójiào hùnhé Hànyǔ* 佛教混合漢語) which shows considerable vernacularity. Buddhist Chinese also shows a significant number of elements which derive from the source language, including calques and phonological transcriptions.^[33] Scholarly analysis of these texts have shown that they were translated from Middle Indic Prakrit source languages, with varying degrees of sanskritisation.^[34]

While the other Chinese Agamas are mostly doctrinally consistent with the Pali Nikayas, the Ekottara Agama (EA) has been seen by various scholars such as Johannes Bronkhorst and Etienne Lamotte as being influenced by later Mahayana concepts.^[35] According to Lamotte, these 'interpolations' are easily discernible.^[36] According to Analayo, the most often proposed hypothesis

is that the EA derives from the Mahasamgika school.^[37]

EBTs from Pakistan and Afghanistan

Modern discoveries of various fragmentary manuscript collections from Pakistan and Afghanistan has contributed significantly to the study of Early Buddhist Texts.

Most of these texts are written in the Gandhari Language and the Kharoṣṭhī script, but some have also been discovered in Bactrian.^[38] The Gandhāran Buddhist texts contain several EBTs, such as a parallel to the Anattalakkhana Sutta, possibly belonging to the Dharmaguptaka school. A few publications have translated some of these texts.^[39]



Gandhara birchbark scroll fragments (c. 1st century) from British Library Collection

According to Mark Allon, the most recent major finds include the following collections:^[38]

- "The British Library Kharoṣṭhī Manuscripts", Birch bark scrolls in the Gandhari Language and the Kharoṣṭhī script, possibly belonging to the Dharmaguptaka school. They include prose sutras and verse works like parts of the Dharmapada dating to the 1st century CE, making them the earliest EBT manuscripts discovered.
- "The Senior Kharoṣṭhī Manuscripts", Birch bark scrolls in the Gandhari Language and the Kharoṣṭhī script, possibly belonging to the Dharmaguptaka school. Most of these preserve "canonical" prose sutras, as well as some biographical material on the Buddha's life associated with the Vinaya.
- "The Schøyen Manuscripts", discovered in the Bamiyan caves, a collection which preserves both EBT texts, Abhidharma and Mahayana texts in either Sanskrit or Gandhari.

Another important recent find is "a substantial portion of a large Sanskrit birch bark manuscript of the Dirghagama, the division of the canon containing long discourses, belonging to the (Mula)-Sarvastivada school, which dates to the seventh or eighth centuries AD".^[38]

Abhidharma

The various Abhidharma texts and collections (*Pitakas*) are considered by scholars to be (mostly) later material (3rd century BCE onwards) and thus are not EBTs.^[40] In spite of the relative lateness of the Abhidharma works, according to scholars like Erich Frauwallner, there are kernels of early pre-sectarian material in the earliest layer of the Abhidharma literature, such as in the Theravada Vibhanga, the Dharmaskandha of the Sarvastivada, and the Śāriputrābhidharma of the Dharmaguptaka school. According to Frauwallner's comparative study, these texts were possibly developed and "constructed from the same material", mainly early Buddhist doctrinal lists (Pali: *mātikā*, Sanskrit: *mātṛkā*) which forms the "ancient core" of early Abhidharma.^[6]

Other fragmentary sources

There are various EBTs collected in the Tibetan Kangyur. Peter Skilling has published English translations of these texts in his two volume "Mahasutras" (Pāli Text Society, 1994).

Another important source of early Buddhist material in the Tibetan canon are numerous quotations by Śamathadeva in his Abhidharmakośopāyikā-ṭīkā (Derge no. 4094 / Peking no. 5595), a commentary to the Abhidharmakosha. Some of this material is available in English translation by Bhikkhunī Dhammadinnā.^[41]

Likewise, numerous sutra quotations by authors of Sautrantika treatises are also a source of EBT fragments. The Sautrantika school was known for focusing on using examples from and references to EBT sutras. These works include Kumaralata's Drstantapankti, the Abhidharmamrtara-saśastra attributed to Ghosaka, the Abhidharmavatara-sastra attributed to Skandhila and the Tattvasiddhi of Harivarman.^[42]

Sanskritized fragments of different early Buddhist Agamas also survive from archaeological finds in the Tarim Basin and the city of Turfan. These finds include versions of a Sanskrit Udanavarga.^[43]

The Salistamba Sutra is an early Buddhist text which has been tied to the Mahāsāṃghika school, it contains many parallel passages to the Pali suttas.^[44]

Mahayana treatises also sometimes quote EBTs. According to Etienne Lamotte, the *Dà zhìdù lùn* cites "about a hundred sūtras of the Lesser Vehicle; the majority are borrowed from the Āgama collections."^[45]

See also

- Buddhavaṇṇa
- Index of Buddhism-related articles
- Vinaya Pitaka
- List of sūtras
- List of suttas
- Sutta Pitaka

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External links

- [SuttaCentral \(https://suttacentral.net/\)](https://suttacentral.net/) Public domain translations in multiple languages from the Pali Tipitaka as well as other collections, focusing on Early Buddhist Texts.
 - [Accesstoinsight \(http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/index.html\)](http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/index.html) Selected Pali Suttas in English translation.
 - [Bibliography of Translations from the Chinese Buddhist Canon \(http://mbingenheimer.net/tools/bibls/transbibl.html\)](http://mbingenheimer.net/tools/bibls/transbibl.html)
 - [Pali Text Society \(http://www.palitext.com/\)](http://www.palitext.com/)
 - [Buddhist Manuscripts from Gandhāra project \(https://www.en.gandhara.indologie.uni-muenchen.de/overview/index.html\)](https://www.en.gandhara.indologie.uni-muenchen.de/overview/index.html) at Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München
 - [Gandharan Buddhist Texts \(https://www.washington.edu/uwpress/books/series/Seriesbuddhist.html\)](https://www.washington.edu/uwpress/books/series/Seriesbuddhist.html) publications by University of Washington
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