

# Most Ancient Buddhist Records

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**by Moriz Winternitz**

### **The Pāli Canon: The Lamp-post of Indian Chronological Records.**

[207] The Vedic literature leads us directly to pre-historic times. And even as regards the beginnings of epic poetry of India we despair of all time data. Only with the Buddhist literature we enter into clear daylight of history. Even the obscurity of the history of the Vedas and the epic literature is to a certain extent lightened by this illumination. The age of the Buddha lends itself to determination and it provides us with a certain point from which we can reckon the rise of the Buddhist literature. Gautama, the Buddha, was born about 480 B.C., and a well authenticated tradition makes him die at the age of eighty.

As a young man of twenty-nine, he is believed to have embraced the life of a roaming ascetic and commenced to seek the way to salvation. After severe inner struggle, he started as a man of ripe age to proclaim the doctrine discovered by him. In the period between 525 and 480 B.C., therefore, the literary production of the Buddha must have issued, – the founding and the propagation of that Indian creed which was destined to be one of the three great world religions. The land of the Ganges in North-Western India was the seat of his activity. Here, in wealthy Magadha or modern Bihar and

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<sup>1</sup> Originally printed as Appendix III of J. Nariman's Literary History of Sanskrit Buddhism, pp. 207-218.

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Kosala or modern Oudh, he went forth from place to place preaching his doctrine and winning to himself an increasing number of adherents.

Does a written record belong also to these operations extending for several decades? Decidedly not. In the [208] *Tiṭṭaka*, the Pāḷi canon of the Buddhists, most of the speeches and maxims are put in the mouth of the Buddha himself. It is also precisely and circumstantially related, where and on what occasion the Master held a particular dialogue or made a certain speech. How much of all these is traceable to the Buddha himself, will perhaps never be definitely determined, for Gautama Buddha left behind as little in the shape of written record as did the Brahmanic sages Yajñavalkya, Śandilya or Śaunaka. But just as the speeches and dicta of these wise men have been to a great extent actually embodied as tradition in the Upaniṣads, so also undoubtedly many of the discourses and utterances of the Buddha were accurately preserved in their memory by the disciples and bequeathed to posterity.

Deliverances like the celebrated sermon at Benares on the “four noble truths” and the “noble eight-fold path,” which occur not only in many places in the Pāḷi canon, but also in Buddhist texts, composed in Sanskrit in self-same words; much of the parting exhortation delivered by the Master to his disciples preserved in the *Mahāparinibbānasutta*, many of the verses and brief dicta in the *Dhammapada*, in the *Udāna*, in the *Itivuttika* and in more or less similar Sanskrit texts of Nepal as well as in Tibetan and Chinese translations, – these we can look upon as emanating from the Buddha himself, without exposing ourselves to the charge of undue credulity. Gautama Buddha not only preached his new doctrine of

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sorrow and the end of sorrow, but founded a regular Order. He gathered round himself a body of monks who led a holy life in the sense taught by the Master and according to settled prescriptions in the hope of reaching the end of all sorrows, the coveted Nirvāṇa. Accordingly many of the rules and ordinances enacted for this order of monks, for instance, the ten prohibitions for the mendicant friars technically called the *dasasīla*, and probably also the well-known confessional litany, the *Pātimokkha*, are derived directly from the Buddha. [209]

From the age of the Buddha, therefore, no written record has reached us appertaining to the Buddhist literature known to us. On the other hand individual texts incorporated in this literature may with justification be regarded as the word of the Buddha. Moreover, among the earliest disciples of the Buddha there were doubtless several eminent leaders, and many of the discourses, dicta and poems embalmed in our collection probably had for their author some one or other of these prime acolytes.

Almost the entire oldest literature of the Buddhists consists of collections of discourses or dialogues, of dicta, of songs, of stories and of a disciplinary code. And the *Pāli Tipiṭaka* is nothing but an enormous corpus of these collections. It is manifest that such collected records can represent only the close of a literary activity spread over a long anterior period and that the components must necessarily be assigned to diverse periods of time. According to the Buddhist tradition one such final redaction of Buddhist records took place at a very early period in the history of Buddhism. Indeed, it is reported, that a few weeks after the decease of the Buddha, in the city of *Rājagṛha*, modern *Rajgir*, one of the personal disciples of the

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Buddha summoned together an assembly of monks, known as the first Buddhist Council, with view to establish a canon of the religion (dhamma) and the disciplinary code (vinaya.)

Now against the trustworthiness of this report in its earliest shape, as descended to us in the Tipiṭaka itself, speaks the circumstance that it makes too gross a demand on our credulity. In a word, we are asked to believe, that the two great sections of the Tipiṭaka relating to the doctrine and discipline of the Buddha entitled the Suttapiṭaka and the Vinayapiṭaka were composed essentially in the form and shape as we find them today in our Pāḷi canon shortly after the demise of the Buddha, – a proposition impossible in itself. Nevertheless we [210] have no right to assume that this tradition rests on no basis whatever. Probably it is reared on a reminiscence of the not unlikely fact, that the eiders of the faith gathered together soon after the passing of the Master with a view to unity on the main points of his doctrine and discipline. But for a composition of a canon of the sacred texts of the kind of our Tipiṭaka immediately after the death of the Buddha the period elapsed was certainly too brief.

More credible is the tradition regarding the second Council, which is reported to have taken place a hundred years after the death of the Buddha at Vesālī. To follow our most ancient account, the only object of this assembly was to condemn the ten errors which had crept into the disciplinary code. It is only in later reports of the Council that we are told, that a revision of the doctrine was accomplished at a session, which was held for eight months. If we rely on the older report we must assume it as a historical fact, that about a hundred years after the decease of the Buddha a schism had arisen, which had occasioned so much perturbation, that a large

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council of monks had to be convened to arrive at a decision as regards the legality of certain disputed points. This, however, presumes, that at that early date there were already established definite regulations for the solution of questions of this nature and those could only be a canon of rescripts for the conduct of life of the monks of a character and nature corresponding to those of the Vinavapiṭaka now extant.

Thus, in the course of the first century after the Buddha there must have been built up at least a fundamental basis for the text of regular canon, if not a canon itself. An actual canon of the sacred texts was probably established only at the third council, which was summoned at the time of the celebrated king Aśoka, to follow the account of the Ceylonese chroniclers, whose narrative, if embellished with legends, is in the main entirely [211] deserving of credence. That, as these chronicles relate, at the time the Buddhist Order had already split into numerous sects which necessitated an established canon for the orthodox believers, that is to say, for those who wanted to pass for adherents of the original doctrine, – this is antecedently and sufficiently probable.

Not less likely is it that this reaction took place at the time of king Aśoka, the greatest of patrons and adherents of the Buddhist Order. Aśoka himself turns against the schismatics in one of his rock edicts. He must, therefore, have found it incumbent on himself to determine what was the real religion of the Buddha, On the other hand, however, he was so impartial, – tolerance of other creeds he especially enjoins in his other edicts – that he did not summon the council for the establishment of the canon himself, but left it to the spiritual leaders. Accordingly, to follow the tradition, it was not the

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king but the learned and venerated monk Tissa Moggliputta who, in 236, after the death of the Buddha, called an assembly of a thousand monks at the city of Pāṭaliputra, modern Patna, to fix a canon of the texts of the pristine religion. Now the “true religion” was for him one represented by the Theravāda which is to say, “the doctrine of the elders,” the immediate disciples of the Buddha, – the school to which the sect of the Vibhajjavādīs professed to adhere. Tissa, who was the president of the council, was a member of this sect and fit was his canon which in the sessions lasting for nine months was determined at the council of Pāṭaliputra. Credible likewise is the tradition that the same Tissa composed and incorporated with the canon the book of Kathāvatthu in which the heretical doctrines of the period are repudiated. Again it was Tissa, at least if we give credence to the chronicles of Ceylon, who sent out the first missionaries to the north and south and paved the way for the propagation of Buddhism in foreign lands.

A pupil of Tissa was the [212] great Mahinda, the younger brother, or according to another tradition, the son of Aśoka, who brought to Ceylon Buddhism and the Buddhist texts from Northern India. We can easily understand that legends grew round the person of this apostle to Ceylon. Should we, however, decline to believe the chroniclers, who assert that Mahinda and the monks who accompanied him flew straight from India to Ceylon in the air like flamingoes, we need not reject the tradition *en bloc*, but must assume that at the root of the many legends lay the historical fact that Mahinda actually was the introducer of Buddhism into Ceylon and that emigrating into the island he brought with him the texts of the canon. These texts were, – and this sounds entirely trustworthy, – at first only orally communicated and were not committed to writing

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till in the first Christian century under the Singalese king Vattagāminī.

Now according to the view of the Buddhists of Ceylon the canon which was composed at the third council imported by Mahinda to Ceylon and committed to record under Vattagāminī was identical with our Pāli canon or the Tipiṭaka, which we possess to this day. This Tipiṭaka, – the term means three baskets – consists of what are called the three piṭakas or “baskets,” namely:

1. Vinayapiṭaka, the basket of ecclesiastical discipline. This section consists of that which relates to the monastic order (Saṅgha), the regulations of the order, prescriptions for the daily life of the monks and nuns and the like.

2. Suttapiṭaka, “the basket of Suttas.” The Pāli word sutta corresponds to the Sanskrit sūtra, but among the Buddhists it lost its ancient connotation of “brief rules” and here it is equivalent to doctrinal text or doctrinal exposition. Every one of the larger or smaller expositions, often in the [213] form of a dialogue on one or more aspects of the religion, “Dhamma,” is designated sutta. This Suttapiṭaka consists of five nikāyas, that is to say, large groups of such suttas.

3. Abhidhammapiṭaka, “basket of scholastics.” The texts comprised in this section treat as well as those of the Suttapiṭaka, of the religion, Dhamma. But they do so in a more scholastic method and the form of dry enumerations, and divisions which have principally reference to the psychological basis of Buddhist ethics.

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The Kathāvatthu ascribed by tradition to Tissa is found in our Pāli canon as a section of the Abhidhammapiṭaka. But the latter is demonstrably the youngest component of our Tipiṭaka, for it repeatedly presupposes the texts of the Suttapiṭaka as well known. Besides the more ancient texts, for instance, in the reports regarding the Council of Rājagṛha speak invariably only of Dhamma and Vinaya and never of an Abhidhamma. It was, therefore, *per se* quite conceivable that the members of the third Council, when they prepared a codex of the existing texts, relegated to the end the texts of Abhidhammapiṭaka, as those which were composed the last and added to them as a supplement the work of Tissa.

Nevertheless we cannot concede it offhand to the believing Buddhists of Ceylon that the canon established at the third Council is quite the same as the one now before us in the Pāli Tipiṭaka.

In the first place the language of the Tipiṭaka is scarcely the same as that of the canon of the third century B.C. The latter could only be the Māgadhi, the dialect of the province of Magadha, modern Behar. It was the home tongue of the Buddha who doubtless first preached in this idiom. Likewise the monks who fixed the canon in Pāṭaliputra, the capital of Magadha, employed the Māgadhi idiom. Traces of this Māgadhi canon can still be perceived in our Pāli corpus.

But Pāli, the ecclesiastical language of the Buddhists of Ceylon, Siam and Burma is designated by the latter themselves as Māgadhi, although it essentially differs from the latter [214] which is otherwise known to us from inscriptions, literary works, and grammars. At any rate, it corresponds equally little with any other dialect known to us. Pāli is just a language of literature which has

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been exclusively employed as such only by the Buddhists and has sprung like every literature language more or less from an admixture of several dialects. Obviously such a literary tongue, although it represents a kind of compromise between diverse vernaculars, is ultimately derived from one definite dialect. And this the Māgadhi can very well be, so that the tradition which makes Pāḷi and Māgadhi synonymous is not to be accepted literally, but at the same time it rests on a historical basis. In the early period of Buddhism very little weight was attached to the linguistic form of texts. The tradition has handed down to us the wording of the Buddha that he was concerned only with the sense and not with the phraseology and in the Vinayaṭīka the Buddha declines to have his word translated into a uniform sacred tongue like the Sanskrit. On the contrary he holds it necessary that each one should learn the holy word in the exposition composed in his own tongue.

The literary language, Pāḷi, could accordingly have developed only gradually and was probably fixed only when it was reduced to writing in Ceylon under Vaṭṭagāminī. The monks of Ceylon at all events attached importance to the conserving of the texts in the language once and for all determined and to transmit the same to posterity. And as regards the language, these monks have with rare fidelity preserved for, and bequeathed to, us the contents of the texts of the Tīṭaka recorded in the Pāḷi tongue for the last two thousand years.

But prior to this being given a definite shape in Pāḷi and its arrival in Ceylon it is possible that it was subjected to alteration even as regards its contents. Both as regards the language and the contents, therefore, our Pāḷi Tīṭaka approaches [215] very near to the canon

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established under Aśoka but is not identical with the latter. For we must concede that in the period from the third to the first century B. C. when the commitment to writing took place and possibly at a still later date the texts underwent transformation, and possibly commentaries have invaded the texts and got mixed up with the latter.

The original corpus as well as the components have probably grown since then in volume. Centuries have indeed not passed over them without leaving a mark. And it is only in this way that we can explain the numerous contradictions in the body of the canon as well as the repeated occurrence of older and younger tradition in juxtaposition and the frequent appearance of the same texts in more than one collection.

With these reservations and limitations, however, we can affirm that the body of our Pāḷi tipīṭaka as a whole cannot be so very divergent from the Māgadhi canon of the third century B.C. For this above all we have a warrant in the inscriptions of the king Aśoka. It is not only that his edicts preach the same spirit as the oldest of the Suttas in our Pāḷi canon, but in them there are verbal echoes of the texts of our canon and quotations which with trifling divergence are to be found in our texts. There is still something more. In the edict of Bairat or Bhabra dating from 249 B.C., the king says to the monks of Magadha:

“All that the Buddha, the Lord, has spoken he has spoken well.”

He proceeds to especially recommend for their study seven texts of which he mentions titles. These texts partly bear the same title and are partly referable to similar headings in our Suttapiṭaka.

From the second century B.C. and partly from the period of Aśoka himself date moreover the celebrated [216] stūpas or *Topes* of Bharhut and Sañchi, the stone sculptures of which are embellished with valuable reliefs and inscriptions. On the reliefs we find representations of Buddhist legends and stories; the titles of most of which are also there subscribed. And these titles leave no doubt whatever that the reliefs represent illustrations to the Book of Jātaka or the history of the previous births of the Buddha, – a book which forms a section of the Tipiṭaka.

On the monuments of Sañchi, however, we find votive tablets in which monks are assigned the distinction of Pañchanikāyika or the master of the five Nikāyas, Pāṭika, or the master of the Piṭakas, and Dhammakathikā the preacher of religion and to a nun is applied the designation of Suttatikinī, which means one who knows or teaches the suttas. It follows therefore, that about the middle of the third century B.C. there was a corpus of Buddhist texts which was designated Piṭakas and divided into five Nikāyas, that there were suttas in which the Dhamma or the religion of the Buddha was promulgated, that many of these suttas coincided with those in our Tipiṭaka, that besides Jātakas exactly of the kind perpetuated in our Tipiṭaka, appertained to the Buddhist literature as a component, – in brief, that in the time of king Aśoka there must have existed a Buddhist canon which, at least so far as the Suttapiṭaka is concerned, could not have been dissimilar to our Pāli canon.

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The most ancient literary testimony of the existence of the three Baskets or a triad of piṭakas (piṭakattiyam) and of the Nikāyas is to be found for the first time in the Milindapañha, a work the genuine portion of which may be surmised to belong to the commencement of the first Christian century. But the entire remaining Buddhist literature outside the Pāli canon in our possession shows that the texts incorporated in the latter reach back to an age of great antiquity not widely separated from the age of the Buddha himself [217] and may be regarded at all events as the most genuine evidence of the original doctrine of the Buddha and of Buddhism of the first two centuries after the passing away of the Buddha.

This is demonstrated in the first place by the non-canonic Pāli literature which comprises the dialogue of Milindapañha, the chronicles of Ceylon called Dīpavaṃsa and Mahāvaṃsa and a rich literature of scholastic commentaries related to the Tipiṭaka. All these books presuppose the existence of the Tipiṭaka at least in the first Christian century.

But the Buddhist Sanskrit literature also witnesses to the antiquity and the authenticity of the Pāli tradition. To this belonged a literature of diverse varieties and different sects composed partly in classical Sanskrit and partly in a “mixed Sanskrit”. One of these sects had also a canon of its own in Sanskrit of which most recently fragments have been made known. It is seen that this canon has not been translated from Pāli, but that it most brilliantly corroborates the authenticity of the Pāli canon. For, notwithstanding numerous deviations in the texts and in the arrangement, there is such an amount of verbal agreement between the Sanskrit and Pāli canons,

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that we are compelled to assume a unity of tradition underlying both the records.

But even Sanskrit works of the Buddhists of Nepal as well as the books of various Buddhist sects known to us only from Tibetan and Chinese versions enable us not only to determine a common stock of doctrine, but also of the original texts which are in accord with the tradition of the Pāḷi canon in all essentials. The more this Buddhist Sanskrit literature becomes available to us and the more deeply we institute comparisons between it and the Pāḷi canon, the more it becomes evident that Oldenberg is only [218] right when he claims that “the Pāḷi replica, which is naturally not immaculately correct, must, however, be adjudged as eminently good.” Moreover, no canon and no Buddhist text has come down to us from antiquity as remote as that of the Pāḷi canon, of the first Christian century before Christ, in which the great Buddhist king Aśoka is yet nowhere referred to.

In language, style and contents the Pāḷi texts are in harmonious continuation of the Upaniṣads, while the Buddhist Sanskrit literature much rather reminds us of the Purāṇas. Finally, the fact that in these traditional texts committed to writing in Ceylon there is no allusion to the island further confirms it that therein we have to deal with “no canon of the Buddhists of Ceylon” but a canon of that Buddhist sect of India which has in fact preserved the most of ancient Buddhism; and this doctrine can with some justice be designated as the Theravāda or the teaching of the first disciples of the Buddha. But not only as a source of our knowledge of Buddhism, but also, – and this appeals to us directly – from a purely literary standpoint the Pāḷi texts surpass all other evidences of Buddhist literature, and this will be manifest only from a survey of these writings.