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ABBREVIATIONS

A	<i>Āṅguttara-nikāya</i>
AO	<i>Acta Orientalia</i>
AM	<i>Asia Major</i>
As	<i>Aṭṭhasālinī</i>
BEFEO	<i>Bulletin de l'Ecole Française d'Extrême Orient</i>
BHSD	F. Edgerton, <i>Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit Grammar and Dictionary</i>
BM	<i>Burlington Magazine</i>
BSOAS	<i>Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies</i>
BSR	<i>Buddhist Studies Review</i>
CIS	<i>Contributions to Indian Sociology</i>
CPD	<i>Critical Pāli Dictionary</i>
CSSH	<i>Comparative Studies in Society and History</i>
CSLCY	<i>Chin-so liu-chu yin</i> , in TC, no. 1015
D	<i>Dīgha-nikāya</i>
Dīp	<i>Dīpavaṃsa</i>
EA	<i>Études Asiatiques</i>
EFEO	<i>Ecole Française d'Extrême Orient</i>
EJS	<i>European Journal of Sociology</i>
EI	<i>Epigraphia Indica</i>
ERE	<i>Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics</i> , edited by James Hastings, Edinburgh, T.&T. Clark, 1911
HJAS	<i>Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies</i>
HR	<i>History of Religions</i>
IASWR	<i>Institute for Advanced Studies of World Religions</i>
IBK	<i>Indogaku Bukkyōgaku kenkyū</i>
IHQ	<i>Indian Historical Quarterly</i>
IJ	<i>Indo-Iranian Journal</i>
IT	<i>Indologica Taurinensia</i>
JA	<i>Journal Asiatique</i>
JAS	<i>Journal of Asian Studies</i>
JHR	<i>Journal of the History of Religions</i>
JIABS	<i>Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies</i>

<i>JNCBRAS</i>	<i>Journal of the North China Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society</i>
<i>JNRC</i>	<i>Journal of the Nepal Research Centre</i>
<i>JPTS</i>	<i>Journal of the Pali Texts Society</i>
<i>JRAS</i>	<i>Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society</i>
<i>JS</i>	<i>Journal des Savants</i>
<i>Kv</i>	<i>Kathāvatthu</i>
<i>Kv-a</i>	<i>Kathāvatthu-aṭṭhakathā</i>
<i>MCB</i>	<i>Mélanges Chinois et Bouddhiques</i>
<i>M</i>	<i>Majjhima-nikāya</i>
<i>Mhbv</i>	<i>Mahābodhivaṃsa</i>
<i>Mhv</i>	<i>Mahāvāṃsa</i>
<i>Mp</i>	<i>Manoratha-pūranī</i>
<i>MSMS</i>	Monumenta Serica Monograph Series
<i>Paṭis</i>	<i>Paṭisambhidā-magga</i>
<i>PTS</i>	Pali Text Society
<i>RH</i>	<i>Revue Historique</i>
<i>RO</i>	<i>Rocznik Orientalistyczny</i>
<i>S</i>	<i>Samyutta-nikāya</i>
<i>SBE</i>	Sacred Books of the East
<i>Saddhamma-s</i>	<i>Saddhamma-saṅgaha</i>
<i>SLJBS</i>	<i>Sri Lanka Journal of Buddhist Studies</i>
<i>Sp</i>	<i>Samantapāsādikā</i>
<i>SSAC</i>	<i>Studies in South Asian Culture</i>
<i>T</i>	The Taishō edition of the Buddhist Canon in Chinese (vol. no.)
<i>Th</i>	<i>Theragāthā</i>
<i>TMKFTCC</i>	<i>Tao-men k'o-fa ta-ch'üan-chi</i> , in TC, no. 1215
<i>TP</i>	<i>T'oung Pao</i>
<i>TC</i>	The Taoist Canon, text numbered in accordance with the Harvard-Yenching Index to its titles
<i>TTD</i>	Tibetan Tripitaka, sDe-dge Edition
<i>TTP</i>	Tibetan Tripitaka, Peking Edition
<i>UCR</i>	<i>Univeristy of Ceylon Review</i> , Colombo
<i>VBA</i>	<i>Visva-bharati Annals</i>
<i>Vin</i>	<i>Vinaya-piṭaka</i>
<i>Vism</i>	<i>Visuddhimagga</i>
<i>WZKSO</i>	<i>Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde Süd- (und Ost) asiens</i>
<i>ZDMG</i>	<i>Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft</i>

Councils as Ideas and Events in the Theravāda

Charles Hallisey*

“Before giving a short survey of the traditions relative to the Buddhist Councils, it seems advisable to state what these councils were.”

Louis de la Vallée Poussin¹

It is a standard scholarly practice to begin a presentation of research with a definition, in the strict sense of the word, of the subject which has been investigated. We are encouraged to do this early in our education, with reminders to ‘define your terms’, and we generally admire the clarity that a good definition can bring to an argument. We value definitions, even ‘working definitions’, in the presentation of research so routinely that we rarely consider the implications of this practice for research itself. All of us know by hard experience that the actual processes of research are far messier than is suggested by the way we present our research. Even so, we assume certain parallels. Our research begins with a choice of a subject that seems to function like the initial definition in a research presentation. But while we may begin with an attempt to define a subject, as a practical way of limiting and focusing our research, in the course of investigation we often discover a state of affairs quite different from what we had anticipated. This common turn of events can dismay or discourage, but it can also delight. “A new discovery”—major, of course—is the stuff scholarly dreams are made of.

It would be one thing if the first definition, taken as the starting point for research, were wrong, out and out wrong, and thus could be replaced by the new understanding. This is actually quite rare, however, in large part because we usually adapt these first working definitions from other sources. As Bernard Cohn has said, “each piece of research doesn’t start as if it were year one, nor does the

* An earlier version of this paper was presented as part of a panel on “Rethinking Theravāda Buddhism” at the Association for Asian Studies Annual Meeting, Washington, D.C., March 1989. I have benefited greatly from the papers and comments of my co-panelists at that meeting (George Bond, John Ross Carter, Steven Collins, Charles Keyes, and Frank Reynolds).

¹ Louis de la Vallée Poussin, “Councils and Synods: Buddhist”, *ERE*, vol. 4, 179.

scholar begin as a *tabula rasa* to be instructed by the native or the document, nor is he or she merely a pencil which records in some fashion what is read or seen.”² In fact, what we choose to study is probably set more by the units of study or theoretical assumptions in our particular field of training than by the subject matter itself. The seemingly better understanding of a topic ends up being merely another interpretation yielded by a different theoretical perspective. One understanding does not negate another, nor do we see ways that they might be related in a common schema. Different understandings are allowed simply to co-exist, in mutual isolation, while we argue back and forth.

For a community of scholars this is disastrous. Our research presentations end up bearing witness to our lives in an academic Tower of Babel.

It is easy to see how this occurred. As students of Buddhism, we may welcome new approaches to the rich resources of the Buddhist traditions.³ There is more than enough work to do, and labourers are still few. Perhaps the chronological and spatial extent of the Buddhist traditions made the introduction of some new approaches relatively unproblematic at first. For example, anthropologists and sociologists, seeking to understand the workings of culture and society, were naturally drawn to the study of contemporary Buddhist communities, fields of research which textualists and historians generally preferred to ignore.

This division of labour appears neater than it actually is. It looks as if it is a division of subject matter, with historian and anthropologist each examining what he or she is best prepared to study. But it sometimes masks a more profound difference in theoretical perspective. This difference becomes an obstacle when both anthropologists and historians have their own definite ideas about a common subject. Such is the case with the councils (*saṅgīti* or *saṅgāyanā*) in the Theravāda.

The purpose of this paper is propaedeutic. That is, I wish to follow La Vallée Poussin’s advice, given in the quotation at the start of this paper, and sketch out what the councils were in the Theravāda; this sketch is a preliminary to the survey of the councils I am working on. My purpose is to define the subject by showing how different scholarly understandings of councils may be combined to interpret their place in the Theravāda as a historical tradition. Moreover, in sketching out what the councils were, I hope to indicate how they might be fruitfully studied. These programmatic comments, I think, will have applicability to other areas in the study of Buddhism.

Charles Prebish evocatively referred to the first Buddhist Councils as problems which have “haunted western Buddhological research through almost all of its last

² Bernard Cohn, “History and Anthropology: The State of Play”, in *An Anthropologist among the Historians and Other Essays*, Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1987, 47.

³ Indeed this is one of the purposes of the Buddhist Forum. See Tadeusz Skorupski’s *Introduction to The Buddhist Forum*, vol. I, London, SOAS, 1990, 1.

one hundred years”.⁴ Even though these first Buddhist councils might seem to be a natural starting point for any investigation of the Theravādin councils, to begin with them is actually to become embroiled in a complicated and ongoing debate.⁵ Much of this debate, especially on the historical value of different accounts about these councils, seems one-sided when viewed from the vantage point of later Theravādin cultural history. To begin from the later Theravādin councils is equally problematic though, since these events conventionally draw their sanction from accounts of the earlier councils.

Our difficulty is an academic chicken and egg problem: in order to understand the individual councils, the parts, we need to have some idea of the councils as a whole, but we generally only know the whole through the individual parts. Some way out of this hermeneutical circle, in this particular instance, can be found by looking at a similar case, the role of the Pāli canon in the Theravāda.

In recent years, two different orientations to the Pāli canon have emerged in the scholarly literature concerned with contemporary Theravādin communities.⁶ Both are reactions against the interpretive prominence the canon has had in Buddhist studies. One orientation emphasizes the actual possession and use of texts. Charles Keyes, for example, has argued that

“the relevance of texts to religious dogma in the worldview of any people cannot be assumed simply because some set of texts has been recognised as belonging to a particular religious tradition. It is necessary, in every particular case, to identify those texts that can be shown to be the sources of dogmatic formulations that are being communicated to the people through some medium. There is no single integrated textual tradition based on a ‘canon’ to the exclusion of all other texts...

The very size and complexity of a canon leads those who use it to give differential emphasis to its component texts. Moreover, even those for whom a defined set of scriptures exists will employ as sources of religious ideas many texts which do not belong to a canon... [Finally,] for any particular temple-monastery in Thailand or Laos, the collection of texts available to the people in the associated community are not exactly the same as those found in another temple-monastery. In brief,

⁴ Charles S. Prebish, “A Review of Scholarship on the Buddhist Councils”, *JAS*, 33, 1974, 239.

⁵ Bibliographic information on this vigorous and inconclusive debate may be conveniently found in J.W. de Jong, *A Brief History of Buddhist Studies in Europe and America*, Varanasi, Bharat-Bharati, 1976, 30–31, 67, and in Prebish’s article, cited in note 4.

⁶ My comments here depend greatly on the work of Steven Collins in his paper, “On the Very Idea of the Pāli Canon”, *JPTS*, vol. 14, forthcoming 1990.

the relevance of textual formulations to religious dogma in popular worldviews is problematic in each specific case.”⁷

The orientation that emerges from this discussion is primarily concerned with issues of transmission and distribution: ‘who had what texts when?’

A second orientation emphasizes the *idea* of the canon. François Bizot, for example, has pointed out with respect to modern Khmer Buddhism that the term *tipitaka* “refers less to a collection of texts than to an ideological concept”.⁸ This orientation is concerned more with the internal constitution of the tradition: ‘what makes the Theravāda valid from the point of view of Theravādins?’

The two orientations highlight different facts. The first highlights the presence within the Theravāda of standpoints which are geographically and historically very particular. This particularity, however, may be obscured for Buddhist individuals and groups by the phenomenon highlighted by the second orientation, a perspective which is considerably loftier and less determinately located.

These two orientations, taken together, can and should replace an assumption that was once more widely held than it is today, although it still has a pernicious influence in scholarship. That is, it was once widely assumed that the Pāli canon—or the ‘early Buddhism’ which was reconstructed from the canon—constituted the Theravāda in all its essentials. With this assumption, almost all interesting questions about the Theravāda as a historical tradition remained unasked. The two, more recent orientations are clearly an improvement on that assumption, and although they were developed in connection with the study of contemporary Buddhism, they are still very useful as tools for historical investigations.

In shorthand, I will call the first orientation’s focus ‘event’ and the focus of the second orientation ‘idea’.⁹ By calling the first ‘event’, I wish to stress how a

⁷ Charles Keyes, “Merit-Transference in the Kammic Theory of Popular Theravada Buddhism”, in Charles Keyes & E. Valentine Daniel, editors, *Karma: An Anthropological Inquiry*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1983, 272. Compare Richard Gombrich’s comments: “The contents of sacred texts are not simply reproduced in the doctrines of the religions which venerate them; there must be interpretation and selective emphasis. This is obviously true when the corpus of sacred literature is large, as in Christianity and Buddhism. Historians of these religions may therefore ask why certain doctrines and certain scriptures have been emphasized at the expense of others”. “Buddhist Karma and Social Control”, *CSSH*, 17, 1975, 212.

⁸ François Bizot, *Le figuier à cinq branches*, Paris, EFEO, 1976, 21. This orientation has been elaborated very convincingly in the paper by Steven Collins cited in note 6.

⁹ Bernard Cohn, *op. cit.*, 45, speaks of the same distinction in the following way: “We write of an event as being unique, something that happens only once, yet every culture has a means to convert the uniqueness into a general and transcendent meaningfulness through the language members of the society speak... [For example], the death of a ruler may be mourned by rituals which turn the biographic fact of a death into a public statement relating not only to a particular ruler but to rulership *per se*. In many societies ritual transforms uniqueness into structure.”

particular set of circumstances are largely accidental and thus unique. A scholar employing this orientation as an interpretive tool will discover how this set of circumstances came about and the impact that it subsequently had. When these multiple sets of circumstances collectively change to a substantial degree, then one may speak of a transition or transformation in the tradition.¹⁰ By ‘idea’, I mean to emphasize persisting patterns of meanings and norms which mark the Theravāda; this notion could equally well be called ‘structure’. These patterns can sanction or even shape the actions of individuals and groups.

The notion of *event* is more conventionally historical in its emphases, while the notion of *idea* is more typical of anthropology. Each can be used as a heuristic tool independent of the other, according to the research purposes of the scholar, but the phenomena they refer to are inevitably interrelated. The reason for the transmission of manuscripts of the *tipiṭaka* cannot be separated from the idea of the canon. And if we are aware that the texts of the canon are variously interpreted in different circumstances, as Keyes argues, at the same time we need to remember that the idea of the canon provides a framework which gives relative meaning and significance to the reading or hearing of other texts, or the performance of rituals.

I am not advocating that we should have recourse to ever-ready ahistorical frameworks of meaning here. We need to discover frameworks of significance, like the idea of the canon, within particular historical contexts; we should probably expect to find that persons may employ more than one framework within any given context. But when we are able to identify such frameworks *in situ*, we will then be able to see the constructedness of the Theravāda tradition. To put it another way, when we discern ‘events’ being given meaning by ‘ideas’ and ‘ideas’ being shaped by ‘events’ in particular contexts, we will be able to see the Theravāda as a tradition whose identity is continually being constituted and reconstituted, with its history and account of continuity in difference.

These general lessons—a distinction between event and idea, and the correlation of these two notions—can be applied specifically to the Theravādin

¹⁰ See Charles Keyes, *The Golden Peninsula*, New York, Macmillan, 1977, 86: “If the true Buddhist is one who seeks to become an Arahāt, the fully perfected monk who attains enlightenment, then quite obviously Buddhism could never be a popular religion. It would be a religion of only a small number of adepts. Ancient Buddhism may have been such a religion, but it underwent a transformation first in the third century B.C., when it was brought under the patronage of King Asoka who set an example for other ruling elites. Theravada Buddhism was further transformed in the fifth century A.D. through the theological interpretations of Buddhaghosa and several of his contemporaries. Finally, it went through yet another transformation in the twelfth to thirteenth centuries when it became a universal religion, a religion for peasant farmer as well as for monk and king.”

saṅgīti. While the first lesson is already a major, if implicit, part of the scholarly literature on the Theravādin councils, the second still needs to be learned.¹¹

Buddhological investigation of the first three councils at Rājagaha, Vesālī, and Pāṭaliputta has generally been part of a larger scholarly project to shed light on the Buddhist past “as it really was”, to use von Ranke’s phrase, with the result that the councils were defined, almost *a priori*, as events. While the goal of recovering the past “as it really was” remains unrealized—if indeed such an aim is even possible—comparative research on the various accounts of the First Councils found in Buddhist literature did succeed in making it impossible to attribute historical accuracy to any single description preserved by a particular Buddhist tradition. In short, one of the accomplishments of a century of research on the First Councils has been to drive a wedge between our perception of the councils as historical events and Buddhist ideas about the councils.

Scholarly reaction to this distinction between councils as ideas and councils as events gradually evolved. An initial and understandable reaction was to see the distinction as offering a clear and sharp choice: the accounts either contain real history or they are fiction. Commenting on the account of the councils in the *Vinaya*, Oldenberg wrote, “what we have here before us is not history, but pure invention”.¹² A tendency to see the accounts as essentially fictions was perhaps strengthened by the development of questions about the motives which could have

¹¹ For an example of a failure to correlate the two notions of ‘event’ and ‘idea’, see the critique by Michael Carrithers of Stanley Tambiah on the subject of Parākkamabāhu’s council in twelfth-century Sri Lanka. Carrithers writes: “In *World Conqueror* Tambiah, pursuing the relationship between kings and monks, dwells at length on the purification of the Buddhist order carried out by Parākkamabāhu I of Sri Lanka. He argues that this was patterned after a similar act of the Emperor Aśoka, preceded other similar royal acts, and was therefore part of a pervasive pattern in the relationship between royalty and the Buddhist order throughout Buddhist history. On this account all purifications were analogous, the working out of a particular timeless relation between kings and monks. But such an account leaves out the single most important feature of Parākkamabāhu I’s reform, namely that it was a radically new interpretation of the king’s role, an interpretation which set a new pattern for Theravāda and Theravādin kings.” (Michael Carrithers, “Buddhists without history”, *CIS*, N.S. 21, 1987, 167.)

Tambiah’s rejoinder to Carrithers, in the same issue of *CIS*, does show a movement towards the combination of heuristic concepts that I have in mind: “Carrithers ... seem(s) to have the simplistic notion that there are only two kinds of historical interpretation possible—there is either a stasis and repetition of the past or there is a radical change. (He does) not seem to appreciate both the complexity and the pervasiveness of a historical condition in which certain kinds of persistence *coexist* with certain kinds of change of state, and such amalgams and syntheses of varying kinds and varying degrees of cohesion and tension characterise much of the so-called flow of history.” (Stanley Tambiah, “At the confluence of anthropology, history, and indology”, 194.)

¹² Hermann Oldenberg, “Introduction”, in *The Vinaya Piṭakam*, ed. by H. Oldenberg, London, Williams & Norgate, 1879, xxvii.

led to the composition of the council narratives. Przyluski, for example, argued that “one (could) explain the diversity of the accounts of the (first) council (by saying that) there are so many different recitations [*saṅgīti*] as there are sects having a distinct canon. Each school tries to prove that its canon dates back to the origins of the Church and that it was codified by the assembly of Rājagṛha”.¹³

Przyluski’s comment illustrates the possibility of discussing Buddhist ideas about the councils independently of any judgement about the historical incidents themselves. He displays a significance in the ideas that is worth pursuing on their own terms even if the accounts are not reports of ‘real’ occurrences.

In a similar way, scholars have formulated questions about the events which can be pursued in isolation from Buddhist ideas about the councils. La Vallée Poussin intimated this possibility in his entry on Buddhist councils in the *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*: “While it is impossible to accept the Buddhist opinion, which views them as ecumenical assemblies after the Nicene type, it is at the same time necessary to explain how Buddhist monastic life, without the help of such solemn assemblies, nevertheless resulted in a sort of ‘catholicism’, and secured the redaction and the compilation of Canons of scripture very like one another.”¹⁴ La Vallée Poussin’s position was that “while acknowledging the possibility (even the probability) of synods, we are at no loss to point out more certain and farther reaching causes of the facts to be explained, viz. the formation of the body of the Scriptures, the general (if not strict) ‘consensus’ of the sects of the Hīnayāna as concerns Buddha’s teaching, and conversely, the splitting of the Order into sects.”¹⁵

More recently, in an earlier series of the Buddhist Forum, Richard Gombrich illustrated another way that the First Councils might be discussed as events independent of the Buddhist accounts, although he offers a more positive evaluation of those accounts than La Vallée Poussin allowed. The discussion quoted here takes up the same question as La Vallée Poussin: how did the teachings of the Buddha, given over a long period of time in many places, come to be collected into what eventually became the Pāli Canon?

“The *Saṅgīti-suttanta* begins by recounting that at the death of Nigaṅṭha Nātaputta his followers disagreed about what he had said. The same passage occurs at two other points in the Pāli canon; but it makes good sense in this context, for it is the occasion for rehearsing a long summary of the Buddha’s teaching in the form of mnemonic lists. The text says that the rehearsal was led by Sāriputta, in the Buddha’s lifetime. Whether the text records a historical incident we shall probably

¹³ Jean Przyluski, *Le concile de Rājagṛha*, quoted in Prebish, 243.

¹⁴ La Vallée Poussin, *ERE*, vol. 4, 179.

¹⁵ La Vallée Poussin, *ibid.*, 179.

never know. But that is not my point. I would argue that unless we posit that such episodes took place not merely after the Buddha's death but as soon as Saṅgha had reached a size and geographic spread which precluded frequent meetings with the Buddha, it is not possible to conceive how the teachings were preserved or texts were composed. By similar reasoning, something like the first *saṅgāyanā* (communal recitation) must have taken place, otherwise there would simply be no corpus of scriptures. Details such as the precise time and place of the event are irrelevant to this consideration."¹⁶

The historical reasoning in this discussion is noteworthy. I would especially like to draw attention to Gombrich's use of the historian's knowledge of the outcome of the past to provide an alternative perspective with which to view and reconstruct the processes of early Buddhist history. His reasoning restores some balance to the scholar's choice of seeing the first Buddhist councils as either events or as ideas, as fact or fiction. It is understandable that since there is no archaeological or epigraphical evidence actually from the First Council, its historicity could appear quite suspect in the light of the all-too-obvious, vested interests expressed in the various council narratives. Gombrich's reasoning makes us seriously consider the historicity of an event like the First Council as a necessity.¹⁷

Is what we learn from this argument, however, transferable to later events which are also compared to or described as councils? This question would apply not only to the Second and Third Councils, but also to the events sponsored by Theravādins in the medieval and late periods. Gombrich seems to suggest such a possibility when he says without qualification in another context "the Councils (*saṅgāyanā*), better termed Communal Recitations, served the function of systematizing knowledge and perhaps of organizing its further preservation".¹⁸ Similarly, K.R. Norman seems to project a pattern from the First Council onto the events of the medieval Theravāda:

¹⁶ R.F. Gombrich, "Recovering the Buddha's Message", *The Buddhist Forum*, vol. I, 6. It is interesting to note that Minayeff took the minor details of the accounts as "to some extent historical" (cited in La Vallée Poussin, 182). Thus both the plot and the details of the first councils have been described as both fact and fiction. Cf. Richard Gombrich, "How the Mahāyāna Began", *The Buddhist Forum*, Vol. I, 26.

¹⁷ It is also the case that the general scholarly tendency now current is to give the Buddhist accounts "the benefit of the doubt", in contrast to the inclination of scholars around the turn of this century. K.R. Norman, for example, writes: "Although we may have reservations about the texts which were dealt with at the first council, there is no reason to doubt the general way in which it was held". (K.R. Norman, *Pāli Literature*, Wiesbaden, Harrassowitz, 1983.) At one time, this would have been a highly provocative statement.

¹⁸ R.F. Gombrich, "How the Mahāyāna Began", 25–26.

“It is not inappropriate to talk of a Burmese or Siamese or Sinhalese tradition for the transmission of a particular text, and the differences which we find between the readings of the manuscripts belonging to the various traditions must go back to the councils which have been held from time to time in the different countries. [T]he value of each tradition (stemming from different councils) will depend upon the care with which evidence for variant readings was sifted, and the criteria which were adopted as the basis of the decisions which were made.”¹⁹

A projection of patterns reconstructed from events, however, is misleading. The *Mahāvamsa*, the great chronicle of Sri Lanka, records at least twelve councils in medieval Sri Lanka, and it is notable that a communal recitation or recension of the *tipiṭaka* is not mentioned as being part of any.²⁰ In fact, I am not aware of any definite evidence dating from the medieval period itself which indicates that “communal recitations” were held, although events which did occur still claimed the Third Council as a precedent.²¹

Thus, as much as I admire Gombrich’s historical reasoning in connection with the events of the First Council, I also think we should keep in mind that it is applied to a specific body of evidence, in connection with a particular problem in reconstructing the Buddhist past. How much this reconstruction can serve as a guide to other events is a more difficult issue. On the one hand, the historical problems which confront a student of the Theravāda, whatever the period, are not quite the same as those facing the students of early Buddhism, even when both may be concerned with similar issues. This difference is, in part, due to the increasing complexity of the tradition itself; for example, the student of the Theravāda, aware of the *bhāṇaka* system and the use of writing, must acknowledge that “communal recitations” were not strictly necessary for the

¹⁹ K.R. Norman, *Pāli Literature*, 13.

²⁰ See *Mahāvamsa*, 39:57; 41:2; 44:46; 44:76ff; 48:71; 51:64; 52:10; 52:44; 73:11ff; 78:2ff; 84:7; 91:10; 100:44.

²¹ An event in the medieval period which does approximate the conventional functions usually attributed to a “communal recitation”, such as preserving knowledge and transmitting texts, is Vijayabāhu III’s patronage of a rewriting of the canon (*Mahāvamsa* 81:40-45). Significantly, the participants in this event were laymen, and it is not described as either a *saṅgīti* or a *saṅgāyanā*.

The event which perhaps comes closest to an actual “communal recitation” is the scripture revision and recitation sponsored by King Tilaka at Chiang Mai in 1475–7; this event is described in the *Jinakālamālī* (London: PTS, 1962), 115. Again, this event is not described in the *Jinakālamālī* as a *saṅgāyanā*, although later texts in the Thai tradition (e.g. *Saṅgītiyavamsa*) do accept it as such. It is also significant that this event was probably held after the writing of the *Saddhammasaṅgaha*, which radically recast the traditional idea of a *saṅgāyanā*.

preservation of the Pāli canon.²² On the other hand, simply projecting a pattern reconstructed from one event onto other events avoids asking how Theravāda Buddhists themselves transformed unique events into ideas of general meaningfulness.

The Theravāda's transformation of councils from events into ideas has been brilliantly investigated by Heinz Bechert in two articles which may be read together profitably.²³ Bechert's main purpose in the first article is to add to our knowledge of the Third Council as a historical event, but as part of a secondary argument, he traces how the events of that council were subsequently transformed in the Pāli commentaries and chronicles. In a manner reminiscent of Pryzluski's explanation of the diversity in the accounts of the First Council, Bechert argues that the events at Pāṭaliputra were actually a 'synod' of a monastic sub-group (*nikāya*), which later and for obvious reasons were portrayed as a unification and purification of the entire Saṅgha. In a second article on *sāsana* reform, Bechert discusses how these ideas about Asoka and the Third Council were used in the medieval Theravāda, arguing that the transformation of the historical Asoka into a Theravādin sectarian in the chronicles and commentaries provided a "foundation for ideology of state-Saṅgha relations in Theravāda countries".²⁴

Keeping Bechert's insights, I would turn his statement around and say that Theravādins preferred to convert unique events into phenomena of general meaning and import by historicist transformations.²⁵ The presence of historical consciousness in the Theravāda tradition has frequently been noted, but its full significance in the development of the tradition still remains obscure.²⁶ Even so, there is ample evidence that one of the uses of history in the Theravāda tradition

²² On the *bhāṇaka* system, see E.W. Adikaram, *Early History of Buddhism in Ceylon*, Migoda, D.S. Puswella, 1946, 24–32. Adikaram traces this system of reciters, but also suggests that Buddhaghosa saw the *bhāṇaka* system as making *saṅgāyanā* unnecessary as a means of preserving and transmitting the canon.

²³ Heinz Bechert, "Aśokas 'schismenedikt' und der Begriff Saṅghabheda", *WZKSO*, 5, 1961, 18–52, and, by the same author, "Theravāda Buddhist Saṅgha: Some General Observations on Historical and Political Factors in its Development", *JAS*, 29, 1970, 761–778. See also Heinz Bechert, "The Importance of Aśoka's So-called Schism Edict", *Indological and Buddhist Studies: Volume in Honour of Professor J.W. de Jong*, Canberra, Faculty of Asian Studies, 1982, 61–68.

²⁴ H. Bechert, "Theravāda Buddhist Sangha", 764.

²⁵ On the historicist transformation of the Pali canon, see the paper by Steven Collins cited in note 7.

²⁶ See, for example, Heinz Bechert, "The Beginnings of Buddhist Historiography: *Mahāvamsa* and Political Thinking", in *Religion and Legitimation of Power in Ceylon*, edited by Bardwell L. Smith, Chambersburg, PA, Anima, 1978. In another vein, Stanley Tambiah, in *World Conqueror and World Renouncer*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 1977, says that "one of the most important features of [the] Theravada Buddhist politics is their active *consciousness of historical continuity* (page 518, emphasis in the original).

was to give individual events a general significance with ideas that have the appearance of being reports about previous events.

On the functioning of a previous event as an idea which can sanction other events, David Lowenthal has written that “the past validates present attitudes and actions by affirming their resemblance to former ones. Previous usage seals with approval what is now done”. At the same time, “precedent legitimates action on the assumption, explicit or implicit, that what has been should continue to be or be again”.²⁷

The use of the past to provide a general order of meaning is common in Theravādin literature and inscriptions. We see this use of the past, for example, in connection with Parākkamabāhu I’s reform of the Saṅgha in twelfth-century Sri Lanka, as when the *Mahāvamsa* explicitly compares that king to Asoka in its detailed description of that council.²⁸ The historicist transformation of the event of the Third Council into an idea is even more prominent in Parākkamabāhu’s Galvihara inscription which explains his motives for purifying the monastic order of his day:

“Now, His Majesty reasoned thus: ‘Seeing over and over again a blot such as this on the immaculate Buddhist religion, if a mighty emperor like myself were to remain indifferent, the Buddhist religion would perish, and many living beings will be destined to the *apāya*. Let me serve the Buddhist religion which should last five thousand years.’...

[His Majesty pondered that in days gone by] the great king Dharma Aśoka, enlisting the services of Moggaliputta Tissa, the Great Elder of the Buddha Cycle acknowledged by the Buddha himself, crushed out the sinful *bhikkhus*; suppressed the heretics; purged the religion of its impurities and brought about the holding of the Third Rehearsal of the *Dhamma*. In like manner, His Majesty [Parākkamabāhu] also enlisted the services of those (*Udumbara-giri*) *bhikkhus* and, removing from the Master’s religion many hundreds of sinful monks, brought about a rapprochement of the three fraternities and a coalition of them into one single fraternity (*nikāya*)—a reconciliation which former kings, despite their great efforts, were not able to effect, even though there were at the time eminently holy personages endowed with aggregates of diverse faculties such as the six psychic powers, etc.”²⁹

²⁷ David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 1985, 40. On the past as a sanction in the Theravāda tradition, see S. Tambiah, *World Conqueror and World Renouncer*, 528ff.

²⁸ *Mahāvamsa*, 78, 27.

²⁹ *Epigraphia Zeylanica*, London, Humphrey Milford, 1928, II, 274–275. Concerning this council, see the exchange between Michael Carrithers and Stanley Tambiah cited in note 11.

In this inscription, Asoka and the Third Council are claimed both as precedent and model for Parākkamabāhu's own efforts to unify and reform the monastic order. The precedent is not an exact blueprint for the proceedings, however, since there is no mention of a recitation of the canon as part of Parākkamabāhu's reform, even though the inscription does refer to the Third *Dhammasaṅgīti*. Perhaps the more literal meaning of the term *saṅgīti* ("communal recitation") was no longer noticed, and the Third Council was simply taken as providing a precedent for "combating the forces of decay within the Saṅgha".³⁰ Obviously, the purification of the Saṅgha is linked to the preservation of the *sāsana* too.

We should also note that the holding of a council is linked to a persona of the king. Parākkamabāhu's readiness to purify the monastic order is an expression of his desire to do service to the Buddha's *sāsana* and to humanity in general. The council is also linked to the establishment of unified, that is, valid monastic order, an issue that preoccupied Theravādin kings and monks throughout the medieval period.³¹

All of this is at a level of ideas of general significance and meaning, and not events. The actual event itself is absent in this passage. Just as it is a mistake to take events directly as ideas, by projecting a pattern from one event onto other events, so it is a mistake to take ideas directly as events, by assuming that a particular council is a simple realization of the general idea. Events and ideas need to be correlated with each other, not rendered identical. The councils of the medieval and late Theravāda were still unique events, even as they were shaped and given significance by Theravādin ideas about the councils. Any event is both more and less than these ideas may suggest. Michael Aung Thwin has shown that *sāsana* reforms in medieval Burma, modelled on the Third Council, had very tangible political and economic benefits for the kings who initiated the purifications.³² The ideas about the councils affirm that some aspects of the events are not as crucial as others.

I have spoken of ideas about the councils shaping specific councils as events, but this occurred in only the most general manner. André Bareau, in his classic study of the first Buddhist councils, remarked that "as astonishing as it may be", Buddhist literature tells us almost nothing about the ritual and ceremony of a

³⁰ H. Bechert, "Theravāda Buddhist Sangha", 763.

³¹ Councils were held, it seems, for the purpose of reordination of monks in a valid monastic lineage. See François Bizot, *Les traditions de la pabbajja en Asie du Sud-Est*, Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1988.

³² Michael Aung Thwin, "The Role of *Sasana* Reform in Burmese History: Economic Dimensions of a Religious Purification", *JAS*, 38, 1979, 671–688. See also Victor B. Lieberman, "The Political Significance of Religious Wealth in Burmese History: Some Further Thoughts", *JAS*, 39, 1980, 753–69 and Michael Aung Thwin, "A Reply to Lieberman", *JAS*, 40, 1980, 87–90.

council.³³ There was actually very little guidance available to later Buddhists on the procedures for holding a council. Instead, Buddhist literature provides only normative motives for holding councils and information about the general benefits that would follow.

This lack of specificity about the procedures of a council allowed for some surprising interpretations of a *saṅgāyanā*. Late Theravādin inscriptions from Cambodia indicate that the word *saṅgāyanā* was used to designate a form of merit-making, in which a small number of monks recited or discussed a few texts over a number of days.³⁴ Another elaborate association of *saṅgīti* with specific acts of merit is found in the *Saddhammasaṅgaha*, a Pāli text probably composed in Thailand in the fourteenth or fifteenth century.³⁵ This text is often utilized as a historical source,³⁶ although it presents itself as an *ānisaṃsa* work, and describes the advantages that accrue to “those who themselves write (the *piṭakas*), those who make others to write, and those who approve of it”.³⁷ It also gives an account of the benefits that come to those who listen to the *Dhamma*. These discussions of *ānisaṃsa* are preceded by a very innovative history of the councils in the Theravāda.

The *Saddhammasaṅgaha* describes seven comparable events, the usual three councils in India, plus four others in Sri Lanka. These other four are the recitation of the *Vinaya* by the monk Ariṭṭha at the time of the introduction of Buddhism to Sri Lanka (which the *Saddhammasaṅgaha* numbers as the fourth council), the writing down of the canon at Aluvihara, Buddhaghosa’s editing of the commentaries, and Parākkamabāhu’s council which is characterized as a revision of the canon and the source of the Pāli subcommentaries.

The description of an event like Buddhaghosa’s translation of the *aṭṭhakathās* as similar to a council may seem surprising when viewed with a literal definition of a *saṅgīti*, but it makes good sense when seen as a historicist strategy for giving general significance to numerous small events. In the *Saddhammasaṅgaha*, paying for even a portion of a Buddhist book to be copied is classed as belonging to the

³³ André Bareau, *Les premiers conciles bouddhiques*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1955, 137.

³⁴ See the following articles by Saveros Pou (also known as Lewitz), “Inscriptions modernes d’Angkor 34 et 38”, *BEFEO*, 62, 1975, 286, 290; “Inscriptions modernes d’Angkor 35, 36, 37, et 39” *BEFEO* 61, 1974, 316; “Les inscriptions modernes d’Angkor vat”, *JA*, 260, 1972, 123. Although the inscriptions are called modern, they are all from the 14–18th centuries.

³⁵ *Saddhamma-saṅgaha*, ed. Ven. N. Saddhananda, *JPTS*, 4, 1890, 21–90. See also the translation by Bimala Churn Law, *A Manual of Buddhist Historical Traditions*, Calcutta, University of Calcutta, 1963.

³⁶ K.R. Norman calls it a “bibliographic text”, and utilizes it as a source for information about the writing of different Buddhist texts; see K.R. Norman, *Pāli literature*, 179.

³⁷ B.C. Law, *A Manual of Buddhist Historical Traditions*, 99.

same category of event as the first writing of the canon itself. It is possible that in the *Saddhammasaṅgaha* and the Cambodian inscriptions, we see an illustration of Hocart’s thesis of “nationalization” by which “the king’s state is reproduced in miniature by his vassals”.³⁸

Pāli chronicles composed in Thailand and Burma during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries share with the *Saddhammasaṅgaha* an interest in numbering councils, although each differs in its final count. The Burmese *Sāsanavaṃsa* counts four councils before a fifth which was held in the nineteenth century, while the Thai *Saṅgītiyavaṃsa* counts eight before a ninth held in Bangkok at the end of the eighteenth century.³⁹ This suggests that one strategy for reshaping the normative idea about *saṅgītis* was to number councils.

The device of numbering councils allowed for a few councils to be given greater importance than others, and thus out of this constructed sequence of events, a new normative idea could be fashioned. The variations in the constructed sequences, however, are quite striking, especially when they are viewed comparatively:

Mahāvamsa

(Sri Lanka, ca. 5–6 AD)

1. Rājagaha
2. Vesālī
3. Pāṭaliputta

Saddhammasaṅgaha

(Thailand, ca. 14–15 AD)

1. Rājagaha
2. Vesālī
3. Pāṭaliputta
4. Ariṭṭha’s recitation at Anuradhapura
[Writing of canon;
included but not numbered]
[Buddhaghosa’s editing of
commentaries; included but
unnumbered]
[Parakkamabāhu’s council;
included but not numbered]

Sāsanavaṃsa

(Thailand, 18 AD)

1. Rājagaha
2. Vesālī
3. Pāṭaliputta
4. Ariṭṭha’s recitation
5. Writing of Canon

Saṅgītiyavaṃsa

(Burma, 19 AD)

1. Rājagaha
2. Vesālī
3. Pāṭaliputta
4. Writing of canon
[Mindon’s council at Mandalay;

³⁸ Quoted in S. Tambiah, *World Conqueror*, 74.

³⁹ *Sāsanavaṃsa*, edited by Mabel Bode, London, Pali Text Society, 1897; translated as *The History of the Buddha’s Religion*, by B.C. Law, London, PTS, 1952; *Saṅgītiyavaṃsa*, Bangkok, n.p., 1977.

- | | |
|--------------------------------------|----------------------------|
| 6. Buddhaghosa | included but not numbered] |
| 7. Parākkamabāhu's
at Polonnaruva | |
| 8. Tilaka's at Chiang Mai | |
| 9. Rama I's at Bangkok | |

How might we explain these variations? Without going into the specifics of each case, a general explanation can be offered. As we have already seen with the *Saddhammasaṅgaha*, the ideas about the councils in the Theravāda were not fixed, but were subject to alteration by the events with which they were subsequently associated. It is thus not inconsequential that *Sāsanavaṃsa* and the *Sanḅhīyavaṃsa* were written in connection with some events that were also described as councils by their participants. Both councils were held in a context of concern about the immediate survival of the *sāsana*, with Mindon's Fifth Council held just after the Second Anglo-Burmese War, and Rama I's Ninth Council after the complete collapse of the Ayudhya kingdom.⁴⁰ Both councils were quite concerned with questions of monastic governance and factionalism within the Saṅgha, but neither was able to accomplish a complete unification of the Saṅgha, the conventional purpose of the great medieval councils. In both cases, the chronicles connected with these councils reconstituted the idea of a council, and shifted the normative means for preserving the tradition from the maintenance of a pure and unified monastic order to the possession and purification of an authoritative scripture. Unlike so many councils held in the medieval Theravāda, these two councils took as their central purpose the revision and writing of the *tipiṭaka*, which was portrayed as following a precedent. Theravādins, like "the English, [and] no less than Indian villagers or the faculty at the University of Chicago, act as if what was recently created and denominated a 'tradition' is part of their ancient heritage."⁴¹

We are finally in a position to answer the question with which I began: what were the councils in the Theravāda? They were events, unique occasions of considerable variety. Councils were held to recite texts, settle monastic disputes, bring about monastic unity, preserve the *sāsana*, display the power of a king, earn merit, and so on. Some councils succeeded in their aims more than others. But the councils are also a varied set of ideas, all of which were used to establish the continuing validity of the Theravāda as a tradition.

Seeing the councils as both events and ideas also suggests how they should be studied. We need 'empirical' research into the actual accomplishments of each

⁴⁰ See, for brief accounts of these councils, E. Michael Mendelson, *Saṅgha and State in Burma: A Study of Monastic Sectarianism and Leadership*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1975, 112–13, 276–78, 335 and Craig Reynolds, "The Buddhist Monkhood in Nineteenth Century Thailand", unpublished PhD dissertation, Cornell University, 1973, 50–55.

⁴¹ Bernard Cohn, "History and Anthropology: The State of Play", 45.

council, as far as our sources allow. Some of these accomplishments may appear decidedly impious, such as the economic benefits that fell to a king from monastic reform. We also need to keep in mind the historical importance of the idea of a council for understanding the collective actions of those persons who convened, participated in, and accepted the authority of a council. In turn, we need to be alert to ways that events left an imprint on these normative ideas; we need a history of the reception of these ideas in subsequent contexts.

Only when we begin to trace the history of phenomena with a dual character as events and ideas will we begin to see the Theravāda as it truly is: not as an unchanging conceptual system, not as a static structure, but as a complex human movement in a perpetual process of constitution and reconstitution. With such a history, we will see the Theravāda *yathā bhūtam*—as it was, as it became, as it is.⁴²

⁴² I owe this formulation to John Ross Carter.