

The Pāli *Nidānakathā* and its Tibetan Translation: Its Textual Precursors and Associated Literature

Sean Gaffney

The *Nidānakathā* as it is preserved in the Pāli Canon, and in the Tibetan *bKa' 'gyur*, has come to us via canonical traditions and an extensive network of commentarial traditions that began in India and were continued later in Ceylon. These commentarial traditions began at a very early period, possibly from the time of the death of the Buddha, and were inspired by the need to establish certain facts concerning the life of the Buddha. The commentarial traditions associated with the *Jātaka* were centred on the *Jātakatthavaṇṇanā*, consisting of prose elucidation on the *gāthās* of the *Jātaka* text. This work, or at least its core, was possibly in existence at the time of the first Council, and is known to have been a part of the Canon at the time of the Council of Vaiśālī. That there is evidence of a *Jātaka* and commentary from such an early stage is an indication of its antiquity, its contents being drawn from earlier Indian sources with some elements of it probably reaching back to the lifetime of the Buddha.

The Pāli text of the *Nidānakathā* forms an introduction to the *Jātaka* collection contained in the *Khuddaka-nikāya* (Minor collection). The precise number of texts collected in this *Nikāya* has varied widely according to the Pāli tradition at different times in Buddhist history, from as few as nine to as many as nineteen. The number of texts that have been accepted as constituting this *Nikāya* in Ceylon, from at least the fifth century A.D., are the fifteen now included within that collection in the Pāli *Tipiṭaka*.¹ That different traditions existed concerning the contents of one of the five *Nikāyas* of the *Suttapiṭaka*, which are all accepted as canonical by the Pāli tradition, in no way invalidates the *Khuddaka-nikāya's*

¹ K.R. Norman, *Pāli Literature*, Wiesbaden, 1983, 9, gives the lists of twelve texts, excluding the *Buddhavaṃsa*, *Cariyāpiṭaka* and *Apadāna*, as recorded by the *Dīgha-bhāṇakas* and included by them in the *Abhidhammapiṭaka*, while page 31 gives the fifteen texts reckoned by Buddhaghosa to constitute the *Khuddaka-nikāya* and which he incorporates within the *Suttapiṭaka*. M. Winternitz, *History of Indian Literature*, vol. 2, 1933, 77 adds that the Burmese tradition includes four texts in their *Khuddaka-nikāya* that are not regarded as canonical in Ceylon, namely: *Milindapañha*, *Suttasaṃgaha*, *Petakopadesa* and the *Nettipakarāṇa*. See also W. Geiger, *Pāli Literature and Language*, New Delhi, 1978, 19.

claim to be considered as an extremely ancient collection of texts. This is not to maintain that all the texts collected within the *Khuddaka-nikāya* are of equal antiquity, for clearly many of its works date from a later period. In regard to its age, it may be noted that other works from within the first four *Nikāyas* quote from some of the texts that are contained in the *Khuddaka-nikāya*.² The position of the various texts of the Pāli *Khuddaka-nikāya* that are included or omitted by the different Pāli Buddhist traditions may at least be ascertained with some certainty, in that it is possible to see how these traditions classified the texts.

The *Khuddaka-nikāya* is comprised of a group of disparate texts that seem to have proved something of a problem to the compilers of the *Nikāyas*. The Pāli tradition has placed all these miscellaneous texts that did not fit into the scheme of the four *Nikāyas* into this *Khuddaka-nikāya* or fifth *Nikāya*. It is possible that not all the texts of the *Khuddaka-nikāya* were originally accepted as equally authoritative, in that they were not *Buddhavacana* in the strict sense of the term, and so they were classified as *Khuddaka* or Minor works.³ Whatever the initial standing of this *Nikāya* may have been, it is apparent that the division into five *Nikāyas* is an old one, for according to Theravāda sources, the last work to be added to their Canon was the *Kathāvattu*⁴ at the time of the Third Council in the third century BC. If this is the case, it can be surmised that the *Khuddaka-nikāya*, in either its twelve or fifteen text format, or both, had been known in Ceylon from a very early time. Whatever the date of its introduction, it became a well established part of the *Suttapiṭaka* for the Theravādins. The importance of the Pāli *Khuddaka-nikāya* is that it represents the only complete and extant specimen of this fifth *Nikāya* from amongst all the Buddhist traditions.

Given that the *Khuddaka-nikāya* was known to Ceylon from a very early period, it is unusual that the term for the transmitters of this *Nikāya*, the *Khuddakanikāyabhāṇakas*, does not occur in the commentarial literature of that country. The first reference to this school of *Khuddakanikāyabhāṇakas* only occurs in the *Milindapañha*,⁵ a work of a later date than the five *Nikāyas*, and which came to Ceylon from the Indian mainland.⁶ Although there is no term used to describe the transmitters of the *Khuddaka-nikāya*, there is reference

² E. Lamotte, *History of Indian Buddhism*, Louvain-Paris, 1988, 157. He gives two reasons for believing the antiquity of at least some of the texts of the *Khuddaka-nikāya*; firstly, they are used as sources by the first four *Nikāyas* and secondly, most of them have corresponding versions in Sanskrit or Prakrit.

³ Bh. Sangharakshita, *The Eternal Legacy*, London, 1985, 45.

⁴ K.R. Norman, *Pāli Literature*, 1983, 84.

⁵ V. Trenckner and P.S. Jaini, *Milindapañho with Milindaṭṭhā*, PTS, London, 1986, 342, where, interestingly, a list of six groups of *bhāṇikas* is given: *Jātakabhāṇikā*, *Dīghabhāṇikā*, *Majjhimbhāṇikā*, *Samyuttabhāṇikā*, *Anguttarabhāṇikā* and *Khuddakabhāṇikā*.

⁶ E.W. Adikaram, *Early History of Buddhism in Ceylon*, Colombo, 1946, 25.

made to the transmitters of the *Jātaka* collection who were known as the *Jātakabhāṇakas*. These *Jātakabhāṇakas* were supposed to learn not only the *Jātaka* and its commentary but also the text of the *Dhammapada*. There is no record of how the other texts of the *Khuddaka-nikāya* were to be transmitted, but it is likely that there were *bhāṇakas* of the other *Khuddaka-nikāya* texts.⁷ It may be that the other texts of the *Khuddaka-nikāya* were grouped in a different way for the purpose of transmission, perhaps being categorised in groups, as in the case of the *Jātaka* and *Dhammapada*.

The contents of the Sanskrit *Kṣudraka-nikāya* or *Kṣudrakāgama* and its full list of works is a much more problematic issue. This classification using a fifth *Āgama* appears to have been used, in the same way that it is used in the Pāli tradition, as a convenient place to locate miscellaneous texts that had not been included in the four *Āgamas*. Their position within the Sanskrit Canons is by no means fixed, with the different schools resorting to diverse methods of classifying them. Some sources, notably the Sarvāstivādins used the texts from within the *Kṣudrakāgama*⁸ referring to them as *Kṣudraka* (Minor works) but only recognised four *Āgamas*. Others such as the Mahāsāṃghikas, Haimavatas, Mahīśāsakas and the Dharmaguptakas⁹ did not have a *Kṣudrakāgama* but collected the texts that formed this *Āgama* in other schools into what they termed the *Kṣudrakpiṭaka*, the fifth collection of their *Sūtrapiṭaka*.¹⁰

The exact number of texts comprising the Sanskrit *Kṣudrakāgama* is as yet an unresolved area of research that can only be satisfactorily resolved by the discovery of either the texts themselves or of references to them in the works of the other four *Āgamas*. This fifth *Āgama* seems to have been for the Sanskrit tradition, or at least for sections of that tradition, a notional or theoretical possibility rather than an actual collection of texts that was accepted as being canonical. As with the Pāli recension of this *Nikāya*, the Sanskrit is also a series of works in verse, with its contents varying greatly. However, the texts: *Udāna*, *Dharmapada*, *Sthaviragāthā*, *Vimānavastu*, *Pretavastu*, *Avadāna* and

⁷ K.R. Norman, “Pāli Language and Scriptures”, in *The Buddhist Heritage*, ed., T. Skorupski, Tring, 1989, 33.

⁸ A.C. Banerjee, *Sarvāstivāda Literature*, Calcutta, 1979, 19, and E. Lamotte, *History of Indian Buddhism*, 1988, 152. Although the Sarvāstivādins list only four *Āgamas* in their *Sūtrapiṭaka* they had and used texts that they refer to as coming from the *Kṣudrakāgama*.

⁹ A. Hirakawa, *A History of Indian Buddhism*, Hawaii, 1990, 128.

¹⁰ E. Lamotte, *History of Indian Buddhism*, 159. Sometimes they are assigned to the *Kṣudrakāgama* or *Kṣudrakpiṭaka*, and sometimes they are classified as a fourth *Piṭaka* distinct from the *Tripiṭaka*.

Buddhavamsā are known to have existed in the Sanskrit Canons.¹¹ It is noteworthy that the Chinese sources only know of four *Āgamas*,¹² but fourteen of the texts which constitute the *Kṣudrakāgama* of other schools appear as individual works in the Chinese canon, which includes a version of a work entitled the *Jātakanidāna*, though whether this corresponds to the Pāli text of the same name is another matter.

The Tibetan Buddhist tradition of cataloguing canonical works, as established by Bu-ston 1290–1364 A.D.,¹³ sets out its literary works in quite a different manner to that of the Sanskrit canons of the early Indian schools. The primary distinction for the Tibetans is between *bKa' 'gyur* and *BsTan 'gyur*. For, while the Tibetans obtained scriptures, teachings and methods of classifying teachings from India, they have largely followed their own scheme when designating these scriptures into their respective places in the collections of *bKa' 'gyur* and *BsTan 'gyur*.

The Tibetans of course were following the *Mahāyāna* tradition, but even the *Mahāyāna* recognised the authority of the *Sūtrapīṭaka* with its four or five *Āgamas*. Moreover, they also admitted the existence of texts of the three turnings¹⁴ of the wheel of the doctrine. That the Tibetans knew of the division of works into *Āgamas* can be seen by references to the four *Āgamas* in the *Mahāvvyutpatti*.¹⁵ The Tibetans, ignoring the four or fivefold classification into *Āgamas* or *Nikāyas*, instead set out the *Sūtra* material under four headings: *Śer-phyin* (*Prajñāpāramitā*), *dKon-brtsegs* (*Ratnakūṭa*), *Phal-chen* (*Avatamsaka*) and *mDo-sna-tshogs* (*Miscellaneous Sūtra*). In the Peking edition of the *bKa' 'gyur*, the *mDo-sna-tshogs* section contains works that can be traced in Pāli to three *Nikāyas* including a work corresponding in part to the *Dhammapada* of the *Khuddakanikāya*.¹⁶ With the addition of the texts in the *Śer-phyin* section, texts of all five Pāli *Nikāyas* can be located in the *bKa' 'gyur*. For the Tibetan canon, as with the Chinese, some of the texts of the *Kṣudrakāgama* are known but are

¹¹ K.R. Norman, “The Value of the Pāli Tradition”, in his *Collected Papers*, vol. 3, Oxford, PTS, 1992, 4041. See also Winternitz, *History of Indian Literature*, vol. 2, 236.

¹² A.C. Banerjee, *Sarvāstivāda Literature*, 20; also E.J. Thomas, *The Life of the Buddha as Legend and History*, 1933, 272.

¹³ D. Seyfort-Ruegg, *The Life of Bu-sTon Rin-po-che*, Rome, 1966, 20, says that the impetus for the compilation of a definitive collection of texts in Tibet was probably due to the sharp decrease of Indian texts coming into the country.

¹⁴ D. Snellgrove, *Indo-Tibetan Buddhism*, London, 1987, 79-109; F.D. Lessing & A. Wayman, *Introduction to the Buddhist Tantric Systems*, The Hague, 1968, Indian reprint 1983, 45–49.

¹⁵ R. Sasaki, *Mahāvvyutpatti*, Tokyo, 1925, Nos: 1421–4.

¹⁶ The Tibetan Tripiṭaka, Peking Edition, Catalogue and Index, Kyoto, 1985, vol. 39, No. 992: *Ched-du brjod-paḥi tshoms (Udānavarga)*.

not grouped together or classified as belonging to a *Kṣudrakāgama*; instead they appear as individual texts.

The Tibetan translation of the *Nidānakathā* is found in the *bKa' 'gyur*¹⁷ grouped together with twelve other texts also translated from Pāli.¹⁸ These and ten other complete texts, also from Pāli sources, appear to be the only texts translated directly from Pāli into Tibetan. This is not to say that Pāli sources were not cited in other Tibetan works, but these references would have been to portions of text only.¹⁹ The group of thirteen texts that includes the *Nidānakathā* is located, in the Peking *bKa' 'gyur*, at the end of the *Śer-phyin* section. There is no apparent reason for their inclusion at this particular location in the *bKa' 'gyur*, since they are not *Prajñāpāramitā sūtras*, and it does seem an incongruous point at which to insert this group into the collection. It has recently been suggested that the *paritta* (protective) status of these texts was perhaps recognised by the Tibetans and that they were used as *dhāraṇīs* (charms) to end a section of the *bKa' 'gyur*,²⁰ a practice that is not without precedent in the Tibetan canon.

The Tibetan *bKa' 'gyur* traditions do not appear to assign a definite location in the *bKa' 'gyur* for this group of texts, and at least one of these traditions omits many of the thirteen texts. The earliest systematic account in Tibetan of the Buddhist scriptures and their ordering comes from the thirteenth century AD with the writings of Bu-ston. In the final part of the third section of his *Chos-ḥbyuñ* (History of Buddhism in Tibet), he mentions that his teacher, Ñi-ma-rgyal-mtshan-dpal-bzañ-po, had spent a fourteen year period in Nepal during which time he translated the group of thirteen texts²¹ at the invitation of the monk Paṇḍita Ānandaśrī. At the end of the catalogue of the *Śer-phyin sūtras*, Bu-ston says that some teachers recognise there is also a group of recently translated *sūtras* which are to be added to this section, but he gives no elaboration on this matter²² regarding the names of the texts. The detailed reference to the group of thirteen texts is found later on in section four of his work. There, he lists all the texts by name and comments that all these were recently translated by Paṇḍita Ānandaśrī and Lama Ñi-ma-rgyal-mtshan-dpal-

¹⁷ The Tibetan *Tripitaka*, Peking Edition, Catalogue and Index, Kyoto 1985, 94–5. Here the *Nidānakathā* is found at the end of the *Śer-phyin (Prajñāpāramitā)* section, volume 21, no.748.

¹⁸ P. Skilling, “Theravādin Literature in Tibetan Translation”, *JPTS*, 19, 1993, 69–183, provides the most up-to-date study of these Pāli texts that were translated into Tibetan. See also L. Renou and J. Filliozat, *L’Inde Classique* vol. 2, 1953, 393.

¹⁹ *ibid.*, 143, 182.

²⁰ *ibid.*, 83.

²¹ Bu-ston, *Chos-ḥbyuñ-gsuñ-rab-rin-po-cheḥi-mdzod*, 1988, 206.

²² Bu ston, *Chos-ḥbyuñ*, 1988, 217.

bzañ-po;²³ these are also the names that are given in the colophons of those texts as being the transmitters of the texts and their translators into Tibetan.

Within Bu-ston's descriptions, there are two possible locations for the group of thirteen texts. The first is at the end of the *Śer-phyin* section while the second, where Bu-ston himself places them, is at the end of the section of his catalogue entitled *Theg pa chen po hi mdo sde sna tshogs* ("Miscellaneous Section of *Mahāyāna Sūtras*"). While all of the thirteen texts, apart from the *Nidānakathā*, are sūtras they are not *Mahāyāna* works, and it raises the question of whether Bu-ston was aware of their school affiliation, or if he was aware of it why he decided to add them to the *Mahāyāna Sūtra* section. That Bu-ston should mention them as recently translated texts may be significant, for if the texts were relative latecomers to the compilers of the various editions of the *bKa' 'gyur* and since they came as a distinct group, translated by the same two personages, it is not unreasonable to suppose that they would be kept together even if the *bKa' 'gyur* traditions placed them within different sections. The consensus of evidence within the different editions of the *bKa' 'gyur* regarding the location of these texts is divided between the two above mentioned sections of the *bKa' 'gyur*.

The seven editions of the *bKa' 'gyur* consulted here can be divided into two groups on the question as to where to record the thirteen texts within their respective *bKa' 'gyurs*. The first group has the texts at the end of the *Śer-phyin* section and within this group are the Peking, Urga and sDe-dge; the second group records the texts at the end of the *mDo-sde* section and is comprised of the sTog, sNar-thañ, Lha-sa and Śel-dkar. This difference between the two groups in locating the thirteen texts is hard to explain; it may be that they were following Bu-ston's suggestions. The problem is not solved by dividing the groups into Eastern and Western²⁴ traditions for there is no unanimous agreement between them as to whether the texts should be at the end of the *Śer-phyin* or *Mdo-sde* sections.

The Pāli text of the *Nidānakathā* as it now exists forms an integral part of the *Jātaka* collection. This, however, has not always been the case. The *Jātaka* collection together with its commentary, the *Jātakaṭṭhavaṇṇanā*, was probably known in Ceylon in some form or other from the introduction of Buddhism into that country. The tradition there considered that only the *gāthās* were to be taken as canonical²⁵ and not the commentary on them. This division into canonical and commentarial literature is extremely important for the history of Buddhist

²³ *ibid.*, 225.

²⁴ H. Eimer, "Some Results of Recent Kanjur Research", *Archiv für Zentralasiatische Geschichtsforschung*, VGH Wissenschaftsverlag, Sankt Augustin, 1983, 13.

²⁵ See K.R. Norman. *Pāli Literature*, 1988, 77; W. Geiger, *Pāli Literature and Language*, 21.

literature in Ceylon, as it was only the commentarial material that was translated from Pāli, or whatever other Middle Indo Aryan dialect it may have been composed in, into the Sinhalese language.²⁶ This process of translation probably began at an early stage; it has even been suggested that the translation into Sinhalese began during the time of Mahinda in the third century BC and was in fact instigated by him.²⁷

This method of translating the Pāli commentarial material into Sinhalese became the normal way of recording the commentaries in Ceylon. By the time of Buddhaghosa in the fifth century AD, there was a vast amount of commentarial literature in Sinhalese; how much of this material was derived from Indian sources and how much from indigenous Sinhalese sources is difficult to determine.²⁸ What can be said, however, is that when Buddhaghosa arrived in Ceylon from India he was confronted with at least six²⁹ different commentarial traditions preserved in Sinhalese and Dravidian. So his work was not simply a matter of translation but of editing and evaluating the different commentarial traditions. Buddhaghosa is the pivotal figure in beginning the process of translating and editing the Sinhalese commentaries into Pāli, a process taken up by succeeding writers, and leading to the composition of works in Pāli by Sinhalese and Indian authors, some of them contemporaries of Buddhaghosa.

The text of the *Nidānakathā* belongs to that part of Buddhist commentarial tradition that is primarily concerned with the portrayal of the life of the Buddha. The *gāthās* of the *Jātaka* collection provided the basis around which there grew an elaborate system of commentary that dealt with the Buddha's relationship to these *gāthās*. The express purpose of the *Jātaka* commentary is to place the *gāthās* within an understandable and Buddhistically meaningful context. This was achieved by presenting the central character of each of the *Jātakas* as being the Buddha in one of his previous existences. That a commentarial tradition of some kind was linked to the *Jātaka gāthās* from the very earliest period is

²⁶ E. Frauwallner, *The Earliest Vinaya and the Beginnings of Buddhist Literature*, Rome, 1956, 186, draws attention to another level of classification of the literature of Ceylon: "the essential distinction (regarding Ceylon) is not that between canonical and non-canonical scriptures, but between local (Sinhalese) literature and the literature of the home (India) country."

²⁷ G.P. Malalasekera, *Pāli Literature of Ceylon*, 73.

²⁸ See G.P. Malalasekera, *op. cit.*, 81, where he quotes the *Sāsanavamsa* in order to show that even in Buddhaghosa's time, the *Aṭṭhakathas* were not extant in India.

²⁹ *ibid.*, 91, Malalasekera gives a list of six commentarial traditions in Ceylon that would have been available to Buddhaghosa. E. W. Adikaram, *Early History of Buddhism in Ceylon*, 10, gives a list of twenty-eight commentaries, but says that only a few of these were distinct works while others were simply alternative names for some of the other works. See also T.W. Rhys Davids and J.E. Carpenter, *Sumaṅgala-Vilāsinī*, PTS London, 1968, ix-xi.

beyond dispute³⁰ and, given the terse and cryptic nature of those *gāthās*, understandable. The explanatory material provided by the commentary served a dual purpose; it allowed for an exposition of the doctrinal aspects of the *gāthās*, and also furnished concrete examples of how the Buddha had behaved in his previous lives.

The genre of texts dealing with the life of the Buddha and later with the Buddha legend, while represented in its fully developed form by the commentarial tradition, and especially for the Pāli tradition by the *Nidānakathā*, was not an independent section of Buddhist literature from the inception of that literary tradition. The rise of the genealogical class of works purporting to represent the Buddha's spiritual lineage and progress from one existence to another were not in themselves innovations within the existing Indian religious tradition. Texts dealing with spiritual or temporal genealogies, whether it be of kings or religious teachers, were a shared feature of Indian literary works. The intention of such texts was to establish that a particular person or tradition was important or in some way significant not only because of any individual or specific achievement, but primarily because of the weight of the tradition that preceded them. By setting out a detailed genealogy, the compilers provided evidence that enhanced the standing of that person or tradition, and by presenting them as belonging to an extremely well attested lineage showed that they were not fleeting phenomena but part of an authentic and ancient process.

The predilection in India for this form of literature that authenticated a person or tradition is present even from the Vedic period. In Vedic literature it is the *ṛṣis* who are depicted as having individual family lineages reaching back to the very origin of the *Vedas*. The rationale behind these genealogies is to demonstrate that the *ṛṣis* are the direct heirs to an unbroken line of human teachers and by implication bearers of an authentic religious and literary tradition. This form of literary record was continued and developed in later Indian history reaching its most complex form in the *Purāṇas*.

This biographical or genealogical genre of literature was already a recognised and developed form for representing persons or traditions prior to the advent of Buddhist works on the life of the Buddha. Perhaps the closest to the Buddhist tradition, and for comparative purposes the most interesting, is that of the Jainas with their genealogy of Mahāvīra. The case of the Jaina tradition that records the life of Mahāvīra yields numerous correspondences to that of the Buddhist compilations on the life of the Buddha. Jaina sources catalogue events connected with the conception, birth, early life, renunciation, enlightenment and nirvāṇa of Mahāvīra.³¹ These events have obvious parallels to the Buddhist records on the

³⁰ W. Geiger, *Pāli Literature and Language*, 21.

³¹ P.S. Jaini, *The Jaina Path of Purification*, 6–10.

life of the Buddha. The similarities are more striking when the Jaina tradition regarding the lineage of the twenty-four *Tīrthāṅkaras*³² taken into account. Whether the Jaina textual sources were influential in leading to the creation of the Buddhist tradition of the life of the Buddha and of the twenty-four previous Buddhas will not be investigated here; suffice it to say that the concept of a genealogical tradition that had as its purpose the establishment of an authentic and unbroken lineage was part of the general Indian cultural background, and certainly not a purely Buddhist innovation.

Given the prevalence of the literary tradition of recording genealogies in ancient India, it cannot be considered unusual that the Buddhists should have evolved their own textual traditions dealing with the life of the Buddha Gotama. The events that are presented as a continuous biography in the *Nidānakathā* have some precedents in the texts of the Pāli canon. Though the early Canonical works attempt no systematic or coherent life of the Buddha, references to the various important events in the Buddha's life are scattered throughout the texts of the *Suttapiṭaka* and *Vinayapiṭaka* as integral parts of individual texts.

Precisely when the attempt was made to begin the production of a connected life story of the Buddha is not known. Although from a very early period there had been isolated attempts to present a more or less connected series of episodes from certain parts of the Buddha's career, the text of the *Mahāparinibbāna-sutta* is an example of this stage of development. It has been suggested that the later works centring on the biography of the Buddha were in fact based in part on an old *Skandhaka*,³³ this being a proto-biography of the Buddha and a part of the *Vinaya*, which was compiled shortly before or after the Council of Vaiśālī. This text was a partial biography but it dealt with the parts of the Buddha's life that were most important for the establishment of a thoroughgoing Buddhist history. Here, the life of the Buddha is important in the sense that it allows for an elucidation of the history of the doctrine and how that doctrine was first introduced to the world.

The earliest occurrence in the Pāli Canon of the depiction of events in the life of the Buddha revolve around the personal recollections of Gotama Buddha about particular events in his life. These early records of the life of the Buddha appear to reflect the concern of the early compilers to establish a tradition that could be seen to derive directly from the founder's own experiences and which had been transmitted by him to his followers during his lifetime. These early fragmentary glimpses of the life of the Buddha are of a historical and utilitarian

³² P. Dundas, *The Jains*, 1992, 20–1, assigns the earliest Jaina biography of Mahāvīra to the second or first centuries B.C. In this work, the *Acaraṅga*, the Mahāvīra is first associated with the twenty-three preceding Tīrthāṅkaras. See also Jaini, *op. cit.*, 164–166.

³³ E. Frauwallner, *op. cit.*, 163. See also E. Lamotte, *op. cit.*, 176.

nature. Although even here, in texts like *Acchariyabbhutadhamma-sutta* of the *Majjhima-nikāya*, the description of his birth is full of what might almost be called doecetic tendencies. The events are usually related to specific occasions in Gotama's life and are important in that they provide information on both the pre-enlightened and post-enlightened parts of Gotama's life.

The *Nidānakathā*, in contrast to other canonical sources, represents the biography of the Buddha not in the narrow or restrictive sense of only the life of Gotama but rather on the macrocosmic scale. The purpose of the text is to show the spiritual lineage of the Buddha Gotama through the presentation of the lives of the twenty-four Buddhas who preceded him. This scheme seeks to normalise the notion of Buddhahood by setting out an unbroken succession of Buddhas that reaches back in time for many aeons and culminates in a depiction of the life of the Buddha Gotama and his attainment of Buddhahood.

Though the *Nidānakathā* occurs at the head of the Pāli *Jātaka* collection belonging to the Theravāda school, it is still not fully understood from which school's sources it originally stems. From the internal evidence of the text, or at least from its introductory verses, it is apparent that the Theravādins themselves believed that the text represented their own doctrinal position. The evidence for this view is contained within the dedicatory verses that precede the text of the *Nidānakathā*.³⁴ The introductory verses begin with praises to the Buddha and his teachings and then proceed to state the reasons for the compilation of this introductory section to the *Jātakaṭṭhakathā*.

The authorship of these dedicatory verses and the *Nidānakathā* remains an undecided issue. It is assigned by the Pāli tradition to Buddhaghosa but this has been called into question by modern scholars and some think it more likely that it was Buddhadatta. The date of the work is thought to be fifth century AD³⁵ but certainly no earlier. The author makes it known that the impetus for the compilation of the *Nidānakathā* lies not with his own decision but is at the request of three *theras*, Atthadassi, Buddhamitta and Buddhadeva, of whom at least one belonged to the Mahimsāsaka school. There are differing views regarding just which one of these *theras* is referred to as being of the Mahimsāsaka³⁶ school.

The Tibetan text omits these introductory verses and so makes no reference to the Mahimsāsaka school. The existence of this school in Ceylon during the fourth and fifth centuries AD is attested to by Chinese sources; the accounts of Fa-Hien's travels in Ceylon show that he obtained copies in Sanskrit of a

³⁴ V. Fausboll, *The Jātaka* vol. 1, 1.

³⁵ E.J. Thomas, *History of Buddhist Thought*, London, 1933, 283.

³⁶ K.R. Norman, *op. cit.*, 128, says it is Buddhadeva who is meant; G. P Malalasekera, *op. cit.*, 117, says all three belonged to the same school.

Vinayapiṭaka of the Mahiṃsāsaka school as well as a number of other works also in Sanskrit.³⁷ What their precise connection with the Mahāvihāra was remains unclear and to what extent they exerted influence on the Mahāvihāra is even more difficult to determine although it seems likely that they had some texts in common with the Mahāvihāra, in particular the Mahiṃsāsaka *Vinayapiṭaka* that contained correspondences with both the *Dīgha-nikāya* and the *Khuddhaka-nikāya*³⁸ of the Pāli canon. Whatever the influence of the Mahiṃsāsaka may have been the author of the introductory verses concludes that he intends to present the commentary in accordance with the tradition of the Mahāvihāra.

The Tibetan text has its own short introduction, with no parallel in the Pāli. It is very like the introduction or *nidāna* found in *sūtras*. Here, the Buddha is approached by the gNas-brtan-chen-po Don-mthoñ (Mahāsthavira Arthadarśana) and asked to teach about the lineage of the Buddhas. This coincides with the sense of the Pāli introductory verses in that it identifies the Mahāsthavira Arthadaśana as the person at whose request the *Nidānakathā* is related.

The main body of the first section of the text of the *Nidānakathā* is in prose and relates the life stories of the twenty-four Buddhas preceding the Buddha Gotama. The structure of the text shows it to be a composite work consisting of layers of Buddhist tradition, drawing on both canonical and non-canonical sources. That non-canonical or apocryphal materials are added to the existing stock of the traditional accounts of the Buddha's life is an innovative turn in Pāli Buddhist literature. It represents the evolution of the Buddha legend from an original core of canonical traditions concerning the life of the Buddha to a fully developed genealogical history of Buddhas in general. What sources the author of the *Nidānakathā* utilised for his work and what their age was cannot be accurately known. All that can be said is that the earlier commentaries that had been translated from Pāli into Sinhalese provided the basis for the *Nidānakathā* and that the growth of this Sinhalese commentarial tradition is thought to have come to an end during the first century AD.³⁹ It is possible that commentaries still came from India for some time, for Frauwallner maintains that the connection with India went on until the second century AD.⁴⁰

The Pāli canonical sources in the *Nidānakathā* are represented not only by *gāthās* taken directly from canonical texts but also by themes that occur in canonical works. The principal canonical text that is commented upon in the

³⁷ E. Frauwallner, *op. cit.*, 156; also J. Legge, *A Record of Buddhist Kingdoms*, New York, Dover Publications, 1965, 111.

³⁸ A. Hirakawa, *op. cit.*, 121.

³⁹ E.W. Adikaram, *op. cit.*, 42.

⁴⁰ E. Frauwallner, *op. cit.*, 186.

Nidānakathā is the *Buddhavaṃsa*; the second chapter, the *Dīpaṅkara-Buddhavaṃsa*, is found almost in its entirety and individual *gāthās* from the remaining chapters are cited. The other canonical works quoted in the *Nidānakathā* are also works of the *Khuddakanikāya*, *gāthās* from the *Jātaka*, *Dhammapada*, *Theragāthā* and *Cariyāpiṭaka*, and from the *Vinayapiṭaka* there are *gāthās* from the *Mahāvagga*. The themes that the *Nidānakathā* includes are a mixture of old and new. While taking the traditional themes about the Buddha's life, such as birth, renunciation, enlightenment and death, it details, however, these events in a way not seen in the *Nikāya* works. It also introduces themes that do not seem to have a counterpart in any other Pāli canonical works apart from the *Buddhavaṃsa* and the *Cariyāpiṭaka*.⁴¹ The sources that the *Nidānakathā* cites come from extremely early texts as well as later additions to the Pāli canon. In this respect the text represents a synthesis of the earlier and later traditions and their treatment of the life of the Buddha.

The first section of the *Nidānakathā*, the story of the remote past (*dūrenidāna*), contains large segments of *gāthās* from the text of the *Buddhavaṃsa*. These *gāthās* provide the canonical framework around which the commentary builds up a synchronic account of the path to Buddhahood of the Bodhisatta who was to become Gotama Buddha. The *dūrenidāna* deals with the period from his initial resolve to attain Buddhahood as the brahmin Sumedha to his rebirth in the Tusita heaven prior to his rebirth as Gotama. In this section the events that are claimed by the *Nidānakathā* to be common to all Buddhas are presented, such as the prediction to Buddhahood, by the Buddha of that age.

Both the *Buddhavaṃsa* and *Cariyāpiṭaka* are *gāthā* works that treat in detail topics that are not dealt with in such an ordered and systematic manner in any other work of the Pāli canon. The *Buddhavaṃsa* gives a full history of the lives of the twenty-four Buddhas, and in so doing shows the enormously long path to Buddhahood of the Buddha Gotama, who made his resolution to become a Buddha during the time of Dīpaṅkara, the first Buddha, and became a Buddha after Kassapa the twenty-fourth Buddha. This scheme of twenty-four Buddhas found in the *Buddhavaṃsa* is an increase on the six Buddhas that are referred to in other works of the Pāli canon. There is also a different ethos present that sets these two works apart from the other *Nikāya* texts.

Both the *Buddhavaṃsa* and its commentary record the incident where Sāriputta's request leads to the Buddha teaching the *Buddhavaṃsa*. The fact that the text is said to be the word of the Buddha should have been sufficient to ensure that it was accepted as canonical by all, although as is known, the *Dīghabhāṅakas* and *Majjhimbhāṅakas* disagreed over this. That these

⁴¹ These two texts have long been known to be later additions to the Pāli Canon; see E. J. Thomas, *op. cit.*, 171.

differences existed regarding the various ways of assigning the text to different *Nikāyas* can be taken as evidence in favour of the *Buddhavaṃsa* being a late work. Certainly the consensus among scholars is that it is a late text,⁴² being placed by Warder as no earlier than the second century B.C.,⁴³ while Gombrich thinks it is probably a work of the third century B.C.⁴⁴

The dating of the *Buddhavaṃsa* owes much to the recognition that the ideas and content found in the text belong to a different phase in the development of Buddhist thought and doctrine. Some have argued that it belongs to a different school altogether. The variations found in the text when compared to other canonical works go beyond the simple differences over the number of Buddhas, for the *Buddhavaṃsa* contains doctrines that are not explicitly formulated in any other Pāli canonical works. These expound the doctrine of the Bodhisatta who strives for countless aeons to achieve Buddhahood and his practice of the ten *pāramī* (perfections) that must be perfected before Buddhahood can be achieved.

The term Bodhisatta is of course known to the other works of the Pāli canon but seems to be used there in a much more limited and restricted sense. In the many examples of the use of the term in Pāli canonical works, it is invariably used by the Buddha Gotama when referring to himself in his pre-enlightened state and is also usually confined to his existence as Gotama rather than to all his previous lives. In the *Nidānakathā*, the term and the number of individual lives it is connected with is extended to encompass all the previous lives of Gotama Buddha that occurred during the time of the twenty-four Buddhas that are mentioned in that text. This is an innovative development in the Buddhology and doctrine of the Pāli canon, for it does not possess anywhere else such elaborate and detailed schemes setting out the Bodhisatta's long and arduous career and his development over many lifetimes of the ten *pāramīs*.

The *pāramīs*, like the term Bodhisatta, are also known to the Pāli canon. The principal Pāli canonical sources dealing with the *pāramīs* are the *Jātaka* collection, thirty-two of the thirty-five *cariyās* in the *Cariyāpiṭaka* can be related to the *Jātaka* collection. There the *pāramīs* are treated as individual qualities that have been developed by the Buddha during various previous lives. There is no systematic presentation of the *pāramīs* in the *Jātaka* but only the bare mention of them as qualities that are developed by the Bodhisatta, much less is there anything approaching a doctrine of the *pāramīs*. The *Jātakas* certainly do not deal exclusively with the *pāramīs*, there being many *Jātakas* that have no

⁴² K.R Norman, *op. cit.*, 94. ; Thomas, *op. cit.*, 171; Winternitz, *op. cit.*, 162.

⁴³ A. Warder, *op. cit.*, 298.

⁴⁴ R. Gombrich, "The Significance of Former Buddhas in the Theravādin Tradition", in *Buddhist Studies in Honour of Walpola Rahula*, eds., S. Balasooriya *et al.*, London, 1980, 68.

reference to the *pāramīs* at all. They appear scattered throughout the *Jātakas* and some of the *pāramīs* have only one or two *Jātakas* representing them⁴⁵ from among the entire collection.

The *Buddhavaṃsa* and the *Cariyāpiṭaka* represent quite a sophisticated and evolved level of Buddhist doctrine. These doctrines, if we are to take the paucity of evidence for them in other works of the Pāli canon into account, seem to have appeared almost without canonical precedent. Both these works are the only two Pāli canonical sources that treat of the Bodhisatta and the *pāramīs* in anything like a coherent and systematised fashion. These two texts represent the epitome of Theravāda Buddhology for the doctrines found in them are not developed further in that tradition.

Because of the developments found in the *Buddhavaṃsa* and *Cariyāpiṭaka*, but absent in other works of the Pāli canon, the source of origin of these texts has been called into question. The doctrines that they contain, and they must be taken as doctrines for they are not merely random teachings as in the *Jātaka*, but fully set out and interconnected schemes of the path to Buddhahood, have led some to assume that the two texts were imported in their entirety from another school altogether.⁴⁶ It is known that a *Buddhavaṃsa* existed in the Sanskrit canon and reference is made in the Tarkajvāla to a text of that name belonging to the Abhayagiri school of Ceylon, who adopted the *Vaitulya-piṭaka* purportedly a *Mahāyāna* canon.⁴⁷ However, locating the sources for the *Buddhavaṃsa* and deciding whether it is a borrowing from another school or simply drawing on earlier material that had not previously found its way to Ceylon are in all likelihood impossible tasks given our incomplete knowledge of the canons of the mainland schools and of the *Vaitulyapiṭaka* that existed in Ceylon.

While the *Buddhavaṃsa* provides the biographies of the twenty-four previous Buddhas, the *Nidānakathā*, as a biography of Gotama Buddha, is concerned with the various accounts of the lives of the Bodhisatta but also pays particular attention to the life story of Gotama from birth to the donation of the Jetavana park. The second and third sections of the *Nidānakathā*, the *avidūrenidāna* (middle era) and *santikenidāna* (present era), deal solely with the life of Gotama before and after enlightenment. The accounts are found not only in the Pāli canon but also in the *Vinaya* texts of the Sanskrit canons, although they are only extant in Sanskrit in the Mūlsarvātivādin recension. The material in the *Vinayas* dealing with the life of the Buddha probably represents the oldest strata of this tradition that sought to flesh out the life story of the Buddha Gotama. For the

⁴⁵ I.B. Horner, *Ten Jātaka Stories*, Bangkok, 1974, x.

⁴⁶ E.J. Thomas, *op. cit.*, 172.

⁴⁷ P. Skilling, *op. cit.*, 142–3.

Pāli canon, the principal source as a starting point for the life of Buddha was the *Mahāvagga* section of the *Vinaya-piṭaka*, though this was an extremely restricted account of a short period of the Buddha Gotama's life. The existing Sanskrit *Vinaya* sources for a biography of the Buddha are contained in the final two sections of the Mūlasarvāstivādin *Vinaya*, the *Samghabhedavastu* and the *Kṣudrakavastu*, which provide a fairly detailed account.

It has been shown by Frauwallner that the old *Skandhaka* text provided the basic materials for the stories about the life of the Buddha compiled by the different schools after the period of the schisms. From a very early time, each school equipped itself with a biography of the Buddha that can be seen to stem from this extremely ancient common source. The Chinese recension of a text questions what the text dealing with the life of the Buddha is called, and gives the answer that the Mahāsāṃghikas call it the *Mahāvastu*, the Sarvāstivādins call it the *Mahālalitavistara*, the Kāśyapīyas call it the *Buddhajātakanidāna*, the Dharmaguptakas call it the *Śākyamuni-Buddhacarita*, and the Mahīśāsakas call it the *Vinayapiṭakamūla*.⁴⁸ The common feature of all these biographies is that they depended on the old *Skandhaka* text, since it provided them with canonical authority and a precedent for their compilation.

The *Nidānakathā* is, like the early biographies of the Buddha that were based on the old *Skandhaka*, an incomplete biography in that it does not give any details about a large part of his life that culminates in his *parinibbāna*. The text only covers the period of the Buddha's life that ends with the donation of the Jetavana park by Anāthapiṇḍika. That the text ends here is significant, for it indicates that it shares with the *Mahāvastu* and the *Lalitavistara*, the feature of being a partial biography; on the basis of which Frauwallner and Lamotte have concluded that all these biographical texts derive from the same source. If the *Nidānakathā* is reliant on this source, it would explain why there are similarities between it and these other two biographies mentioned, and why its method of ordering events is not found elsewhere in the Pāli canon.

The *Nidānakathā*, incomplete as it is, still represents the fullest account of the life of the Buddha that is available to the Pāli tradition. Though it is primarily a commentarial work, it has come to provide for the Pāli tradition what is considered to be the most authoritative and extended account of the life of the Buddha. That it is set out in the form of an introduction to the *Jātaka* collection has perhaps aided its acceptance by the Pāli tradition as an ancient and reliable source of biographical material on the Buddha's life. Because, as an integral part of the *Jātaka* collection, it may have come to be regarded as being a valid part of the *Khuddaka-nikāya*, and therefore have acquired some sort of canonical or quasi-canonical status, Thomas has referred to what he terms the spurious

⁴⁸ E. Frauwallner, *op. cit.*, 50; Lamotte, *op. cit.*, 177.

authority accorded to the *Nidānakathā*.⁴⁹ It should be remembered, however, that it was only the *Jātaka gāthās* that were technically recognised as canonical, but it is possible that the distinction between canonical and commentarial traditions became blurred. This process is all the more probable with the *Jātaka* collection where the commentary is so closely connected with the elucidation of the *gāthās* that form its canonical basis.

The treatment by the Tibetan tradition of the *Nidānakathā* has to be taken as an indication that they, for whatever reason, considered the text to be canonical. All the seven Tibetan *bKa' 'gyur* traditions used in this paper have included the text in the *bKa' 'gyur* section, even though they might not have agreed on its exact location in that collection of canonical works. There could be any one of several reasons for its inclusion in the canonical section. The fact that it came with the twelve *sutta* texts may have led to its being taken as a *sutta* of some kind, or at the very least a fully canonical work. The Tibetan translator Ņi-ma-rgyal-mtshan-dpal-bzañ-po may have been informed that all thirteen texts were canonical by the Sinhalese monk Ānandaśri who is named in the colophons as the person from whom the texts were obtained. If this is so, it could reveal the standing of the *Nidānakathā* in northern India, and possibly Ceylon, in the early part of the twelfth century AD. There is also the possibility that the Tibetans gave the text canonical status due to the introductory section, found in the Tibetan but not the Pāli, which states that it was the Buddha who initially taught the text. Alternatively, the inclusion of the *Nidānakathā* in the *bKa' 'gyur* may be a simple mistake or oversight, for Bu-ston is uncertain whether the thirteen texts were duplicates of earlier translations or even if they were *sūtras* of the Māhayāna or the Hīnayāna.⁵⁰

The Tibetan *bKa' 'gyur* and *BsTan 'gyur* contains some other texts dealing with the life of the Buddha. There are four well known biographical works in these two collections. The *bKa' 'gyur* has in its *mDo-sde* (“*Sūtra Section*”) the *Lalitavistara* and the *Abhiniṣkramaṇa-sūtra*. The *BsTan 'gyur* contains at least two texts dealing with the Buddha’s life story, the *Jātakamāla* and the *Buddhacarita*. The *Nidānakathā*, as a commentarial text arranged into its present form in the fifth century AD, would seem to have more in common with these last two texts, since the *Jātakamāla* and the *Buddhacarita* are both earlier than the *Nidānakathā* in its present form, so that if the age of the text was any

⁴⁹ E.J. Thomas, *op. cit.*, 283.

⁵⁰ P. Skilling, *op. cit.*, 78–9.

criterion for its acceptance as canonical, the *Nidānakathā* would be excluded, unless of course its date of retranslation and re-editing into Pāli was not known to the Tibetans. The problem is that it is not always possible to know exactly what criteria were used by the Tibetans, or what information was available to them when assigning these works to the *bKa' gyur*.

For the Pāli tradition, the *Nidānakathā* text is their record of the life of the Buddha, in the same way as the *Mahāvastu* and *Lalitavistara* represent the record of other schools. The text in its present form is a relative latecomer to the Pāli canon and represents a compilation of various traditional accounts of the life of the Buddha. It is an unusual work in that it spans both the canonical and commentarial traditions in the presentation of the Buddha's life. The canonical sources that it utilizes are equally diverse, both in their age and in their subject matter, covering the early period as represented in the *Vinaya* and a later period as shown in the *Buddhavaṃsa*. The principal doctrines that are dealt with are the Bodhisatta and the ten *pāramīs*, and the treatment of these two aspects of Buddhist doctrine is the most detailed in Pāli sources.

The study of the Tibetan translation of the *Nidānakathā* allows for a thorough comparison of the two versions to be made. It is admittedly unusual to find Pāli texts in the Tibetan *bKa' gyur*, but given the eclectic nature of the Tibetan translators it should not be thought that the texts represent translations from Sanskrit sources rather than Pāli. The Tibetan translation of the text provides a valuable witness to the version of the text preserved in Pāli, for it is a record of that Pāli text as known in north India in the thirteenth century AD. Any complete study of the *Nidānakathā*, however, cannot ignore the Sanskrit sources for the life of the Buddha, in particular the *Mahāvastu* and the *Lalitavistara* for these two texts contain certain parallels with the *Nidānakathā*.