

THE BUDDHIST FORUM, VOLUME V

**A PHILOLOGICAL APPROACH  
TO BUDDHISM**

The Bukkyō Dendō Kyōkai Lectures 1994

K.R. Norman

THE INSTITUTE OF BUDDHIST STUDIES, TRING, UK  
THE INSTITUTE OF BUDDHIST STUDIES, BERKELEY, USA  
2012

First published by the School of Oriental and African Studies (University of London), 1997

© Online copyright 2012 belongs to:  
The Institute of Buddhist Studies, Tring, UK &  
The Institute of Buddhist Studies, Berkeley, USA

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

ISBN 0-7286-0276-8  
ISSN 0959-0595

## CONTENTS

---

*The online pagination 2012 corresponds to the hard copy pagination 1997*

Foreword.....	vii
Abbreviations.....	ix
Bibliography.....	xi
I Buddhism and Philology.....	1
II Buddhism and its Origins.....	21
III Buddhism and Oral Tradition.....	41
IV Buddhism and Regional Dialects.....	59
V Buddhism and Writing.....	77
VI Buddhism and Sanskritisation.....	95
VII Buddhism and Aśoka.....	113
VIII Buddhism and Canonicity.....	131
IX Buddhism and the Commentarial Tradition.....	149
X Buddhism and Philology.....	167
Word Index.....	185

## ABBREVIATIONS

---

AMg	Ardha-Māgadhī
AO	Acta Orientalia
B.C.E.	Before Common Era
BHS	Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit
BHSD	Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit Dictionary
BHSG	Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit Grammar
BSO(A)S	Bulletin of the School of Oriental (and African) Studies
BSR	Buddhist Studies Review
BUp	Brhad-Āraṇyaka Upaniṣad
C.E.	Common Era
CP I–V	K.R. Norman. Collected Papers, Volumes I–IV (1990–94)
CPD	A Critical Pāli Dictionary, Copenhagen
CUP	Cambridge University Press
DEDR	T. Burrow & M.B. Emeneau, <i>Dravidian Etymological Dictionary</i> (Revised edition, 1984)
DPPN	G.P. Malalasekera, <i>Dictionary of Pāli Proper Names</i> (1937–38)
EV I, II	K.R. Norman, <i>Elders' Verses</i> I (1969), II (1971)
GD I, II	K.R. Norman, <i>The Group of Discourses</i> I (1984), II (1992)
IJ	Indo-Iranian Journal
IT	Indologica Taurinensia
JA	Journal Asiatique
JBuRS	Journal of the Burma Research Society
JOI(B)	Journal of the Oriental Institute (Baroda)
JPTS	Journal of the Pali Texts Society
JRAS	Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society
m.c.	metri causa
MIA	Middle Indo-Aryan
MRI	<i>Minor Readings and Illustrator</i>

MW	M. Monier-Williams, <i>Sanskrit-English Dictionary</i> (1899)
OUP	Oxford University Press
PDhp	Patna Dharmapada
PE	Pillar Edict
PED	The PTS's Pali-English Dictionary
Pkt	Prakrit
PTS	Pali Text Society
RE	Rock Edict
SBE	Sacred Books of the East
Skt	Sanskrit
SOAS	School of Oriental and African Studies (London)
SWTF	Goerg von Simson (ed.), <i>Sanskrit-Wörterbuch der buddhistischen Texte aus den Turfan-Funden</i> (1973–)
Überbl	O. von Hinüber, <i>Das ältere Mittelindisch im Überblick</i> (1986)
WZKSO	Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde Südasiens

Abbreviations of the titles of Pāli texts are those adopted by the CPD.  
Editions are those of the PTS, unless otherwise stated.

## V Buddhism and Writing

---

I want in this lecture to say something about the impact which writing had upon Buddhism, and about the deductions which we can make about the changes which took place when Buddhist texts began to be written down—first, the changes in those texts and second, the changes in Buddhism itself.

The Dīpavaṃsa, our earliest authority for the statement that the canon was written down, states: “Before this time (i.e. the reign of King Vaṭṭagāmini Abhaya, in the first century B.C.E.<sup>1</sup>), the wise bhikkhus had handed down orally the text of the three *piṭakas* and also the *aṭṭhakathā*. At this time, the bhikkhus, perceiving the loss of living beings, assembled, and in order that the religion might endure for a long time, they recorded (the above-mentioned texts) in written books”.<sup>2</sup> It is not clear whether “perceiving the loss of living beings” is to be taken generally—“everyone is going to die”—or whether it refers to the specific events of the time. If the latter, then it could well be a reference to the partial breakdown of the *bhāṇaka* system. I mentioned in the third lecture that Buddhaghosa records the fact<sup>3</sup> that, at some time after the introduction of Theravādin Buddhism into Sri Lanka, there came a time when only one bhikkhu knew the Niddesa, and from fear of its disappearing completely a thera was persuaded to learn it from this one bhikkhu, and other theras learnt it from him. This probably made the *saṅgha* in Sri Lanka realise that the whole canon could disappear if the oral tradition died out.

Nevertheless, it is probable that there were other pressures too. It is very likely that the so-called Brāhmaṇatissa famine, foreign invasion from South India and also the political and economic circumstances of the times played a part in persuading the bhikkhus to make this decision. It has also been suggested that

---

<sup>1</sup> 89–77 B.C.E., according to Bechert, 199A1, 9.

<sup>2</sup> *piṭakattayapāliṅ ca tassa aṭṭhakatham pi ca | mukhapāthena ānesuṃ pubbe bhikkhu mahāmati || hāniṃ disvāna sattānaṃ tadā bhikkhu samāgatā | ciraṭṭhitatthaṃ dhammassa potthakesu likhāpayuṃ ||* Dīp 20.20–21.

<sup>3</sup> Sp 695–96.

the growing power of the newly founded Abhayagiri *vihāra*, and the threat which this offered to the Mahāvihāra, could not be ignored.

Other, later, sources give more information about the writing down of the canon, presumably making use of information either unknown to, or at least unused by, the author of the Dīpavaṃsa. Some authorities talk of a joint recitation (*saṅgīti*) being held in the Āloka-vihāra before the writing down, and this is referred to as being “like a fourth *saṅgīti*” by some sources.<sup>4</sup> This may, of course, be an invention dating from a later time when there was some doubt about the authority of the written canon, because it appeared not to have been authenticated by a *saṅgīti*. In this connection we should remember the pattern at the fifth *saṅgāyana* in the nineteenth century and the sixth *saṅgāyana* in the 50’s of this century: The canon was recited and then what had been agreed was carved and printed, respectively. This clearly was the pattern which was expected if an authentic version of the canon was to be produced. It is, of course, possible that the committing of the canon to writing was a rather drawn-out affair, and was not the result of a single *saṅgīti*, which is why there is no mention of one in the earliest texts. If this was so, then it is certain that the story of the *saṅgīti* was a later invention. There is, however, little doubt that we can accept that the writing down of the *tipiṭaka* during the reign of Vaṭṭagāmiṇi Abhaya was an historic fact.<sup>5</sup>

The Dīpavaṃsa gives no information about the way in which the *tipiṭaka* was written down. We must assume that what was currently being remembered and recited was repeated in the presence of scribes, who wrote it down from dictation. Unless the various sections of the *bhāṇaka* tradition had been co-operating and had been making simultaneous changes, e.g. in the Sanskritisations which had been introduced, we must assume that immediately prior to writing down the canon there were divergent features in the *nikāyas*. Writing down would have been an excellent opportunity for the homogenisation of forms—all absolutes in *-tā* being changed to *-tvā*, and the forms containing *-r-* being standardised, etc. The references to the *bhāṇakas* in the commentaries suggest that the oral tradition continued to function alongside the written *tipiṭaka*, and if the *bhāṇakas* continued to act in the same way as before, they had perhaps to relearn or, at least, revise their *nikāyas*, with these homogenised readings in them.

In the case of the Pāli tradition, then, we may assume that the writing down of the canon may have had some effect on the inter-relationship of the various *bhāṇaka* traditions, if they were compelled to co-operate in this way. It is noteworthy that, as I said in the third lecture, there are differences of readings in

---

<sup>4</sup> See Norman, 1983C, 11.

<sup>5</sup> Bechert, 1992, 45–53 (52).

parallel passages in different *nikāyas*, as we have them now, and we find that the use of stock phrases, e.g. the formulae used to describe bhikkhus approaching the Buddha, etc., are not identical. We may conclude that any editorial process which occurred was not complete, but was restricted to certain particulars.

The date when writing might have first been used by the Buddhists depends, of course, on the date of the introduction of writing into India, and there is no agreement about this among scholars. As is well known, writing was widely used by the emperor Aśoka c. 260 B.C.E. in two scripts: Kharoṣṭhī and Brāhmī. The former, it is agreed by all scholars, I think, was derived from the Aramaic script which was used by the administrators of the Persian Empire, and its use was confined to the areas of North-west India which were at one time part of the Persian Empire, i.e. the region around Gandhāra, and also Chinese Turkestan into which the script was taken from Gandhāra. We have no inscriptions in Kharoṣṭhī earlier than Aśoka, but the references made by the Greek historians to the use of writing in the North-west of India at the time of Alexander presumably refer to it, and if Pāṇini refers to writing, then since he came from the North-west, it was probably Kharoṣṭhī that he meant.

There are, to simplify the discussion, three views about the origin of the Brāhmī script.<sup>6</sup> It is undoubtedly the case that the script used by the Indus Valley civilisation c. 2000 B.C.E. contained a small number of characters which were identical with, or very similar in appearance to, characters in the Aśokan form of Brāhmī (although, of course, until the Indus script is deciphered we do not know if the phonetic values were the same). Some scholars, therefore, think that writing continued from the Indus Valley civilisation right through to the third century B.C.E. Others, basing their theory on a small number of characters which seem to have parallels, of both form and phonetic value, in an early Semitic script, believe that writing came to India from further west. The third view is that the script was invented by Aśoka's scribes, or those of his immediate predecessors, specifically for the purpose of inscribing imperial edicts. There are objections to this view, in as much as the variety of forms which we find in the Aśokan version of Brāhmī suggest that there was already a history of development of the script before Aśoka's scribes used it. Support for this idea of pre-Aśokan development has been given very recently by the discovery of sherds at Anuradhapura in Sri Lanka, inscribed with small numbers of characters which seem to be Brāhmī. These sherds have been dated, by both Carbon 14 and Thermo-luminescence dating, to pre-Aśokan times, perhaps as much as two centuries before Aśoka.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> von Hinüber, 1989A.

<sup>7</sup> Deraniyagala, 1990A, 149–68; and 1990B, 251–92.



It is hard to believe that traders, operating throughout the Near and Middle East and meeting fellow-traders from countries where writing had been used for centuries, would not see the advantages of adopting a writing system. The same applies to administrators. Once the North-west of India had become part of the Persian empire, if not before, writing would have been employed by the Aramaic scribes in that area, and it is likely that neighbouring rulers would realise the advantages of keeping records of regnal years and royal accounts, and treasury and armoury details, in some tangible form. Aśoka's so-called "Queen's edict" (if my interpretation of it is correct)<sup>8</sup> specifically states that certain charges are to be set against the queen's name, in a way which implies that this system of accounting was well known.

My own belief is that although one correspondence in both shape and sound between Brāhmī and an early Semitic script might be simply chance, it is beyond the bounds of coincidence for what I regard as at least three certain parallelisms of both form and phonetic value to have occurred.<sup>9</sup> I therefore take it as certain that at least those three characters of Brāhmī are connected with the Semitic script.

There are other similarities of form between Brāhmī and early Semitic, but the phonetic values are not the same. This partial correspondence does not, however, present an insurmountable difficulty. There is precisely the same problem with the Carian alphabet which was based upon the Greek alphabet, but did not always have the same phonetic value as the Greek. What was borrowed was the *idea* of writing, with a small number of direct parallels. This is not to say that these Brāhmī characters were necessarily borrowed from the Semitic script at the time for which we have attestations of its use. There is, in principle, no objection to believing that they were borrowed from a later, at present unattested, version of that script.

I would therefore support the view that the Brāhmī script was in use in India well before the time of Aśoka, and was probably brought from the West by traders, who had borrowed the idea of writing, and some of the characters, from Semitic traders.

There is, however, no certain evidence for the use of the Brāhmī script in India before the time of Aśoka—there is no agreement among scholars about the handful of inscriptions found in India which have been claimed to be pre-Aśokan. It is, therefore, appropriate to ask why, if writing existed in India before the time of Aśoka, there are no records of it. The probable explanation is that writing was not at first used for religious or literary purposes, but exclusively for

---

<sup>8</sup> See Norman, 1976A, 35–42 (= CP II, 52–58).

<sup>9</sup> Initial *a-* and *aleph*, *ga* and *gimel*, and *tha* and *theth* (with the cross in the middle of *theth* reduced to a dot in *tha*). See MW, xxvii.

administration and trading. Since there was no need for the documents of administrators and merchants to last for ever, they were written on ephemeral materials, and therefore perished.

Similarly, although the Gandhāra area had been a part of the Persian empire since the time of Darius, there are no remains of pre-Aśokan Aramaic inscriptions from that area, presumably because such records were similarly written on ephemeral material. Only kings had inscriptions carved on rock—“that they might long endure” “as long as the sun and the moon”, as Aśoka says—and there appears to be no reason to reject the much-repeated suggestion that the wording of some of his edicts seems to contain echoes of the words of Darius, which suggests that Aśoka’s inscriptions were a direct result of his having heard about the inscriptions of Iranian kings at Behistun and elsewhere.

Even if writing was not used until the time of Aśoka, it is surprising that the Theravādin texts were not written down until 200 years after Aśoka’s time. Since many converts to Buddhism were *kṣatriyas* and *vaiśyas*, who would have been acquainted with the use of writing for accounts and lists of merchandise or military equipment, etc., it is inconceivable that not one of them made use of his earlier knowledge after he had become a bhikkhu. The opposition of the *bhāṇakas* would probably have prevented any attempt to transmit entire texts by writing, but it would be odd if sermon notes or aids to recitation<sup>10</sup> were not written down. There could be no religious reason for not using writing. As I said in the third lecture, there is no mention of writing in the Vinaya rules, either to regulate or forbid its use.

Moreover, by the first century B.C.E., writing in a semi-religious context had been widely used for a century or more in Sri Lanka, for donative inscriptions, etc. It is hard to imagine that monks sitting in their caves with an inscription on the drip ledge did not think of the value which writing might have for the perpetuation of the *Buddhavacana*.

We must then ask if it is an incontrovertible fact that Buddhists did not make use of writing until the whole canon was written down in the first century B.C.E., or whether there is any evidence at all for the use of writing before the time of the so-called fourth *saṅgīti*. There are, in fact, hints which have led some scholars to suggest that writing was indeed used, if only to a limited extent. Following Lüders,<sup>11</sup> John Brough<sup>12</sup> compared a *pāda* in the Gāndhārī Dharmapada<sup>13</sup> which ends in so *vayadi* “he goes” with the corresponding *pāda*

---

<sup>10</sup> As Tambiah (1968, 85–131) reported of a modern Thai monastery he visited.

<sup>11</sup> Lüders, 1954, § 105.

<sup>12</sup> See Brough, 1962, 218.

<sup>13</sup> *aviṭhidu so vayadi*, GDhp 144.

in the Udāna-varga,<sup>14</sup> which ends in *sa vrajati*, with the same meaning, and contrasted these forms with *va sayati* “he lies down” in the Pāli equivalent,<sup>15</sup> and he pointed out that in the context the idea of moving is more likely to be correct than lying down. He explained the Pāli form as showing the metathesis of the two akṣaras *va* and *sa*, and noted that although such a metathesis might occur in a purely oral tradition, it would imply “an unbelievably slipshod *paramparā*”. In manuscript copying, however, this is a common and readily understandable error. The conclusion he arrived at was that the text was already being transmitted by manuscript copying, and not exclusively by oral tradition, at a date earlier than the redaction of the Pāli version.

It is not always possible to be certain whether such an error is the result of an oral or a written tradition. Even the belief that an error *is* due to writing does not, in itself, prove that the error was earlier than the writing down of the canon, since it could well have occurred at some later date when the manuscript was being copied. We should, however, note, that if this is the explanation, we have to assume that it happened at a time when manuscripts of any individual text were very few in number, and probably unique. It can be shown that this might well have been the case, for Alsdorf has pointed out that in one Jain text<sup>16</sup> the whole tradition available to us, not only all extant manuscripts but even the oldest commentaries, go back to one single individual manuscript in which, through an ordinary clerical mistake, one akṣara had been omitted.<sup>17</sup>

Similarly, although Brough wrote of a slipshod *paramparā*, we cannot rule out completely the suggestion that there might have been such an imperfect method of transmission. If all manuscripts of a particular Jain text and the commentaries upon that text go back to a single, unique manuscript, then, in theory, at least, all manuscripts of a particular Pāli text and the commentary upon it, may go back to a single, unique *bhāṇaka*, and, as I have said, we know that that was the situation with regard to at least one Pāli canonical text. In short, I agree with Brough that writing was already being used before the whole canon was written down, but I am not certain that the evidence he gave proves it.

Others too<sup>18</sup> believe that writing had already begun to be used on a small scale, and we may assume that its use increased, as it became more and more common in the secular world. In the absence of firm evidence, however, it is always possible for alternative suggestions to be made about the cause of errors in the transmission, and scholars rarely agree either about the probability of such

---

<sup>14</sup> *aviṣṭhitaḥ sa vrajati*, Udāna-v 1.6

<sup>15</sup> *abbhuṭṭhito va sayati*, Ja IV 494, 2\*.

<sup>16</sup> Utt 25.7.

<sup>17</sup> L. Alsdorf, 1962, 110–36 (134).

<sup>18</sup> See Bechert, 1991A, 9.

errors being due to transmission by means of writing, or about the date when they might have occurred.

I mentioned in the third lecture some of the errors which, despite all the care which the *bhāṇakas* took in their reciting, might creep into the texts because of mispronunciations.

Writing, however, brought with it a whole new range of possible errors, of the sort with which we are familiar from the manuscript tradition of classical studies: writing the same syllable or group of syllables twice (dittography); omitting one of a pair of consecutive identical syllables or groups of syllables (haplography); allowing the eye to jump from words at the end of one line or verse to the identical words at the end of another line or verse, with the resultant loss of the words in between (homoioteleuton), etc., and a glance at the critical apparatus of any Pāli text will provide abundant examples of all these errors occurring in the manuscripts. Such errors are found from the very beginning of writing in India, and examples of all of them can be seen in the Aśokan inscriptions.

There was another type of error, however, which was due to deficiencies in the early Indian writing system. In the earliest form of the Brāhmī script, double consonants were not written, and the marks for long vowels were frequently omitted.

There are, in the Pāli canon, a number of textual variations showing alternative forms with single or double consonants, which are most easily explained as having been written at some time in such a script. When, in a later form of the Brāhmī script, the facility of writing double consonants was adopted, in places where the metre was of no help in determining the length of a vowel, e.g. in prose or in metrically doubtful positions, a copyist had to decide whether the single consonant in the exemplar, which he was copying, stood for a single or a double consonant. In most cases the context would make this clear, but in passages where both forms could be considered to yield some sort of sense, it was a matter of personal preference which form he chose to write or how he chose to interpret it. The tradition sometimes remained ambivalent, with both possibilities being handed down to us.

The writing of single consonants after vowels in metrically doubtful positions can explain how doublets of this kind could arise.<sup>19</sup> In the Therīgāthā we find a verse which states, “There is no release from *dukkha* for you, even if you approach and run away”. This seems slightly odd. The word for “approach” is the absolutive *upecca*<sup>20</sup> (< Sanskrit *upetya*), and the commentary sees the

---

<sup>19</sup> See Norman, *EV* II, 109 (on Thī 248).

<sup>20</sup> Showing the palatalisation of *-a-> -e-* before *-c-*. See Norman, 1976B, 328–42 (= *CP* I, 220–37).

difficulty and explains that here it means *sañcicca* “having considered”, i.e. “after consideration” or, perhaps, “deliberately”. The commentary, however, also states that there is another reading, namely *uppacca*, which it explains as *uppativā* “having flown up”. This seems to make better sense in the context “there is no release from *dukkha* for you, even if you leap up and run away”, and it is very likely that this is the reading we should adopt, especially as it is the only reading found for the verse in some of the other places where it occurs. Here we can postulate the existence of an earlier form with single consonants, i.e. *\*upaca*. Since the first syllable is in a metrically doubtful position at the beginning of a *pāda*, the scribe had no way of telling whether the word began with *up-* or *upp-*. In the absence of such knowledge, *upaca* developed to *\*upeca* when *-a-* was palatalised to *-e-* before *-c-*. When the possibility of writing double consonants arose, the tradition interpreted *\*upaca* as *uppacca* (< Sanskrit *utpatya*) and *\*upeca* as *upecca* (< Sanskrit *upetya*).

In a prose passage in the Niddesa<sup>21</sup> we find a long list of adjectives describing ascetic practices, e.g. *hatthi-vattika* “following the practice of elephants”. There are variant readings for each epithet, with a single *-t-*, e.g. *hatthi-vatika* “taking the elephant vow”. In Sanskrit we find *-vratika* in similar contexts,<sup>22</sup> but since the difference in meaning between *vratika* and *ṛttika* is very small, a scribe who was accustomed to a particular writing system, where single *-t-* was written for both *vatika* and *vattika*, might have difficulty in deciding which was the correct spelling, when the possibility of writing double consonants arose.

Sometimes we find that a variation for a word appears, not in the commentary, but in the scribal tradition, e.g. in a verse in the Theragāthā,<sup>23</sup> where the Pali Text Society edition reads *nimmissaṃ*, with double *-mm-*, there is a variant reading *nimissaṃ*, with single *-m-*. The first syllable, being the first syllable of the *pāda*, is in a metrically doubtful position, so the metre cannot help us to decide between single and double *-m-*. In Pāli, *nimināti* “he exchanges” and *nimmināti* “he constructs” are sometimes confused,<sup>24</sup> because in certain contexts their meanings converge. In this verse, however, it seems certain that we should adopt the variant reading *nimissaṃ* with single *-m-*, since “exchange” makes better sense in the context, which talks of “exchanging the ageing for agelessness”. The word was presumably written as *\*nimisaṃ* in an earlier version, and because of the doubt about the metrical length of the first syllable,

<sup>21</sup> Nidd I 89, 17–29.

<sup>22</sup> cf. Skt *go-vratika*, *biḍāla-vratika*, *cāndra-vratika*.

<sup>23</sup> Th 32.

<sup>24</sup> The same confusion is found in BHS (see BHSD, s.vv. *nimināti* and *nirminoti*), e.g. at Mvu II 176,12 where Jones emends (1952,170, note 3) *nimmin-* to *nimin-*, because Ja III 63, 9, 10 has *nimini* and *nimineyya*.

either *nim-* or *nimm-* was possible as an interpretation, and different branches of the scribal tradition transmitted different readings.

Not only did the early Brāhmī script write double akṣaras as single, but it also frequently omitted *anusvāra*, e.g. the active *liṃpati* “he smears” and the passive *lippati* (< *lipyate*) “he is smeared”, could both be written as *lipati*, since the passive ending *-ate* was often replaced by the active ending *-ati* in Middle Indo-Aryan. Exactly the same could happen with the active *muñcati* and the passive *muccati* < *mucyate*, both of which might be written as *mucati*. This would have caused no confusion as long as the oral and written traditions continued side by side, as they must have done for some time. But when the oral tradition ceased, scribes were then entirely dependent on what was written, which might be ambiguous, unless the context gave help. It is certain from the nature of some alternations that scribes were entirely dependent on written forms, with no help from any oral tradition.

Faced with a form *mucati*, a scribe who did write doubled consonants and *anusvāra* had to choose between writing *muccati* and *muñcati*. If the context did not make the choice obvious, then mistakes might occur. In a verse in the Patnā Dharmapada,<sup>25</sup> for example, we find the passive *mucceya*, where other versions of the *pāda* have the active stem *muñc-*. There is considerable doubt about the meaning of this particular verse among modern scholars, and it is clear that some ancient copyists were equally perplexed, and were uncertain about the way in which to interpret the reading in their exemplars. It is noteworthy that this possible confusion of active and passive continued, to some extent, even after the use of double consonants and *anusvāra* became standard, and we find in Pāli that *muñcati* is sometimes used for *muccati*,<sup>26</sup> and vice versa.

There is, similarly, doubt about the alternation between the active *liṃpati* and the passive *lippati*, to such an extent that *liṃpati* seems almost to acquire a passive sense. The root *lip* means “to smear”, and in the passive “to be smeared, to be defiled, to cling to”. Although the pattern is not entirely consistent in Pāli, it would appear that the case usage with this verb polarised, with the instrumental being used with the sense of “defiled by (something)”, and the locative with the sense of “clinging to (something)”, e.g. water clings to, or does not cling to, a leaf. In the second usage, where there was an absence of an obvious sense of passivity, a doubt possibly arose in the copyists’ minds as to whether the word *lipati* which they found in their exemplar was not perhaps an active form, and they consequently wrote the active *liṃpati*. We consequently find that the Pāli manuscript tradition is quite uncertain about this verb, and *liṃpati* and *lippati* are sometimes found as alternative readings.

---

<sup>25</sup> PDhp 46.

<sup>26</sup> See *PED*, s.v. *muñcati*.

We can get some idea of the difficulties which such a writing system caused if we examine a verse in the Gāndhārī Dharmapada, which is written in the Kharoṣṭhī script, which has similar deficiencies, in that it does not write double consonants or long vowels. When we try to interpret the words *kamaradu* and *kamaramu* in the Gāndhārī Dharmapada,<sup>27</sup> we are unable, because of the nature of the Kharoṣṭhī script, to decide whether the first part of these compounds stands for *kāma-* or *kamma-*. If we look for parallel or near-parallel passages in Pāli, to help us make a decision, we find that both *kāmarata* and *kammarata* occur there.<sup>28</sup> The occurrence of the two forms would seem to be a clear indication that at one time that portion, at least, of the Theravādin tradition was transmitted through a script which did not write either double consonants or long vowels. Consequently the first part of the compound was written as *\*kama-*, which could be variously interpreted.

It has been pointed out<sup>29</sup> that the so-called ablatives in *-am* in Middle Indo-Aryan may be due to a transmission through manuscripts which, like the script of the Gāndhārī Dharmapada, did not mark vowel length or nasalisation or, like the Brāhmī script of the Aśokan inscriptions, did not do so consistently, so that from the point of view of the written form an accusative of a short *-a* stem noun, which should be *-am*, and an ablative, which should be *-ā*, would be identical, i.e. *-a*. We should expect that, when a text written in such a manner was rendered into a full orthography, whether at the time of translation into Pāli or subsequently, this would for the most part be done correctly, since the scribe's knowledge of the language would enable him to interpret from the context. Equally, however, it would not be surprising if, from time to time, either because his attention was wandering, or because the passage was genuinely difficult or ambiguous, the scribe misinterpreted his exemplar, and wrote *-am* where he should have written *-ā*.<sup>30</sup>

We find similar problems arising from a type of orthographic ambiguity which occurs in some later manuscripts, where the copyists used dots to denote *anusvāra* and also to indicate doubled consonants.<sup>31</sup> This is not, strictly speaking, the use of an *anusvāra* to indicate doubling, but the use of a dot which could be confused with the dot used for *anusvāra*. The end result of this scribal habit was similar to that which I have already mentioned. Without help from the context, it is difficult in a Middle Indo-Aryan text to tell whether, say, *lipati*,

---

<sup>27</sup> GDhp 63.

<sup>28</sup> *kāmarata* at A IV 438, 19 and *kammarata* at It 71, 16.

<sup>29</sup> Brough, 1962, 79.

<sup>30</sup> Brough, 1962, 266–67 (ad GDhp292).

<sup>31</sup> See Brough, 1954, 361.

written with a dot above the *-p-* in such a manuscript, stands for *lippiati* or *limpati*.

There is a similar potential ambiguity found in manuscripts written in Burmese script, where the *i-mātrā* is a circle above the consonant,<sup>32</sup> and the *anusvāra* is a (smaller) circle above the consonant. This therefore sometimes leads to a confusion between *-i* and *-am*. This phenomenon sometimes gives us a very useful criterion when investigating the early history of a particular manuscript tradition. In Sinhalese manuscripts we sometimes find *-am* where we should expect *-i*, and vice versa. Such an error should not occur in manuscripts in the Sinhalese tradition, because in the Sinhalese script *-i* and *-am* do not resemble each other at all. If, therefore, we find in a Sinhalese manuscript an error which we can explain as being due to the confusion of the two akṣaras, we can be certain that at some stage in its transmission the text was copied from a Burmese manuscript,<sup>33</sup> and the copyist was mistaken in his identification of what he was copying.

I spoke in the third lecture of the value which repetition had in an oral tradition. It is likely that another result of writing the canon down was that scribes began to realise that there was no need to write out all the repetitions in full, since it was quite easy for a reader to look back to the place in the manuscript where the passages had occurred before, whereas it was not so good to say, when reciting, “I am going to leave out the next few paragraphs because I said them ten minutes ago”. There arose, then, the practice which we find in the manuscripts of writing the syllables *pe* or *la* which are abbreviations for *peyyāla* (< Skt *paryāya*), which means something like “formula”. In a text then, it means “(here comes a) formula, i.e. a repeated passage”, which is the equivalent of “and so on down to ...”. Relying on such precedents, early European Pāli scholars also made abbreviations in their editions of Pāli texts, writing *par<sup>o</sup>* for *pariyādiyati*, etc. This was condemned by a number of Sinhalese scholars<sup>34</sup> who pointed out that “to interfere, either with words or letters, otherwise than is done by the *peyyālams* made use of by the Arahats (who recited the texts at the various recitations), has frequently been declared to be not good”. Consequently, volume I of the Pali Text Society’s edition of the Aṅguttara-nikāya, which abounded in such abbreviations, had to be withdrawn and a new edition made.

Such indignation was perhaps an over-reaction to “western tampering with sacred texts”, because these *pe* and *la* akṣaras are not always in the same place in

---

<sup>32</sup> See Norman, 1989B, 29–53 (48, note 120) (= CP IV, 92–123 [117, note 2]).

<sup>33</sup> Sadd 374, 29 quotes “*dānaṃ datvā ti taṃcetaṇaṃ pariyodāpetvā*” from Tikap-a 269, 20, where, however, *taṃ* is missing in Ee. We can postulate that it had been written/read as *ti* because of this Burmese phenomenon, and the second *ti* fell out by haplology.

<sup>34</sup> See Report for 1883, JPTS 1883, xii.



different traditions, e.g. the oldest Pāli manuscript we know of—four folios of the Vinaya from Nepal, which are about 1,000 years old—sometimes agrees with the Pali Text Society edition in writing *pe* or *la* in certain places,<sup>35</sup> but in other places gives no hint that there is an omission, even though the Pali Text Society edition *does* write *la*.<sup>36</sup>

It is sometimes not made clear in western editions whether the omissions which editors have made are those authorised by this ancient abbreviation system, or whether they are the editors' own innovations. Because the passages which have been abbreviated seem to vary, in this way, in the different manuscript traditions, someone who recently wished to make some calculations about the amount of repetition there was in a single *sutta* had to go to a great deal of trouble to compare different traditions of that *sutta*, to try to establish something approximating closely to the original unabbreviated version, with all its repetitions kept intact.

The etymology of the word *peyyāla*, with its eastern *l* for *r*, perhaps indicates that it came into use in Buddhism while the texts were still in an eastern dialect. That may mean that the texts had already been written down before the translation into a western dialect took place, or alternatively that this was a technical word, used in this sense in non-religious writing in both eastern and western dialects (as a borrowing from the East in the latter), and taken over into religion from that secular source. In just the same way we find *āva* (< Sanskrit *yāvat*) “(and so on) down to” used in the Aśokan inscriptions, and also the Jain Prakrit form *jāva* used in the same sense in Jain texts.

The fact that some characters were very similar to others in the Aśokan Brāhmī script led to errors being made by the scribes who perhaps misread a badly written akṣara in their exemplar. So, for example, because of the close similarity of *ca* and *va*, we sometimes find that one version of an Aśokan Edict has *va* where the others have *ca*, and vice versa. The same is true of *pa* and *sa*, and *ta* and *na*, etc. Comparable errors are found in texts written in the various scripts of South and South-east Asia, which are derived from the Aśokan Brāhmī, and those working with manuscripts written in such scripts quickly learn the characters which, because of their similarity, may be confused by the copyists.

As the shapes of the akṣaras developed, it sometimes happened that pairs of akṣaras, which at an earlier date were capable of confusion because of their similarity, became dissimilar in shape, while pairs of akṣaras which had originally been quite different, became more similar. Despite their common origin, the Sinhalese, Burmese, Thai and Cambodian scripts sometimes show

---

<sup>35</sup> e.g. Vin II 103, 21.

<sup>36</sup> Vin II 106,4. See von Hinüber, 1991B.

widely divergent patterns of development in the shape of akṣaras, so that two characters which are very similar in one script are perhaps quite different in another. This enables us to gain certain information from orthographical errors. If, for example, we find an error in script A which seems to have arisen from the confusion of two akṣaras which only resemble each other in script B, then this strongly suggests that the tradition was dependent, at some stage of its transmission, upon a manuscript written in script B.

The change from oral to written transmission led to certain changes being made to features which were oral in origin, e.g. those which are dependent upon a variation, or ambiguity, in pronunciation. The introduction of writing meant that it was no longer possible to be ambiguous. In the Suttanipāta we find, in two successive verses, puns dependent upon a non-aspirated and an aspirated form: *pakkodano* “I have boiled my rice” says Dhaniya the herdsman, and *akkodhano* “I am free from anger”, says the Buddha punningly. Writing this pun causes no difficulty, but if the pun depended upon two pronunciations of the same word, then there are problems, because writing forced copyists to choose one spelling or the other, in the same way that Sanskritising copyists, as we shall see in the sixth lecture, had to choose between two Sanskrit forms when translating puns which depended upon Middle Indo-Aryan homonyms. So in a verse in the Dhammapada<sup>37</sup> we find “For a bad deed done is not released immediately, like freshly extracted milk”, where “is released” is *muccati*. Although we might think that the verse has something to do with release from bad *kamma*, and milk being released from the cow, this really makes little sense.

The commentary, however, explains the verb as meaning “develops” (*parinamati*), and we can see that it must originally have been *mucchati*<sup>38</sup> “it coagulates”, i.e. a bad deed does not develop (its result) immediately, just as new milk does not coagulate. In the parallel versions, the Patna Dharmapada<sup>39</sup> reads *mucchati* and the Udāna-varga<sup>40</sup> reads *mūrchati*, so it is clear that the idea was understood in those traditions. It would appear that the Pāli tradition thought that the context of the first part of the line, with the mention of *kamma*, needed the verb *muccati*, while the second part needed *mucchati*, i.e. there was a pun dependent upon a non-aspirated and an aspirated pronunciation. The copyist could, however, only write one of the two and he chose, wrongly, to adopt *muccati*, and this incorrect reading is found, as far as I know, in all manuscripts of both the Dhammapada and its commentary.

---

<sup>37</sup> Dh 71.

<sup>38</sup> See Morris, 1884, 92.

<sup>39</sup> PDhp 107.

<sup>40</sup> Udāna-v 9.17.

As is well known, the oral transmission of the Vedas continued for many centuries after the time of Aśoka. As far as we know, although writing was available it was not adopted for Vedic purposes. Similarly, although the Theravādin tradition states that the Pāli canon was written down in the first century B.C.E., oral recitation of Pāli texts continued and still continues to this day. We cannot tell how long the official *bhāṇaka* sort of oral tradition and the written tradition continued side by side, but it was perhaps not very long. The writing errors, which I mentioned earlier, and which seem to indicate that the oral tradition had been lost, must have occurred at an early date, because they could only happen as long as double consonants (and long vowels) were not written and we know that the facility for doing this was soon developed.

Writing down also had an effect upon the contents of the Theravādin canon. There is some doubt about the state of the canon when it was written down. We do not, for example, know whether it was complete, i.e. whether it was in the form in which we find it today, or not, and we may well wonder whether any texts contain anything which would enable us to identify it as material added after the canon had been committed to writing.

As far as I can judge, once the Theravādin canon had been written down, very little further change was made to it. From the point of view of its language, we should have expected anything added in Sri Lanka to show traces of the local Prakrit, but there are few signs of borrowings from Sinhalese Prakrit being inserted into it, and most of the borrowings which have been suspected can be explained otherwise.<sup>41</sup> The process of Sanskritisation remained incomplete, which suggests that nothing further was done after the canon had been written down. Nevertheless, the explanations given by the commentaries in later centuries show that the canon was not fixed absolutely by the process of writing it down. The system of reciting and approving the form of *suttas* at *saṅgītis* should have resulted in the elimination of all variations, but it is clear that the writing down of the canon did not, in itself, lead to the disappearance of readings which had not been preferred at the various *saṅgītis*, and this would support the view that the system of *bhāṇakas* continued, in some form or other, for some time, with some reciters still keeping alive readings not found in the written texts. It seems that such “unauthorised” readings, if still recited, could easily creep back into a text, if a scribe<sup>42</sup> heard them and reintroduced them while he was copying the text. This would account for the number of variant readings which we find mentioned in the commentaries.

---

<sup>41</sup> See Norman, 1978, 28–47 (32) (= *CP* II, 30–51 [34]).

<sup>42</sup> See Norman, 1984–85, 1–14 (13) (= *CP* III, 126–36 [135]).

Despite the separation of the Sinhalese Buddhists from North India,<sup>43</sup> it seems that literary material continued to reach Sri Lanka, but there is no evidence for the addition of any complete text to the Theravādin canon after the Ālokavihāra *saṅgīti*. An origin in North India is postulated for the Milindapañha,<sup>44</sup> the Peṭakopadesa and the Nettippakarāṇa. The fact that these texts are highly regarded by the commentators, but are not given canonical status,<sup>45</sup> suggests that they arrived in Sri Lanka after the closure of the canon, which presumably occurred at the time when it was committed to writing. This view is supported by the fact that these post-canonical works contain a number of verses and other utterances ascribed to the Buddha and various eminent theras, which are not found in the canon. Nevertheless, it seems that there was no attempt made to add such verses to the canon, even though it would have been a simple matter to insert them into the Dhammapada or the Theragāthā.

Although there are references to writing in the canon, there are only two which refer to religious texts being written. They are in the Vinaya, and both of them are in the Parivāra, the appendix to the Vinaya. At the end of the first eight (of 16) sections of the first chapter, there is a statement that “these eight sections are written in a manner for recitation”,<sup>46</sup> while at the end of the book, after the words “the Parivāra is finished”,<sup>47</sup> there is a statement that Dīpanāma, having asked various questions about the ways of former teachers, thinking out this epitome of the details of the middle way of study, had it written down for the bringing of happiness to disciples. It seems, however, unlikely that if the whole of the Parivāra was composed after the time the canon was written down, i.e. if it was a late addition to the canon, it would have had those two references to writing inserted in the way they are. I can see no good reason for doubting that the two statements are interpolations, added when the Parivāra, together with the rest of the canon, was written down.

One result of the writing down of the canon was that the stranglehold of the *bhāṇakas* was broken, and the control which they had had over the contents of the *nikāyas* was relaxed. At the beginning of the oral tradition they must have observed the Buddha’s instruction about the four *mahāpadesas*,<sup>48</sup> the four references to authority: the Buddha, a community with elders, a group of elders,

---

<sup>43</sup> The break between North India and Ceylon was clearly not an abrupt one, or even a complete one, for Theravādins continued to reside near Bodhgayā for some centuries. The fame of the Sinhalese commentaries was sufficiently widespread in North India to attract Buddhaghosa to Ceylon.

<sup>44</sup> See Norman, 1983C, 108, 110, 111.

<sup>45</sup> For the question of the canonicity of these texts in Burma, see the discussion referred to in the eighth lecture.

<sup>46</sup> Vin V 48, 29.

<sup>47</sup> *Parivāro niṭṭhito*, Vin V 226, 6–7.

<sup>48</sup> D II 123–26.

and a single elder, and checked whether any teaching said to have been obtained from these sources was consistent with the *sutta* and *vinaya* which the *saṅgha* already had. As time passed, however, and less and less hitherto unknown teaching was brought forward for acceptance, we can assume that the canon, or at least the various *nikāyas* which were in the hands of the *bhāṇakas*, was closed and no further additions could be made, except, perhaps, in such small ways as adding extra *apadānas* to the *Apadāna* or perhaps extra verses to the Thera- and Therī-gāthā. There was no way of inserting an entirely new *sutta* into a *nikāya* unless the *bhāṇakas* of that *nikāya* could be persuaded to accept it.

In the third lecture I spoke of the bhikkhu Ariṭṭha, who, you will remember, totally misunderstood the purport of the Buddha's teachings about stumbling blocks.<sup>49</sup> As long as the *bhāṇakas* recited the *sutta* which made the position clear, then any attempt which Ariṭṭha (or others who thought like him) might have made to pretend that his view was authorised by the Buddha, by inventing a *sutta* which authenticated it, would be unsuccessful, because the *bhāṇakas* would not have admitted a new *sutta* which included a view condemned by the Buddha and which was, therefore, not consistent with the rest of the canon.

We might also think of the bhikkhu Sāti, who, as we read in the *Majjhima-nikāya*,<sup>50</sup> so misunderstood the Buddha's teaching that he thought it was "consciousness" (*viññāṇa*) which continued in *saṃsāra*.<sup>51</sup> This would appear to be a recollection by Sāti of a teaching similar to that found in the *Bṛhad-Āraṇyaka Upaniṣad* that *viññāna* continues:<sup>52</sup> "This great being, endless, unlimited, consisting of nothing but intelligence". This view was refuted by the Buddha, who pointed out that he had frequently taught that "Without a cause there is no origination of consciousness".<sup>53</sup> Once again, Sāti had no chance of inserting his view into a *nikāya*.

Nor would it be possible for such views to be inserted into the *nikāyas*, even after the introduction of the use of writing, as long as the *bhāṇaka* tradition continued alongside writing, as I have suggested it did, for some time, in the Theravādin tradition.

On the other hand, once the various schools of Buddhism had started to make use of writing, it was not difficult to produce a text and say that it was *Buddhavacana*, as long as there was no *bhāṇaka* tradition to refute the claim. You will know that the Buddha stated, as reported in Theravādin texts, that there

<sup>49</sup> Alagaddūpamasutta, M I 130–42.

<sup>50</sup> M I 256–71.

<sup>51</sup> *tad ev' idam viññāṇam sandhāvati saṃsārati, anaññaṃ*, M I 256, 19–20.

<sup>52</sup> *idam mahad bhūtam anantam apāraṃ vijñāna-ghana eva*, BU p II.4.12.

<sup>53</sup> *aññatra paccayā n' atthi viññāṇassa sambhavo*, M I 258, 20.

was no “teacher’s fist”,<sup>54</sup> as far as he was concerned, i.e. he was not keeping anything back for an élite, but was making his teaching known to all of his followers who wished to listen. There developed, however, a view in some Buddhist schools that what the Buddha had said openly was intended only for the masses. There was really another, hidden, meaning which the Buddha imparted only to a chosen few. For such schools, the adoption of writing enabled them to claim that their views were indeed *Buddhavacana*.

Richard Gombrich has dealt with this in the context of the rise of the Mahāyāna,<sup>55</sup> but it is possible that not just Mahāyāna, but also dissident Hīnayāna sects benefitted from the use of writing. Since no one ever accuses the Abhayagirivāsins, the opponents of the Mahāvihāravāsins, of transmitting their scriptures in some language other than Pāli, it is probable that their canon was in Pāli. Nevertheless, their version of the Buddhavaṃsa, as far as can be judged from the small portion which is preserved in Tibetan, does not agree with the Theravādin Buddhavaṃsa, and must therefore have been added to their body of scriptures at a time when the *bhāṇaka* system had been by-passed. It is quite possible that they were able to add to their scriptures in this way, by making use of writing. The way in which the so-called quasi-canonical texts came into existence in the Middle Ages in Sri Lanka and South-east Asia is another indication of the way in which the fact that texts were written down enabled them to be accepted by some Buddhists, at least, in a way which would have been impossible if the *bhāṇakas* were still transmitting all texts orally.

Paradoxically, then, if the writing down of the Theravādin canon may be presumed to have stopped the further Sanskritisation of Pāli and prevented the insertion of new *suttas* into the *nikāyas*, it was writing which made possible the production and acceptance of Mahāyāna and other texts. We may suppose that, to a very large extent, the advent of writing meant that an already existent canon was fixed when it was written down, but writing allowed new canons to come into effect because the authors did not have to point to a long *bhāṇaka* tradition of the texts, which alone, before the use of writing, could prove that they were *Buddhavacana*.

In view of this connection which has been seen between writing and the Mahāyāna, it is not unreasonable to believe that the writing down of the Theravādin canon was not due simply to a threatened breakdown in the *bhāṇaka* system of transmission in Sri Lanka, and the social, political and economic conditions of the time, as the Pāli commentarial tradition suggests, and as I proposed earlier, but also to a need to give an authenticity and prestige to the Theravādin canon *vis-à-vis* the written texts of other schools. If the beginnings

---

<sup>54</sup> *na tatth’ Ānanda Tathāgatassa dhammesu ācariya-muṭṭhi*, D II 100, 4 = S V 153, 19.

<sup>55</sup> Gombrich, 1988, 29–46.

of the Mahāyāna, and therefore religious writing, can be dated to the second century B.C.E., then it is likely that Hīnayāna texts were also being committed to writing, in North India if not in Sri Lanka, at that time.

Since the social and religious conditions which had existed at the time of the Buddha had by then changed greatly, and since Pāli and the literary forms of other Middle Indo-Aryan dialects were now almost as much out of touch with the languages of the common people as Sanskrit had seemed 400 years before, it is probable that many such texts were being written in Sanskrit—the language of culture—as opposed to being translated into it.