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The Composition and Transmission of
Early Buddhist Texts
with Specific Reference to Sutras

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ALLON MARK, *The Composition and Transmission of Early Buddhist Texts with Specific Reference to Sutras* (Bochum/Freiburg): Projekt Verlag, 2021. XI, 149 pp. CAN \$33.00 (hc). ISBN 978-3-89733-552-3-9.

The Composition and Transmission of Early Buddhist Texts with Specific Reference to Sutras is Mark Allon's latest contribution to the development of early Buddhist scriptures through an in-depth textual and discourse analysis. It is built on his accumulation of thorough research on early Buddhist scriptures, combining his knowledge of manuscripts and various Indic languages. His expertise covers the Tipitaka and languages such as Gāndhārī, Pāli, and Sanskrit. Allon utilizes discourse and historical analysis to study how the early texts were composed and transmitted, in addition to their evolution. He presents his ideas by cross-examining the various linguistic features of texts. This book discusses the much-debated originality and development of the Pāli canon. Due to the book's comprehensive nature, it is a valuable source for researchers, graduate students and readers with a basic historical background in early Buddhism, and those interested in further investigating the evolution and transmissions of early Pāli texts. Students with knowledge of Pāli will find the examples provided by Allon to be particularly helpful in sutta analysis.

Allon's approach involves a detailed textual examination of the differences among Pāli, Gāndhārī and Sanskrit linguistics. Aside from an analysis of verses from the Dhammapada and Udānavargas, Allon also analyzes the habits and characteristics of monastic communities and lay follower communities, as well as the distinctions in textual transmission among the geographical areas of Gandhara, Punjab and Sri Lanka (48). Owing to the broad array of topics that are covered in a short volume, it is an excellent read for anyone who has background knowledge of the early Pāli canon and those who require direction in understanding the

textual development occurring between the Buddha's time (5th century BCE) and the first written suttas (1st Century BCE).

Chapter One provides a synopsis of the book's structure with an overview of contemporary scholars' positions regarding the textual authenticity and evolution of the Pāli Canon. In this brief chapter, Allon summarizes his previous research on the transmission of texts and provides a historical overview of surviving manuscripts and problems with the dating of texts. He concludes that though the "changes in structure and wording" of Pāli texts took place in the post-Aśokan period (mid-3rd Century BCE), the main teachings, account of events, and "much of the wording is likely to stem from the period immediately after the death of the Buddha" (4). He further denies claims that parallel versions between Pāli and Sanskrit texts were the result of a "joint endeavour of different Buddhist schools" in favour of his position that monastic communities "were well aware of each other's texts and were influenced by each other" (6). Finally, Allon situates the main functions of the Dhammapada/Udānavargas within the community and concludes that the texts served the dual purpose of instruction and attracting converts, including monastics, lay people, and wealthy patrons including kings or merchants (7-8).

Chapter Two is a survey of the style and the different functions of prose and verse in early Buddhist texts. Allon presents evidence of editing based on a study of the stylistic features of the texts. He establishes that "prose was the medium preferred by the early Buddhist community" due to "limitations imposed by the metrical structures of verse" (9). Prose was essential in facilitating "the successful transmission of their texts" (9). Allon describes the texts as "highly structured and stylized, extremely formulaic and repetitive" and draws examples of the formulaic patterns from the Mūlapariyāya-Sutta and Ākaṅkheyya-Sutta (10-11).

To cite an example, the Buddha's teachings were "expressed through four semi-synonymous verbs" that were "arranged according to a waxing number of syllables" (14). The waxing syllable patterns were repeated in phrasal units which were composed in metrical styles.¹ Such constructions purposely enriched verbal recitation, musical cadence and aided in memorization. Allon discusses how a rare word such as "kaṭṭhala," meaning stone or stick, was chosen for its appealing recitation sound, instead of a more common word like "silā" to form a waxing syllable pattern in the Sattavassa Sutta (SN I 123), "kumārikāyo vā kaṭṭhena vā kaṭṭhalāya" (15). Together, the stylistic features of prose, sound and metrical similarities, for example, served as a basic formula to help the community to memorize and to transmit the texts (19-20).

In Chapter Three, Allon presents his argument on how the Pali texts were memorized and recited by monastic communities and laypeople. He begins by examining the Buddha's response to the monk Soṇa in Vinaya passages from the Udāna and Mahāvagga, asserting that the function of the passages was to train new monastics (21-22). He also discusses the recitation of the Aṭṭhakavagga by householders, both laymen and laywomen, who received the transmission of teachings from monastics. The process of reciting amongst monastics followed a graduated approach of first learning the suttas that were "well grasped" before moving to the stages of mastering the tradition (āgatāgamā), and finally becoming an expert in the Dhamma (dhammadharā), a process that ensured the continuity of the scriptures (23). Lastly, he describes the mastery of the Pātimokkha by monastics as a "requisite for ordaining and instructing others" and gives an overview of the various ways in which the Pātimokkha was either partially or fully recited (24).

¹ Waxing syllable pattern is a form of arranging the sequence of synonyms by the number of syllables in ascending order.

After the functions of various literary devices are examined, Chapter Four is Allon's proposal of how texts were formed into larger collections. He primarily studied the compilation of the nikāyas and the verse collections of the Dhammapada, Theragāthā, and Therīgāthā which were organized into "manageable sub-divisions, such as vagga, saṃyutta and nipātas" (27). There was a systematic method of collecting suttas into groups of ten, based on the number of fingers on a hand, or larger groups of 50, for instance (27). Suttas could also be grouped according to genre or the number of verses within the suttas, which were arranged in ascending order from the least to most number of verses (27). Another method of grouping suttas was based on the topic or subject such as dependent arising (paṭiccasamuppāda) or by the audience such as deities, kings, monks, or ascetics, for instance (30). Allon supports his points by providing a detailed analysis of the topic of dependent arising in each of the suttas within the Āhāra-vagga group. He further analyzes the different roles of reciters such as bhāṇakas and saṃgītāras who performed different tasks in the collection process and preservation of the canon (43). Lastly, Allon claims that the motivation to create a collection of suttas was based on creating "a sense of balance and neatness" (as was the case with the Aṅguttara-Nikāya) and a "comprehensive" collection (also in the case of the Saṃyutta-Nikāya) that would "rival religious groups such as the Jains, or possibly with other Buddhist communities, or some combination of these" (38).

In Chapter Five, Allon illustrates his thesis that the suttas were subject to change and editing. In the lengthy chapter, which comprises over one third of the volume, Allon begins by comparing parallel texts in the Pāli, Gāndhārī, Prakrit, Sanskrit, Chinese and Tibetan versions, drawing attention to the complexity and general differences between parallel texts. He notes that differences among parallel or partial-parallel texts

were caused by the change of language, the role of the bhānaka or reciters, the authority of the teacher, or by the geographical isolation or separation of the community, among a comprehensive list of other factors (47). Consequently, the factors led to differences in “the sequence of events and order,” “the arrangement of information” or “the names of people and places,” to name a few, in the parallel texts (47-48). Following Allon’s comprehensive summary of the differences among parallel texts, he provides an extensive analysis of factors such as the change of language or modification of the wording by examining the verses. Allon’s approach is systematic by his arrangement of parallel verses in Pāli, Gāndhārī, Prakrit and Sanskrit, for example, into sequences or tables before delving into a detailed discussion of the variations in words, expressions and structure. For example, in the parallel versions of Sāmaññaphala Sutta (DN I 47), a conversation is recounted between King Ajātaśatru and his courtiers and ministers about who he should visit “to calm or inspire his mind” (68). Allon discovers multiple variations, discussed below,

Here the different versions exhibit variation in the question or questions the king asks, whether only ministers are asked or both courtiers and ministers, whether they are named or not and if named, what name they bear, and what activity or rival teacher each recommends (69).

His analysis reveals that while some variations are only minor, others are significant.² Allon approaches the text through two schemes, the narrative and the doctrine, which is exceptional as it reinforces his position that the narrative parts might have undergone more elaborations,

² Allon references his previous works on the topic of variations in Three Gāndhārī Ekottarikāgama-Type Sūtras: British Library Kharoṣṭhī Fragments 12 and 14, Gāndhāran Buddhist Texts 2 (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2001): 30.

while the doctrinal portions were more strictly adhered to (73). Allon continues, “These developments are certainly intentional, the result of creative minds, no doubt motivated by a desire to ever improve the story and make it more compelling” (73). He further examines parallel verses from the Pātimokkha and asserts, for example, that variations in the Vinaya rules “resulted from active desire to clarify and to smooth awkward formulations” (92). He concludes that the changes did not “alter the meaning of the rules” and instead, made “the meaning of the rule clearer and therefore less likely to be misunderstood” (92). Lastly, Allon investigates the creation of new sutras and verses by monastic communities which were “particularly evident in the āgamas of the Sarvāstivādins and Mūlasarvāstivādins” (106). His discussion draws from the monk-scholar Bhikkhu Anālayo’s research on the Dīgha-Nikāya and Allon cautions that texts without a parallel version are not necessarily an indicator of a new or late text; rather, the lack of parallel versions points to “the limited number of nikāyas/āgamas at our disposal,” pointing to the lack of available manuscripts (108).

Finally, in Chapter Six Allon addresses the question of how the reciter communities responded to the changes in the text “who had invested a huge amount of time and effort into memorizing texts” (109). Before delving further, he reviews the recent works on early text fixation by contrasting two divisions of scholarly views that 1) the texts were the product of improvisation (as suggested by Cousins and McGovern³) or 2) the “early Buddhist texts were designed as fixed texts” (as

³ See Lance Cousins, “Pali Oral Literature,” *Buddhism: Critical Concepts in Religious Studies I* (2005): 96–104, and Nathan McGovern, “Protestant Presuppositions and the Study of the Early Buddhist Oral Tradition,” *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 42 (2019): 449–491.

suggested by Anālayo, Gombrich, and Wynne) (109-110).⁴ Allon takes the position of the middle path in his argument. He disagrees with the definition of improvisation proposed by McGovern who states that “‘improvisation’ simply means that the text as a whole was not memorized word-for-word” (110).⁵ Allon claims that McGovern’s notion of improvisation pertained to Indian oral epics and is not applicable to Buddhist texts. Allon responds that the intentional changes that were made cannot be considered to be an improvisation because the restructuring of the textual blocks or core framework of the suttas were the results of consensus decision-making by the communities (110). He draws attention to the nuances of McGovern’s theory that improvisation occurred when changes were made to a fixed formula of block verses during the recitation, due to the use of contrasting particles and synonyms (111).⁶ While

4 a) See both of Bhikkhu Anālayo’s articles: “Oral Dimensions of Pāli Discourses: Pericopes, Other Mnemonic Techniques, and the Oral Performance Context,” *Canadian Journal of Buddhist Studies* 3 (2007): 5–33, and “The Vicissitudes of Memory and Early Buddhist Oral Transmission,” *Canadian Journal of Buddhist Studies* 5 (2009): 5–19.

b) Richard Gombrich opines that the precise wording of the suttas was a necessity due to the complexity of the teachings. See his “How the Mahāyāna Began,” *The Buddhist Forum* I (2012): 21–30.

5 Allon’s quote of Nathan McGovern in “Protestant Presuppositions and the Study of the Early Buddhist Oral Tradition,” *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 42 (2019): 461.

6 McGovern opines that early Buddhist texts were recited verbatim. See his “Protestant Presuppositions and the Study of the Early Buddhist Oral Tradition,” *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 42 (2019): 449–491. Schulman, on the other hand, argues on the contrary. He argues that while memorization in sangha communities took place, the contents of the recitations were expanded from stock formulae rather than the literal memorization of the entire *sutta*. The compositions did not intend to reflect pure historical happenings, but they were composed for the purposes of memorization and chanting. More details of Schulman’s arguments can be found in his “Looking for Samatha and Vipassanā in the Early Suttas: What, actually, are the Texts?” *Indian International Journal of Buddhist Studies* 20 (2019): 95–141, his “Orality and Creativity in Early Buddhist Discourses,” *The Language of the Sūtras* (Berkeley: Mangalam

McGovern's interpretation of improvisation is rather strict, Allon's perspective allows a degree of leniency to the notion that "intentional change is not improvisation, but [it is] conscious change to text that is being transmitted as a fixed text" (111). Allon claims that his research supports the second view, in part, that the texts were fixed at the time of the Buddha but he clarifies that the texts were not to be seen as "frozen snapshots of oral performances, but formal 'editions' sanctioned by the community concerned" (110). In other words, his middle view can be summarized by the notions that the texts were not purely innovated by the monks (the first view), and the sangha was also not adverse to making changes (the second view). Intentional changes were made when the suttas were formally adopted by the monastic community to suit the changing environment and audience.

Towards the end of Chapter 6, Allon re-asserts his position that the suttas were subject to intentional editing which involved an approval process. While the texts were intended to be memorized and transmitted, they were not intended to be memorized verbatim. He adds that the massive task of editing the suttas occurred gradually in which differences could be detected among the Pāli, Gāndhārī and Sanskrit versions, which corresponded with the consensus of the sangha and the approval of the elders (120). As the needs of the sangha shifted throughout time and the places of preaching changed, the sangha also shifted their focus from complying to the literal words of the texts to the focus on the meaning interpretation (110). Allon finds common grounds with Shulman who claims that community recitations were imperative to the early transmission of Buddhist texts. He begs the question concerning the repetitive lines within the suttas, "Why not just report what happened

Press, 2021), and his *Visions of the Buddha: Creative Dimensions of Early Buddhist Scripture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).

and what the Buddha said in normal speech as a preacher would?” (111). He continues, “The Buddha would not have spoken in the way he is depicted as speaking in these texts,” and clarifies that the changes were necessary for the sake of oral transmission (111). Following a review of scholarly positions on textual development, Allon returns to his initial question about how reciter communities adapted to textual transitions. He summarizes his research that the contents of the texts were derived from a base text and were later expanded from stock formulae based on emotive and aesthetic qualities. He proposes “a more likely scenario” that monastic preachers memorized fixed texts but gave a “free-flowing natural sermon” to support their teaching purposes or to meet audience expectations, for instance (112). Following this discussion, Allon tackles the murky issue of estimating the timeline in which the changes took place. He asserts that “the corpus of sutras transmitted by the Buddhist community prior to the Aśokan period in the mid-3rd century BCE was relatively homogenous” and the changes most likely took place in the ensuing 4th to 5th centuries up to the 1st and 2nd centuries CE (119). He supports his theory with a discussion of parallel texts, namely the *nikāyas*, from two collections of manuscripts, the British Library *Kharoṣṭhī* manuscripts and the Senior *Kharoṣṭhī* manuscripts of a later date, both which are believed to stem from the same monastic community, the *Dharmaguptaka* in Gandhara (120). By comparing the *sutta* formulas, he concluded that changes were still being made in the early centuries CE (120).

A question that naturally arises following Allon’s discussion is, how did the *sangha* react to the intentional redactions? Were there cases of disagreement or opposition about the textual differences within the same monastic communities, or were the changes, which might have been seen as improvements, well-received? While Allon raises the point that the *sangha* gathered periodically for group recitations and therefore, the variations in the texts must have been noticed by the monks

who memorized the communal recitations, readers are left guessing about the attitudes of both the monastics and laypeople (92, 109). Allon's exploration on this phenomenon is brief. He highlights a scenario "where the monastic community was inclined to follow the highly revered senior monk's altered recitation of the monastic rules out of respect and inability to challenge the alteration" but more light could be shed on the topic (92). In defense of Allon, it remains to be seen whether there is textual evidence to reflect the community's reaction to the alterations. Allon's research opens new doorways for potential discovery and he has established the groundwork for those who might be interested in contributing new research to this discussion.

Given the short length of the book, which is less than 150 pages, Allon's analysis of the style and textual features of early Buddhist texts is relatively detailed. Succinct yet not short of powerful arguments, Allon provides an exceptional analysis on the formulae adopted in early textual construction before the texts were initially put into writing around the 1st Century BCE. His views about the division of tasks in the collection and preservation process of the canon are also echoed by Skilling, who claims that the *saṅgītikāras*, *bhāṇakas*, and *dharas* acted as editors, reciters and expert custodians, respectively.⁷ However, Allon's research represents a new contribution to knowledge on early textual construction as his opinion is distinct from the popularly held view that the formulae were merely components of the text. For instance, in Chapter 5, he asserts that the fundamental role of the formulae in the Pāli Nikāyas served as metaphorical germs whereby the rest of the text expanded from, and he supports his analysis with a comparison of the *Dārukkhandhopama Sutta* in three languages (115). Allon's contribution

⁷ See Peter Skilling, *Research on the Madhyama-Agama* (Taipei: Dharma Drum Corporation, 1993): 269-326.

to knowledge is also evidenced by his contrast and comparison of theories of textual development in light of his research. For example, he agrees that the compositions have multiple purposes beyond their functions as pure recordings of the teachings. Allon agrees with Shulman that the texts functioned to preserve the Buddha's doctrines as a priority (117)⁸; however, Allon adds his original insight to the function of texts. He claims that the texts did not directly reflect how the Buddha taught or how the sangha engaged with the teachings. Allon describes early Buddhist texts as affective, creative and aesthetic expressions with literary polishes (117). Specialists in early Buddhist suttas will find his in-depth work to be a beneficial resource.

Notes on the Contributor(s)

Sylvia Chan, a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Kelaniya, has an MBA from Keele University in England and a Master's degree in Buddhist Studies from the University of Hong Kong in 2017. Her earlier career in commercial marketing focused on analyzing and influencing purchasing behaviours by constructing concepts around those products. These earlier influences led to her later abandonment of materialism in favour of pursuing deconstructionism. Since then, she has explored early Buddhism, Pāli literature, the historical development of early Buddhist texts, and the impact of the teachings and practices on modern societies. Buddhism has provided an outlet for her to ponder deeply and to turn inwards and has provided her with a closer look at the process of concept formation.

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⁸ See Eviatar Shulman's *Visions of the Buddha Creative Dimensions of Early Buddhist Scripture* (Oxford University Press, 2021).

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