

Beginnings: The Pali Suttas

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Respectfully dedicated
to my upajjhāya,
Venerable Phra Somdet Ñānasamvara

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Introduction

Where does one begin? This is obviously the first question. And when the issue at hand is the manifest need to explore and resolve the root-problem of our personal existence, then this question takes on a primacy in terms not only of sequence but of importance. One begins, of course, from where one is, for from where else can one begin? Herein the intelligent person, he who does not shrink from unpleasant truths, will acknowledge the problem. He may describe it in any of a number of ways — anxiety, loneliness, insufficiency, frustration, inconstancy, boredom, uncertainty, bondage, meaninglessness, impermanence, despair — but however it appears it will be seen, if it is seen at all, to be fundamental, for it is bound up in one way or another with a sense of one's own mortality.

When we apprehend the ever-present possibility of our own immediate dying, — the impossible possibility, says Heidegger, — then any notions we may have about our golden and glittering prospects in the world will be seen to be illusory inasmuch as they, and we as well, end in death.[1] The gold is now seen for the leaden bondage that it really is, the alchemy has failed, and we see ourselves to be in perpetual subjugation to the uncertainty inherent in the world. And we then feel, deeply, the need to act.

There must be release from this overwhelming fact of our own mortality: we cannot believe otherwise. But, equally certain, we don't know the way to that release else, surely, we would already have taken it. Can we find this way? Fine and earnest people have tried before us — that we know — and have admitted failure. Our task, then, cannot be easy. But having recognized our existence in this world as inherently unsatisfactory, we now sense the utter necessity of seeking the means to transcend it. We are unwilling to plunge yet again — again! — into that endless round of pastimes wherein most people waste their lives in the effort to avoid facing the truth of their own mortal existence. Although we don't know the way ourselves, it is yet possible that there exists some teacher, some teaching, to provide guidance. And so we look about us, and we find... orators, teachers, therapists, hucksters, salvation-mongers, apostles, psychologists, preachers, gurus, swamis, saviours and salesmen by the score, each offering his own brand of salvation. And thus we arrive again at our original question: where does one begin?

They can't all be right. If it were so easy, we would have no need of a teacher, for we and everyone else would already have done the work ourselves. Besides, many of these teachings, anti-teachings, disciplines, non-disciplines and weekends are manifestly in contradiction with one another and sometimes even with themselves, both in doctrine and in practice. And therefore, unless we abandon consistency of both thought and effort, we must acknowledge the importance of choosing among them intelligently, unless we believe them to be uniformly mistaken, in which case the choice would again seem unimportant. For the choice we make will be our beginning, and from that beginning — made wisely or foolishly — everything else will follow.

Nor need we believe ourselves to be totally incompetent to make that choice. For although it is a truism that, as is sometimes argued, the only way to know for certain which teaching or teachings are in accordance with truth is to see truth for oneself, yet we can even now make a reasonable assessment of these teachings. To be unenlightened is not to know nothing; for were that the case we should not long survive in this uncertain world. We are free from confusion at least to the extent that we now see the need to free ourselves from it totally.[2] Having acknowledged the problem, we can sort out from among those teachings which offer themselves to us those that at least address themselves to that problem from those that merely pander in one way or another to the world's

proclivity for any comfortable, or even uncomfortable, notion in order to avoid facing the problem. For underlying each practice will be a doctrine or general attitude, and from this we can come to know the general nature of each teaching and can thereby separate the relevant from the superfluous. And thus it is that, eventually, we will come to the Buddha's Teaching.

1. "This body will perish; it's old;
a nest of distress.
It breaks up, this putrid mold:
life ends in death." — Dh. 148

2. "The fool who does his folly see
is a sage to that degree.
Who to sagacity gives airs,
that fool, he is 'A fool!' declared." — Dh. 63

The Buddha's Teaching

The Buddha's Teaching: what images it conjures — compassion, serenity, acquiescence, wisdom, bliss, selflessness. In such terms is it often described, even from afar, even among those who know only its general outlines. Such is the image of this Teaching that is in world-wide circulation; and with such qualities does it invite seekers of peace to take a closer look. With such a reputation it may perhaps prove to be the fount of advice and guidance we so need. And therefore we eagerly approach it, to find... Theravāda Buddhism, Mahāyāna, Ch'an, Korean Zen, Vajrayāna, Tantric and dozens of other sects and sub-sects, large and small, new and old, all claiming to be the Teaching of the Buddha. And so it is that again we return to our original question: Where does one begin?

Are these schools different in name only? Or do they differ as well in attitude, approach, doctrine and practice? Is all one? Is all a diversity? Does nothing really exist? Does everything really exist? Or are these disparate views merely worldly wisdom, best abandoned in favour of seeing that "Whatever is arises dependent on conditions and is not without conditions"? Must we save others before we will be able to save ourselves? Or must we save ourselves before we will be in a position to save others? Is everything already perfect? Or is it only suffering that arises, suffering that ceases? Do we all have Buddha Nature? Or is all existence empty, without essence? Will we all eventually arrive at eternal salvation? Or do only those achieve liberation who see that all conditions are impermanent? Is nibbāna (Skt. nirvāna) to be found in samsāra, the round of existences, or are they mutually exclusive? What is the sound of one hand clapping?

If we accept that truth, whatever else it may be, is at least not self-contradictory, then the question necessarily arises: which among these paths, diverse and often at odds with one another, will offer us that way to liberation which we seek?[3] And if these teachings are all different — or even if they are not — which of them is that Teaching set forth 2,500 years ago by a certain member of the Gotama family of the Sakyan clan, in northern India, known today as the Awakened One, the Buddha? If it were only possible to come to a reasonable judgement on this point, then we might be able with one stroke to cut through the tangle of confusion we meet with when we inquire into the nature of "Buddhism". For we will then find — if the Teaching lives up to its reputation — one coherent, sufficient and, above all, relevant Teaching which can serve as a standard in our inquiry into the nature of our mortal existence. And perhaps this is possible.

We know that the Pali Suttas — the discourses in the Pali language — are acknowledged by all Buddhist schools to be the oldest record we have of the Buddha's Teaching. We know that nearly a century ago the scholars of the West performed an about-face from their original majority position and now fully acknowledge the primacy, as regards age, of those Suttas. But we also know that certain objections have been raised with regard to the origin and transmission of those discourses. Are these objections valid? What is the difference here, if any, between "oldest" and "original"? How trustworthy are these texts as we now have them? With what degree of confidence are we able to ascertain the truth of the matter? Fortunately, it is possible to know, with reasonable confidence, the way in which these texts were first gathered together and then handed down to us. Let us inquire.

3. If one does not accept that truth is at least consistent with itself — i.e. that truth is not false — then this question will not arise. Instead, one will remain lost in one's inconsistencies and will fail to see that coherent movement wherein one can achieve freedom from confusion and anxiety.

Syncretism?

It may be objected at this point (or even sooner) that all this inquiry is absurd and that the “obvious” approach, for goodness sake, is to take whatever is useful wherever we find it and to get on with the thing already instead of dancing about the starting line for, after all, truth isn’t the exclusive preserve of any one narrow sectarian doctrine, is it? And this eclectic attitude sounds very good until one tries to “get on with the thing” by taking “whatever is useful” etc., for it is at precisely this point — the point of beginning — that the question arises: what is useful? And what merely seems to our blind eyes to be so? Without a standard we would be unable to choose between meditation, ascetic austerities, or prayers to the heavens as paths to liberation. It is precisely this — a standard — that we felt ourselves to be in need of when we decided to seek guidance beyond our personal opinions and judgements.

Although the question of specific doctrines lies outside our present inquiry (for we are not yet well-placed to make the necessary distinctions), something can nevertheless be said about the approach to specific doctrines, i.e. making a beginning. Here the question is not “Where does one begin?” but “How does one begin?”: perhaps the question that immediately follows upon “where?” and which is still prior to any actual beginning. And there seem to be two general answers to this question, How does one begin?, which we can conveniently label as the “syncretistic” approach and the “crystalline” approach.

In the syncretistic approach one views spiritual teachings as if they were a smorgasboard spread out on an enormous table, to be partaken of by all who seek spiritual sustenance. The seeker, plate in hand, helps himself to whatever he cares to, in whatever quantity and variety appeals to him — let’s see now, a bit of TM on toast, some Karma Yoga and cole slaw, a dash of Sufism for spice, a bit of this, a bit of that — and if he has chosen wisely, he will consume, spiritually, a satisfying and nutritious blend which — who knows — just might lead to....

The crystalline approach, on the other hand, assumes that no truth can be more consistent or relevant than the teaching by which it is revealed, and that therefore a teaching that truly leads — i.e. is one-pointed and consistent rather than an amorphous collection of spiritualisms — is akin to a many-faceted crystal, wherein each facet may reflect its own prismatic colours, but each is nonetheless inseparable from the crystal as a whole, for the crystal, being an organic unity, is indivisible. In this approach there can be no pick-and-choose attitude, for to fragment such a teaching is to miss its holistic essence. In such a case, having once made the decision that this is the standard we choose to follow, we will thereupon voluntarily subjugate our personal preferences in favour of the advice of our teaching, even if it is directly contrary to our own wishes. This does not preclude taking “whatever is useful”. Rather, it gives us a basis for judging what is and is not useful. And if it should happen that within our chosen teaching we already find all that we need in order to “get on with it”, then so much the better.

But if the charge of narrowness is nonetheless made, then we will note first that an arrow that is broad and wide is far less likely to hit its mark than one that is properly shaped for one-pointed flight; and second that the charge of narrowness is made without understanding. For no point of view can be understood except from its own frame of reference, an observation which already suggests the crystalline approach, for all that it is true of syncretistic views as well.[4] It is most commonly the case that people do not question the assumptions that underlie their own basic attitudes — after all, it’s obvious, isn’t it? — but until they do so, they will be necessarily unable to understand a point of view that does not arise from those assumptions except from within their own viewpoint, which is to say that they will not be able to understand it at all. And the charge of narrowness is made from the syncretistic point of view without comprehending the crystalline point

of view.

The collection of discourses known as the Pali Suttas heartedly recommends itself to the concerned individual as being that guidance to the transcendental which he seeks. They inform the seeker firstly that his life-problem arises dependent for its condition upon a wrong view of things, and secondly that a right view, which would undermine and end that problem, is to be achieved by following right-view guidance, namely, the training-course set forth by the Buddha. There can be no doubt after even a brief look at these texts that they staunchly advocate the crystalline approach towards liberation. In many ways do they declare themselves to be all-of-a-piece,[5a] a Teaching not to be understood by taking from it according to personal preference.[5b] Therefore when inquiring into the Pali Suttas it is a necessity, if one hopes to understand what is meant therein by “right view”, to adopt the crystalline approach, and we do so here.

4. An extreme extension of the eclectic view, common enough nowadays, is that “all teachings lead to a common goal” or, at least, that the deepest teachings (= “those I most approve of”) do. A discussion of this idea is beyond our scope; but since this view so accords with the spirit of the times that it is particularly liable to be accepted uncritically, it is worthwhile to note that if (as is the case) it is a mistaken view, then its adoption would be an insurmountable barrier to realization of that which transcends what is common.

5a. E.g.: “Monks, just as the great ocean has but one flavour, the flavour of salt, so too this Teaching has but one flavour, the flavour of freedom.” — Cūlavagga IX,1,4 (ii,236) = A. VIII,19 (iv,199) = Ud. V,5 (56).

5b. E.g.: “Monks, even with a teacher who dwells giving importance to material things, an heir to material things, conjoined with material things, haggling such as this would be untenable: ‘If we have it so, then we will do it; if we don’t have it so, then we won’t do it.’ What then, of a Perfect One who dwells unentangled with material things? Monks, a faithful disciple, having scrutinized the teacher’s advice, proceeds in accordance with this: ‘The Exalted One is the teacher. I am the disciple. The Exalted One knows. I do not know.’” — M. 70 (i,480): Kītāgiri Sutta. Numerous additional passages could be quoted to support the two texts above; but perhaps it is not necessary to belabour the point: those who require more evidence can find it themselves, by going to the Suttas.

The Venerable Ānanda

Within the first year after the Buddha's enlightenment, there entered the Order that individual who, apart from the Buddha himself, was best equipped to influence the development of the Suttas as an organized body of teachings, and to whom we therefore owe an immense debt. Without Venerable Ānanda it is possible that we would not have the Suttas today at all.

Venerable Ānanda, cousin of the Buddha, went forth from the lay life not long after the Buddha had visited his kinsmen, the Sakyans, at Kapilavatthu, where both had grown up; and from the time of his going forth it would seem that Venerable Ānanda spent most of his time near the Buddha. Indeed, for the last twenty-five years of the Buddha's ministry Venerable Ānanda served as the Buddha's devoted personal attendant, following him "like a shadow" — Thag. 1041-1043. He did many services for the Buddha, and he also did one for us: he listened.

At that time many people called on the Buddha: monks and nuns, lay followers, kings and ministers, even adherents of other teachers. Some asked for guidance or explanations, some made conversation or put to him prepared questions just to hear what the Buddha might say, and some even challenged and debated with him. To all, the Buddha taught about suffering and about the way to put an end to suffering. Some of these people became enlightened[13] right then and there, while listening to the Buddha: M. 140 (iii,247), etc. Others would bear in mind what had been said and, thinking it over and applying it, would achieve enlightenment at some later time: A. VIII,30 (iv,228-35), etc. Still others never succeeded to this extent but improved themselves and obtained a bright rebirth: S. XL,10 (iv,269-80), etc. And some, of course, went away without having benefited at all by their meeting: M. 18 (i,109), etc.

To all these people the Buddha spoke only about suffering and the path leading to the end of suffering, but he did so in many different ways, explaining himself using various approaches. We must all begin from where we are; but we are not all in the same place, spiritually, when we begin. Different people will respond to different forms of expression. It is important to remember, when reading these Suttas, that they were not spoken in a vacuum: there was an actual person, or people, sitting before the Buddha, and what the Buddha said was spoken with the aim of resolving a particular conflict, usually internal. If we forget this point, we leave ourselves open to the danger of misconceiving the Teaching in mechanistic terms as an impersonal explanation rather than as good advice on how to live, and on how to develop a view of things that is free from attachment and unhappiness.

So the Buddha explained about ignorance, conceit and suffering in many different ways; and Ānanda was there. And he not only listened, he also remembered. So he did two services for us.

Among the monks the custom arose of teaching each other their favourite discourses through the techniques of sequential and simultaneous recitation, practices still found today. Venerable Ānanda took a particular interest in talks worthy of preservation, and with his great capacity for recall[14] he learned many discourses delivered by his fellow monks, as well as those given by the Buddha, thereby increasing his value as a repository of the Teaching.[15] Since, further, he was well known as a monk who had heard much, learned much, and was approachable, willing to help whenever he could, there can be no doubt that he was often asked by others to teach them discourses or just to recite them so that they might be heard. So he taught others — e.g. S. XXII,90 (iii,133-4); A. IX,42 (iv,449) — and helped to spread the Teaching among both his contemporaries and those who followed after. This is a third service by which we are indebted to Venerable Ānanda.

The question had to arise: in what form should these discourses be taught? Clearly they could not

include every word that had been spoken[16] — at least not in the case of every single Sutta — lest the learning become so cumbersome as to be self-defeating. Although mindfulness is central to the practice of the Buddha’s Teaching (S. XLVI,53 (v,115)), monks were not all equally gifted in the ability to memorize: the discourses had to be put into a format conducive to their being accurately remembered, while at the same time preserving their essence as teachings.

The solution that was chosen[17] was to remove superfluous matters, to condense what had been said, to crystallize those aspects of the Teaching which are found repeatedly — the four noble truths, the eightfold path, the method of right conduct, restraint of the faculties, mindfulness, the various levels of meditation, the five aggregates, dependent origination, and so on — into the most concise descriptions possible, to couch the whole of this into a set pattern conducive to memorization, and to introduce as much repetition and re-iteration as possible. A typical Sutta, then, will begin by telling where the discourse took place, it will introduce the person or persons concerned and provide us with any other information necessary; then the theme will be stated concisely; each aspect of the theme will then be brought forward in its turn, repeated, developed with a copious use of synonyms, expanded, summarized and re-iterated. Similes may be introduced, in which case by means of parallel construction with the subject matter their relevance will be unmistakable. Each possible permutation will be dealt with in turn, the opening thematic statement will be recapitulated, and the Sutta will then conclude with remarks usually of approval and pleasure. The purpose is clear: to make absolutely certain that the matter at hand is stated so clearly that an intelligent person, open-minded, willing to listen, not bent on his own views, could not possibly misunderstand.[18] Thus the arising of stock material and techniques, and also their spread, as they came into usage among the various companies of monks that flourished, took place during and not only after the Buddha’s ministry, although, as we shall see, their influence was with limitations: there were those companies that kept to their own forms.

Some find the Suttas, with all of their re-iteration, excruciatingly boring. “This,” they suggest, “could hardly be the message of a Fully Enlightened One.” They suppose that because they themselves are not enthralled that therefore the message cannot be that of a Buddha. Not only do they fault the method, but the message as well; for were the message — renunciation — delightful to them, its repetition would hardly be objectionable. But when the idea of non-attachment is appreciated and approved of, then in both their message and their method the Suttas will be found to be both memorable and rememberable.[19]

13. In this essay the word “enlightened” is used of the sekha — see below — as well as of the arahat, the latter being described as not only enlightened but also liberated.
14. At A. I,14 (i,24) is recorded the Buddha’s declaration of Venerable Ānanda as being foremost, among all monks, both in wide knowledge and in retentive memory, as well as in good conduct, resoluteness, and personal service.
15. In the Theragāthā (v. 1024) Venerable Ānanda says that he knew 82,000 of the Buddha’s discourses as well as 2,000 by the monks. This works out, over a vigorous forty-five year ministry, to nearly five discourses a day. This is sizable, but many of them are but a few lines, so it is not impossible. However, we should bear in mind that the numerical precision so highly valued in Western culture has been and still is of little importance in Indian culture: these figures are best understood as “a very great many”. In India a different sort of precision — Ānanda’s — was valued. (See A. X,95 (v,193-5).)
16. And, clearly, they do not. For example, in the Cūla Saccaka Sutta, M. 35 (i,227-37) we are given the account of a talk between the Buddha and Saccaka, who had previously boasted that in debate he would make the Buddha shake, shiver, tremble and sweat. We expect that in the face of such superior wisdom Saccaka will be reduced to silence and dismay; but in the text it requires but four pages of print to accomplish this. Surely Saccaka was a worthier opponent, with sufficient experience and skills at “eel-wriggling” (amarāvikkhepa) to last longer than that! We must suppose that the actual talk was of greater length, and that the text gives us but the gist of what was said.

17. As to how it was chosen we are given no hint: the Suttas say nothing in this regard. Our information is derived entirely from the results: the Suttas are in fact constructed in the way described.
18. “Monks, these five things lead to the stability, to the non-confusion, to the non-disappearance of the Good Teaching. Which five? Here, monks, the monks master a well-grasped discourse, well laid down by word and line. Monks, of what is well laid down, the purpose is well followed. This, monks, is the first thing that leads to the stability, to the non-confusion, to the non-disappearance of the Good Teaching...” — A. V,156 (iii,179).
19. This, however, is in no way an objection to condensations of printed translations — intended for readers rather than listeners — for the sake of economy of space.

The Four Nikāyas

Each company had its own core of favourite Suttas, which newcomers would learn at least in part. Some of these discourses would be derived from talks by the company's own teacher or stories of local monastic history; others would be drawn from the stock common to all groups. Thus we would expect few companies — probably none — not to have within their ranks those who could recite one version or another of such standard texts as deal in full or in brief with “the gradual teaching,” “the foundations of mindfulness,” and so on. However, we would also expect that from the common pool each company would choose largely not only those discourses whose subject matter appealed to them but also the type of discourse that appealed to them. Thus some groups would learn brief and pithy sayings while others would prefer discourses which developed their subject matter in detail. Still others would gravitate towards texts in which subject matter was intertwined with character and event, resulting in a story-form. This latter sort of text would have particularly appealed to monks living near villages or towns on two grounds. First, such monks would have had the leisure to learn these generally longer Suttas, for life near the towns is easier than life in remote jungle thickets; and second, when the laity would assemble on the new- and full-moon observance days, they would find such Suttas more interesting to listen to than those with little characterization and story. Hence it is the case that the collection of discourses which are long, called the Dīgha Nikāya, does, in fact, address itself to matters of concern to the laity far more frequently than any of the other collections. Indeed, nearly half the discourses in this collection are addressed to laypeople, and in most others layfolk play a significant role.

Life in the forest is not as easy as life near a town. Aside from time devoted to meditation, there are many time-consuming chores. Forest monks would have less time for the learning of long discourses and perhaps, less inclination: not only are forest monks often more given to meditation than are village monks, they are also less frequently visited by laypeople, and therefore have less need to accommodate lay interests. Many of them, however, would wish to know discourses which dealt instructively in detail with a subject. Thus, one who is practising perception of emptiness would likely find it worthwhile to learn at least one of the discourses which develops this theme. [20] Many forest monks would wish to have at hand, for reference in their practice as well as for the joy of associating with the Good Teaching (saddhamma), discourses that consisted of something more than a pithy saying, but which yet were more concerned with instruction than with story and characterization. They would learn Suttas of a moderate length, and they would choose subject matter in accordance with the interests they were pursuing. Hence there is a collection of discourses which are of middle length (Majjhima Nikāya), rich in variety of subject matter, but of less immediate relevance to the concerns of the laity than the longer discourses, and in which the laity play a much smaller role, less than a quarter of these talks are addressed to laypeople.

Naturally many teachers taught by way of a particular subject, such as the practice of reflection in regard to the sense faculties, or the holding aggregates, or feelings, etc. As today, then, too, the followers of each teacher would of course take particular interest in learning discourses that pertained to the subject that concerned them or to some other point of interest: nuns would learn discourses involving nuns; the monks living in the forest of Kosala would remember events and talks which took place there, and so on. Hence there tended to coalesce, with no planning necessary, collections of discourses grouped according to subject matter, and today these exist as the Samyutta Nikāya.

We see, as we inquire into the Buddha's Teaching, that it is much given to enumeration: three kinds of feeling, four right efforts, five powers, six senses, seven factors of enlightenment, the eightfold path, and so on. This may be regarded as a device to serve both mnemonic and pedagogical purposes. Thus, the meditation levels known as jhānas are almost always enumerated as four and almost always described in accordance with a set pattern. That they need not be so enumerated and

described is suggested by the Upakkilesa Sutta, M. 188 (iii,162) (among others), wherein the same range of concentrative attainments is described in six stages. Again, the usual description of those who have seen truth but not yet achieved full purification (i.e. the sekha, trainee, or ariyasāvaka, noble disciple) is three-fold (viz, Stream-enterer, Once-returner, Non-returner); but at A. IX,12 (iv,380-1) we are given a nine-fold division. That these categories are in fact not invariably described according to their usual formulations is strong evidence that they need not be. (Again, higher than actuality stands possibility.) Since the purpose of the Buddha's Teaching is neither to classify nor to analyze but to lead one to see something about oneself, classification is used only for its mnemonic and pedagogical value, though herein its value is great. There are discourses which teach non-attachment to feeling and other aspects of experience without making any enumerations: S. XII,12 (ii,13); XXXVI,4 (iv,206-7); 21 (iv,230-1), etc. The stock descriptions are commonly given because it was found to be generally easier, to use them both as an aid to memory and in the service of one's own practice. It would be expected, then, that some monks would avail themselves of this numerical device, which is an Indian literary style also found in non-Buddhist texts: Jaina Thānānga is an example, and so would learn discourses according to the number of items discussed. Hence today there exists a collection of discourses arranged numerically, up to eleven: the Anguttara Nikāya.[21]

We can see, then, that even during the life of the Buddha these discourses were not distributed randomly: already they must have been organized, in an embryonic form, along the lines in which we now have them. Indeed, the texts themselves refer — A. III,20 (i,117) etc. — to dhammadharā, vinayadharā, mātikadharā, or those who keep (= learn) the Teaching, those who keep the Discipline, and those who keep the Summaries, i.e. the Pātimokkha. Their formal organization would not have been a radical and innovative leap, but the logical next step in a process that had already developed to some extent.

However, the Suttas were probably not formally organized into Nikāyas during the Buddha's lifetime. During that time the Canon was still decidedly open and growing. When they became unwieldy in volume, then no doubt some loose organization was evolved — “Let this company learn these discourses; let that company learn those discourses” — but any formal structure would have been continuously interrupted, requiring recomposition in order to accommodate popular and important new discourses. Thus the Suttas never refer to themselves in terms of the Nikāyas that we now have. Rather, we find fairly often a nine-fold division of the texts: discourses, mixed prose and verse, expositions, verses, solemn utterances, sayings, birth stories, marvels, catechisms (sutta, geyya, veyyākaraṇa, gāthā, udāna, itivuttaka, jātika, abbhutadhamma, vedalla — M. 22 (i,133), etc. This is not to suggest that the texts were ever organized along this nine-fold division. The classification is probably taken from the broad tradition of monasticism existent at that time.[22] This tradition no doubt included criteria according to which teachings could be judged, and the texts sometimes demonstrate (often to non-Buddhist ascetics, e.g. the wanderer, later the Venerable Vacchagotta at M. 73 (i,489-97)) that the Teaching was complete in all its parts as judged by these standards (see also A. VII,55 (iv,82-84)). But the use of this nine-fold classification shows that the texts do, in fact, describe themselves. Therefore their failure to do so in terms of Nikāyas demonstrates that such a division did not come into existence until after the Canon was no longer fully open, i.e. after the Buddha's decease.

Footnotes:

20. “... Because, Ānanda, it is empty of self or of what pertains to self, therefore it is said, ‘The world is empty.’ ...” — S. XXXV,85 (iv,54) [Back to text]

21. In addition to the four Nikāyas described above, there is a fifth collection, the Khuddaka Nikāya. However, it will be convenient to discuss its growth later, inasmuch as it is of later growth. For now we will consider only the four great Nikāyas. [Back to text]

22. As are certain other Canonical technical terms: *jhāna*, for instance, which was certainly known to the Jains — see S. XLI,8 (iv,298) — and to such outside teachers as Ālāra Kālāma and Uddaka Rāmaputta — M. 26 (i,164-5). Convincing evidence could be cited for a number of other terms as well. [Back to text]

The First Council

“Come, friends: let us recite the Teaching and the Discipline before what is not the Teaching shines forth and the Teaching is put aside, before what is not the Discipline shines forth and the Discipline is put aside, before those who speak what is not the Teaching become strong and those who speak what is the Teaching become weak, before those who speak what is not the Discipline become strong and those who speak what is the Discipline become weak.”[23]

Thus, a few months after the Buddha’s decease a meeting now known as the First Council was held in the hills outside of Rājagaha (modern Rajgir, in Bihar) in order to put the Vinaya and the Suttas into a formal structure for the sake of those who would come later. Venerable Upāli, who had gone forth at the same time as Venerable ānanda, was designated responsible for the Vinaya, as was Venerable ānanda for the Suttas. The account of their stewardships consists of but a few lines of reportage, probably edited long after the event — most likely together with the account of the Second Council, the report of which seems to be much more contemporaneous with its subject matter.

The evidence is twofold. First, we would expect the Cūlavagga to have, if not fewer, at least not more Khandhakas than the Mahāvagga. In the Suttas we often encounter Mahā/Cūla pairs, and the Mahā is invariably the longer. At any rate the Tenth Khandhaka of the Cūlavagga is concerned with the nuns. It would be inconsistent with attitudes displayed elsewhere in the texts for the nuns’ disciplinary matters to be placed ahead of the monks’ concerns, particularly at such an important convocation as the Council. Therefore, the account of the Councils must have been appended at a time when the Vinaya was already considered closed to interpolations. Indeed, the account of the Councils was almost certainly the final addition to the Vinaya texts.

Second, it is said in Khandhaka XI that Venerable ānanda recited the five Nikāyas. Therefore the account could not have been edited until a time when the five Nikāyas actually existed. Since the Suttas never refer to themselves as consisting of Nikāyas at all, let alone as five, if we were to assume the account to be contemporary, we would be forced to suppose that this classification came into being quite dramatically. It is more reasonable to suppose that a body of material existed which, though not formally included in the First Council compilation, adhered to it as supplementary matter; that that material must have included an account of the Council itself; and that it, as well as certain other materials, eventually came to be included in the Canon before the Canon itself was regarded as closed. The account was included at a time when the five Nikāyas already existed as formally organized bodies of texts, but probably was codified quite soon after, for the specification of the number five suggests an attempt to legitimize the last of them, the Khuddaka Nikāya.

Be that as it may, it is not difficult, despite the brevity of the reportage, to imagine what must have taken place. The Council was no mere recitation of texts: that had been going on for forty-five years and did not require a special assembly. The Council’s aim must have been two-fold:

- 1) To decide what, out of the vast store of material at hand, should be given the protection of formal organization; and
- 2) To set up a mechanism to preserve this material.

Obviously it couldn’t all be saved. Not only were there the Buddha’s discourses, all 82,000 of them, [24] but also the discourses of many other monks, some of them learned, wise, enlightened, liberated. Some of the discourses were duplicates — the monks from Sāvathī remembering the Buddha saying a particular Sutta when he was there; the monks from Kusinagara remembering him saying quite the same thing on a visit to them — others varied in greater or lesser extent. Some variations were revealing, others perhaps less so. These elders wanted this discourse included, those elders had other requests. In addition to the formal discourses there were events of some

significance: the famine in Verañja and its effects on the Order, Devadatta's attempt at a schism, an attempt on Venerable Sāriputta's life (Ud. IV,4 (39-41)), and so on. Which of these were worthy of preservation? Which would be of less value to those who came later? How much was enough, and how much too much? These decisions were, with regard to the Suttas, Venerable ānanda's responsibility as, with regard to the Vinaya, they were Venerable Upāli's.

The selection being made, it was then necessary to assign to different teachers the responsibility of learning and passing on a certain portion of a collection; for even among the august members of the Council — there were 500 elders, we are told, “not one more, not one less,” and all were liberated — few would have been able to learn the Suttas in their entirety. If one-hundred of them took responsibility for the Vinaya, there would have been one-hundred each for the long discourses, the middle length discourses, the grouped collection, and the enumerated collection.[25] Even though most monks could take responsibility for passing on to their following no more than a portion of a collection, yet every part of this organized recension would have been the responsibility of a large number of schools. Thus, if one or several schools died out, their tradition would not thereby be lost.

(A digression here on the question of memory may be worthwhile. Literate people sometimes express doubt that large segments of text could have been accurately remembered during the five centuries before they were first written down. But anthropologists have often remarked on the extraordinary and proven ability of their non-literate informants to remember accurately. It would seem that the comparatively poor memory of literate folk is due to their very literacy: they don't need to cultivate the faculty of memory. They forget (if they ever knew) that like all faculties, if they don't use it they lose it. In literate cultures that part of experience that is not readily recordable tends to become impoverished: literacy is not without its drawbacks.

(Although Venerable ānanda was pre-eminent in the ability to learn discourses apparently possessing what today is called a “photographic memory”, the ability to remember segments of texts which, in print, take up a volume or more, was not an unusual ability. Even today, when we have authoritative editions of all the texts printed in a variety of scripts, the ability is not unheard of.

(In Burma government-regulated examinations are offered monks annually to test their recall of the texts, as well as their understanding of them. At present (1983) there are in Burma alone four monks who have demonstrated their ability to recite by memory not only the Vinaya and Sutta collections in their entirety, both of which are more voluminous today than in their original First Council recension, but also the seven volumes of the Abhidhamma. Since 1949 when the examinations were first offered, 67 monks have passed the oral and written examinations for the five volumes of the Vinaya and 265 have done so for the Suttas comprising sixteen volumes. Additionally, well over 300 monks have passed oral and written examinations proving their perfect recall and understanding of one entire Nikāya (Dīgha: 122; Majjhima: 89; Samyutta: 52; Anguttara: 55). The number who can recite large portions of a Nikāya — a volume or more — must be substantially higher. In Sri Lanka, where recitation is also greatly valued but where, however, examinations are not offered, one can find many more such reciters.[26])

When we remember that the cultivation of mindfulness and awareness is a central discipline in the Buddha's Teaching, that the Suttas were arranged in as mnemonic a manner as possible, that monks were encouraged to review often the discourses in their minds and that they were expected to meet frequently for group rehearsals, both within their own company and together with other companies, we will not be surprised that at a time when memorization was the only way to transmit the Teaching, such an ability, assiduously fostered, would be widespread and reliable. It will be seen, then, that it was not (as is often asserted) due to the writing down of the texts that they achieved their definitive form. Well before that time, when they had come to be regarded as sacred, there

already existed a method whereby they could be transmitted from generation to generation without error.

Not everyone agreed with what was being done. A wandering monk, the leader of a large company, Venerable Purāna, while travelling through the Southern Hills south of Rājagaha, came to the cave in the canebrake where the Council was meeting. At this time the Vinaya and Suttas had already been recited (i.e. organized, assigned and rehearsed).

“Friend Purāna,” the elders said to him, “the Teaching and Discipline have been recited together by the elder monks. Please submit yourself to this recitation.”

“Friends,” he replied, “the Teaching and Discipline are well-recited by the elders. But in the way I have heard them in the Exalted One’s presence, in the way that I have received them in his presence, thus will I bear it in mind.” — Cūlavagga XI,1,11 (ii,288-9)

Thereby Venerable Purāna rejected not only the organization of the Suttas into collections but, apparently, the structuring of the Suttas individually into the form in which they had been cast for transmission. The Council had no “legal” status by which it could compel other monks to submit to its decisions nor is the notion of compulsion consistent with the spirit of the Suttas and the Vinaya: its strength lay in the collective repute, the upright conduct, and the wisdom of its individual members. They could urge, and perhaps generally receive, compliance; but they could not command it. Probably, then, Venerable Purāna was not the only teacher who chose to go his own way. Others too, though acknowledging that the Council’s recension was well-recited — i.e. providing right-view guidance — may have preferred to continue teaching according to their own methods. We don’t know for sure for none of those other traditions have survived. The only record we have today of the Buddha’s Teaching is that dependent upon the collective repute, the upright conduct, and the wisdom of the individuals who comprised the First Council.

23. Venerable Mahā Kassapa, the elected head of the First Council. Cūlavagga XI,1,1 (ii,284) [Back to text]

24. We noted earlier (footnote 15) that Venerable ānanda knew 84,000 discourses. The four Nikāyas as we now have them comprise sixteen volumes; 5,500 pages in their abbreviated roman-script edition contain according to the Commentarial reckoning a total of 17,505 discourses although some are quite short. Though the precise number of discourses is problematical, we can see that in any case what was included, voluminous as it is, is but a fraction of what was available. [Back to text]

25. These figures — other than the “500” — are entirely speculative. Their purpose is only to demonstrate that, whatever the specific details, a mechanism for preserving the texts was entirely feasible. However, the Commentarial assertion — Sumangalavilāsinī I,13 — that primary responsibility for these four collections was assigned respectively to Venerable ānanda, the pupils of Venerable Sāriputta, Venerable Mahā Kassapa and Venerable Anuruddha, lends support to our suggestion. [Back to text]

26. Data courtesy Religious Affairs Department, Rangoon. [Back to text]

Later Additions

“But how do we know,” it may be asked, “that with the closing of the First Council the Sutta recension that they compiled remained intact, without additions? For if no additions were made

later then, true enough, we would have here the actual Teaching of the Buddha. But what grounds are there for accepting this as so?”

A good and important question. The answer being, that we don't know that “no additions were made later”: quite the contrary, we do know they were made.

The Canon had been open and growing for nearly a half century. For it to be suddenly closed, and for there to be an immediate acceptance of that closure sufficiently widespread for it to be effective, is contrary to reason. Only when the compilation had come to be generally regarded as sacrosanct could the Canon be successfully closed; and such an attitude necessarily develops gradually. And the evidence of the Suttas themselves supports this view. There are, for example, discourses in which Venerable ānanda appears not as the Buddha's shadow but quite apart from the Buddha. In these discourses he is regarded, except by Venerable Mahā Kassapa, as a respected elder; he is called mahā-ācariya, “great teacher” in A. X,96 (v,198) and in S. XVI,11 (ii,218) he is said to have been touring the Southern Hills leading a great company of monks. It is clear that at least some of these discourses took place after his attendancy on the Buddha had ended, with the decease of his master. Indeed, two of them — Subha Sutta, D. 10, and Gopaka-Moggallāna Sutta, M. 108 — state specifically in their introductory material (D. i,204 and M. iii,7) that they took place “not long after” the Buddha's decease. And there are discourses involving monks other than Venerable ānanda in which the text itself informs us that the conversation took place after the Buddha's passing away. [27] Nor can we reasonably suppose all these talks to have occurred during the few months between the Buddha's decease and the convening of the First Council. Some of them may have, but Madhurā (of M. 84), for instance, was in Western India, not so far from present-day Delhi but a great distance from Rājagaha, over very bad roads (A. V,220 (iii,256)): even if the discourse itself had originated before the Council met, it could hardly have become known in Rājagaha in such a short time, let alone become popular enough for inclusion in the recension. But even if such is maintained, there still remains the Bakkula Sutta, M. 124 (iii,124-28), in which Venerable Bakkula asserts, at least thirty-three times, that he has been a monk for eighty years.

Now, all accounts agree that the Buddha's decease took place forty-five years after his awakening. Therefore even if Venerable Bakkula had been ordained very soon after the establishment of the Order,[28] the discourse still had to have taken place at least thirty-five years after the closing of the First Council. And in all likelihood it took place even later than that although Venerable Bakkula could not have been spoken of by the Buddha unless his ordination took place during the Buddha's lifetime: i.e. the Bakkula Sutta postdates the First Council, but by less than eighty years. We can be quite certain, then, that the First Council did not produce the version of the texts that we now have. But we can be equally certain that the compilation they produced is in no way dramatically different from what we now have. Consider:

If we examine the seven Suttas just referred to, we will notice that they have in common a distinctive feature. Whereas the usual way the discourses begin is: “One time the Exalted One was dwelling at...”[29] these discourses make no mention of where the Buddha dwelt. Rather, they begin: “One time Venerable ānanda (or Venerable Udena, or whoever) was dwelling at...” In other words, by this method they inform us at the very start that they are in fact later additions and are not to be taken as having been part of the First Council's compilation.[30] There is no attempt to disguise the fact. On the contrary, there is a conscientiousness in its assertion.

And when we look through the Nikāyas we find other discourses which follow this same form: “One time Ven. So-and-so was dwelling at...” Although they do not always otherwise declare themselves to be later additions — for once should be enough — yet often we can find further telltale evidence that this is so. Thus for example in the Dīgha Nikāya aside from the already-mentioned Subha Sutta, there is only one other discourse out of the thirty-four in that collection

wherein we are told the dwelling not of the Buddha but of the main individual, Venerable Kumāra Kassapa, in this case. This discourse — the Pāyāsi Sutta, D. 23 (ii,316-58) — involves a long discussion between Venerable Kassapa and the chieftain Pāyāsi, mainly on the subject of rebirth. The chieftain presents a series of thought-out reasonings as evidence that there is no rebirth. Venerable Kassapa presents counter-arguments, primarily in the form of elaborate similes,[31] showing the flaws in Pāyāsi's theses. In the end although Venerable Kassapa does not actually offer any arguments in favour of rebirth, Pāyāsi declares himself to be both convinced and pleased.

Now, on numerous occasions the Buddha declared that for beings constrained by craving there is rebirth (S. XXII,25 (iii,26) etc). He said that he could remember his own past lives (M. 4 (i,22) etc), that he could see the passing on of beings according to their deeds (M. 4 (i,22-3) etc), and that by means of certain mental practices others could develop these abilities (A. X,102 (v,211) etc), and had done so: e.g. the Venerable Mahā Moggallāna and Anuruddha. But nowhere do the Suttas record the Buddha arguing in favour of rebirth on logical grounds; nor would we expect him to do so for rebirth is not a matter of logic. Yet despite Venerable Kassapa's assertion that until then he had neither seen nor heard of anyone sharing Pāyāsi's views, there must have been many sceptics to judge both from the views ascribed by the texts to the various teachers of the day and from the frequency with which the Suttas assert rebirth; and most monks — even among those who had personally achieved complete self-purification — would have had to accept rebirth on the basis of confidence in the Buddha rather than from direct knowledge (see S. XII,70 (ii,122-3), and compare A. VII,54 (iv,78-82)). After the Buddha's decease, then, there was a strongly felt need for some sort of textual authority to lend support to these monks on the question of rebirth, just as the Madhurā Sutta, mentioned earlier, seems to have been included to lend support to the Buddhist teaching of ethical equality between castes. It matters not at all that Venerable Kassapa's similes are unlikely to convince a modern sceptic: they were appropriate to their time; they filled an existing need. And that need would have been felt most strongly among the reciters and preservers of the long discourses.

The Pāyāsi Sutta, which is obviously the model for the much later Milindapañha, could have been made much shorter — and hence included in any of the other Nikāyas — by eliminating extraneous introductory and concluding material and some of the more elaborate similes; so it was not only due to considerations of length that it came to be included in the Dīgha Nikāya.[32] Rather, questions about rebirth are more apt to be raised by the laity whose goal is to obtain a good rebirth than by monks whose aim is to transcend rebirth entirely, and in fact the arguments of the Pāyāsi Sutta, concerned as they are with reasoning and simile, are more likely to convince a layperson than a practising monk who — questions of relevance aside — might be better convinced by evidence concerned with direct reflection and perception. Of the four Nikāyas the Dīgha is, for reasons we have already noted, the one most directed to the interests of laypeople, thus lending substantiation to the Commentarial suggestion that Venerable ānanda was primarily responsible for this collection. Hence the monks who would most likely seek textual support on the question of rebirth would be the dīgha-bhānakas, the “reciters of the Dīgha”. There would have developed among the individuals of the various companies who shared the responsibility for various portions of the long discourses a consensus that the Pāyāsi Sutta, until then a part of the peripheral material known by those reciters but not included in their texts, should be formally included in the Nikāya. Since the Dīgha is divided into three Vaggas, or sections, each about a volume in length, and since the Pāyāsi Sutta, is now the last discourse of the second Vagga, the responsibility apparently was assigned to or taken up by those who recited the middle portion of the long discourses. However, it was not always the case that later Suttas came to be placed at the end of a Vagga, as the evidence shows.

The discourse makes no claim to being the ipsissima verba of the Buddha. It presents itself as being, in its central portion, a conversation between a certain fairly obscure monk and a certain layman, apparently mentioned nowhere else in the Suttas; there is no reason not to accept it on those terms.

It acknowledges itself to be a later addition as the Commentator Dhammapāla points out at *Vimāna Vatthu Commentary*, p. 297: indeed, every discourse identified by the traditional commentaries as post-First Council begins, it seems, with the “One time Venerable So-and-so” formula. But it was not a haphazard addition: the mechanism by which the Suttas were passed on necessitated, before the Canon was closed, that additional material could be inserted only when there was a common accord among those who were responsible for a portion of the texts.

Turning now to the *Majjhima Nikāya* we learn more about the process of adding discourses. Other than those already mentioned there are two discourses in the *Majjhima* that make no mention of the Buddha’s dwelling place: the *Anumāna Sutta*, M. 15 (i,95-100) and the *Māratajjanīya Sutta*, M. 50 (i,332-8). Both begin: “One time Venerable Mahā Moggallāna dwelt in the Bhagga Country...” Since we know from S. XLVII,14 (v,163-5) that both Sāriputta and Mahā Moggallāna predeceased the Buddha, the discourses themselves could not have taken place after the time of the First Council as was evidently the case with the *Pāyāsi Sutta*; rather they were simply not included in that compilation.[33] But we note that the two *Majjhima* Suttas have the same venue, and that the Bhagga Country was an out-of-the-way place, at least as measured by the infrequency of its mention in the Suttas.[34] Since Venerable Mahā Moggallāna and Venerable Sāriputta were the two chief disciples of the Buddha, the monks living among the Bhaggas would certainly have remembered the former’s visit to them and would have kept in mind what he had said and done, as part of their local tradition.

There must have been in residence there some companies of *majjhima-bhānakas*, preserving at least the first third of the *Majjhima Nikāya*, which today contains 152 Suttas and, like the *Dīgha*, is divided into three volume-length *Vaggas*. They would be the ones to have wished to include these two discourses — all the more precious for having taken place there — in their collection, to raise them from the lower status of local tradition and to afford them additional protection against being lost. When meeting with neighbouring *majjhima-bhānakas*, as they must have done from time to time, not only to recite together, they successfully convinced their fellow-monks to include these two discourses in their own recitations. Thus, due in effect to local boosterism, the Canon grew. And when we look at the *Samyutta Nikāya* we find further evidence of this. In the entire *Vana Samyutta* (IX (i,197-205)) we find no mention of the Buddha. And all but one of these fourteen discourses take place in Kosala. The monks living in the woods (*vana*) of Kosala apparently managed to get their own local tradition, much involved with deities, included in the Canon. So apparently did the followers of Venerable Sāriputta, for although elsewhere in the *Nikāyas* he is found frequently in discussion with the Buddha, in the *Sāriputta Samyutta* (XXVIII (iii,235-40)) none of the ten discourses make mention of the Teacher; nine of them take place in *Sāvattthī*. Similarly the four consecutive *Samyuttas* (XXXVIII-XLI) named after, respectively, the wanderers *Jambukhādaka* and *Sāmandaka*, each containing sixteen conversations with Venerable Sāriputta, the first set entirely in *Magadha*, the second among the *Vajjians*; Venerable Mahā Moggallāna, eleven discourses, all set in *Sāvattthī*, and the lay disciple *Citta*, ten discourses, all set at *Macchikasanda*, are apparently later additions to the *Samyutta Nikāya* of discourses already in existence when the First Council met, but not compiled by them. It should be noted that the Suttas concerned with *Citta* clearly reveal attitudes of lay devotees rather than of monks.

And there are further examples in both the *Samyutta* and *Anguttara Nikāyas*; but we need not investigate them, for we can see by now that the method whereby any new material could be inserted into the collections had to involve a consensus as to its suitability and also to include in each case a “warning label” — “Venerable So-and-so was dwelling at...” — that the discourse is not part of the original compilation. There are about 200 such discourses, filling roughly 350 pages of print, which is about six per cent of the total.

And by the same evidence we can know that neither was any material lost nor were any of the

Suttas arbitrarily altered. For exactly the same mechanism that required consensus in order to add to the Canon would have come into force had any attempt been made to alter a text. And we can well imagine the difficulty, the virtual impossibility from the very outset, of such a consensus being achieved in order to alter what had been laid down by those very monks who were venerated as the founders of the various lineages (see S. XIV,15 (ii,155-7)).

In order for any Sutta or part of a Sutta to have been lost, we should have to suppose either a collective amnesia among all the monks of all the companies who were reciters of that Sutta — hundreds, or more probably thousands of ambulatory amnesiacs! — or else the breaking up and disappearance of every single company responsible for a certain portion of the Suttas — and this in a time when all the evidence indicates that the Order was thriving and growing — together with the refusal or inability of any single monk (or ex-monk) from any of those lost companies to come forward to teach the texts to the surviving groups. A most improbable combination of events! No, the evidence shows clearly that there were additions to the texts, but to suppose either substantial changes or losses is contrary to reason.

It must be emphasized primarily for the benefit of scholarly readers that we did not begin by assuming that Suttas which do not refer to the Buddha in their introductory material are therefore later additions to the Canon. Rather, we first discovered a few Suttas that certainly describe events that had taken place after the Buddha's decease. Examining them, we noticed that they possessed one feature in common and in distinction to the great majority of discourses. We then looked at other texts which also displayed this feature and found therein further grounds to accept that those texts, too, were probably later additions to the Canon. We described in detail the evidence found in several of these texts and indicated in brief other Suttas providing additional evidence; but we do not propose to present the data to be found in a number of other texts, for to do so would require a very long and technical and uninteresting digression. We will note only that this evidence consists of a large number of small, and a few not-so-small, points, all tending in the same direction, with no cases of an opposite tendency.[35]

For how long did this process of slow accretion continue? We can be quite certain that by the time of the Second Council which met a century after the Buddha's decease, the process had already ended, the four Nikāyas being regarded as closed, and that this view was ratified and finalized by that Council. The evidence:

All additional Suttas involve "first generation" monks, i.e. contemporaries of the Buddha but who, in some cases, outlived the Teacher.[36] The only instance which can reasonably be considered an exception is that of Venerable Nārada, whose talk with King Munda — Ajātasattu's great-grandson, according to later accounts — is recorded at A. V,50 (iii,57-62). However, even in this case we have a discourse at S. XII,68 (ii,115-8) — clearly earlier than the Anguttara Sutta, for there he is said to be already a worthy one (arahat), i.e. fully liberated, whereas here he is self-described as not yet arahat, still a sekha — where Venerable ānanda also has a part. So if Venerable Nārada was not contemporaneous with the Buddha, he was at least not far from it. Venerable Nārada's discourse to King Munda is, as we have it, identical to a discourse to the monks spoken by the Buddha: A. V,48 (iii,54-56).

Later sources tell us that it was during the time of Kālasoka, the third Magadhese king after Munda, that the Second Council convened. The Vinaya's description of this Council is much more detailed than, and about twice the length of, its report on the First Council. The impetus for the meeting was the exposure and condemnation of certain relaxations of monastic discipline which had arisen among a company of monks centred in Vesālī, the famous "ten points", the most important of which concerned a relaxation of the prohibition against "accepting, using, or consenting to the deposit of money". We are told of the politicking that went on before the Council met, and we are introduced

to the main players in that drama, the leading monks of the day. Not one of these eight monks nor any of the lesser monks mentioned is known to the four Nikāyas. If the four Nikāyas had been then regarded as open to additional material, surely we would expect to find these monks represented. [37]

What happened is clear: however highly these monks might have been regarded individually, for of course some of them would have achieved full purification, those monks who were not contemporaries of the Buddha could never achieve the distinction of those who had known him personally. Later monks belonged, inevitably, to a particular lineage which (like caste) could not be transcended. Only the founding elders, those who had established the lineages, could be regarded as beyond those lines. If the doings and sayings of these second generation monks were admitted to the Nikāyas, where would it end? The decision that needed to be reached if the Nikāyas were to survive at all was that with the passing of the first generation the collections had to be closed. Had they been left open they would have become amorphous and protean — not to be confused with “rich and varied”! — and would have lost their very purpose. Therefore whatever pressures may have developed to incorporate this or that “second generation” discourse needed to be opposed and obviously were.

27. E.g. the Madhurā Sutta, M. 84 (ii,83-90), with Venerable Mahā Kaccāna and King Avantiputta of Madhurā; the Ghotamukha Sutta, M. 94 (ii,157-63), with Venerable Udena and the brāhmana Ghotamukha.

28. This, however, is unlikely. Venerable Bakkula seems to be mentioned, in the whole of the four Nikāyas, in only one other context: in A. I,14 (i,25) he is declared by the Buddha to be foremost among all monks in respect of good health.

29. Because the Samyutta and Anguttara Nikāyas contain numerous short discourses, therein this formula is often abbreviated or omitted entirely. This almost certainly was done by the later scribes rather than the earlier reciters. In these instances we know that the Buddha is the speaker by his use of the term bhikkhave, the vocative form for “monks”; for in those days all monks addressed one another as āvuso (= “reverend” or “sir”); only the Buddha used the term bhikkhave.

30. This is in distinction to those Suttas, presumably not later additions, in which although the Buddha plays no part whatsoever in the narrative, yet his dwelling place at that time is nevertheless given according to the usual formula. Examples will be found at D. 34; M. 5, 9, 28, 69, 76, 127; S. V,1, VI,3, 6, 9; A. VI,34, etc. A comparison of S. LV,52 (v,405-6) and S. LVI,30 (v,436-7) points up the distinction. In neither case does the Buddha appear “on stage”; in both cases he is quoted; the first discourse begins “One time the Buddha was dwelling at...”; the second begins “One time a number of senior monks were dwelling at...”

31. Like Venerable Bakkula, Venerable Kumāra Kassapa is mentioned elsewhere in the four Nikāyas only at A. I,14 (i,24), where he is declared foremost in respect of embellished speech. Had the Pāyāsi Sutta not been appended to the Canon, we would have had no example of this. He is also mentioned once in the Vinaya. In affirming the validity of his admission to the Order, for which one must be at least twenty years of age, the Buddha stated that age is reckonable not from birth but from conception, declaring that it is in the womb that “the mind (citta) first arises, consciousness (viññāna) first becomes manifest.” — Mahāvagga I,75 (i,92)

32. Nor is length an absolute criterion. There are at least fifteen Suttas in the other three Nikāyas that are longer than the shortest of the Dīgha Suttas.

33. There are a number of other discourses which also begin “One time Ven. So-and-so...” but which similarly must have been delivered during the Buddha’s lifetime. For example there are about 75 such Suttas involving either Ven. Mahā Moggallāna or Ven. Sāriputta or both. There are also two Suttas (S. XLI,9 (iv,300-302) and A. II,36 (i,65-7)) wherein it is specifically stated in the dialogue that the Buddha was then living at Sāvattihī, in the latter instance, but in the former the location is not given. Therefore we cannot assert that all “One time Ven. So-and-so...” discourses were delivered after the Buddha’s decease: only that they came to be included in the Canon at a later date.

34. A number of other “One time Ven. So-and-so...” discourses are also set in remote locales: ālavī, Avantī, Cetī, Madhurā, etc., generally West of the centres where the texts locate, Venerable ānanda: Vesālī, Pāṭaliputta, Rājagaha, Kosambī. Although during the Buddha’s day the West of India was still “pioneer country” as regards the Teaching, we

know (as discussed in the Appendix) that within a century of the First Council these western territories had risen to monastic prominence and, perhaps, cultural importance as well: Taxila was already a centre of learning even in the Buddha's day: Mahāvagga VIII,1,6-7 (i,269-70).

35. Since this evidence — “One time Venerable so-and-so dwelt at...” — once noted seems obvious, it may be wondered why it has been unreported until now. That the Commentaries should not remark upon it is not remarkable, not only because they lacked in the Fifth Century A.D. the scholarly apparatus available today — word- and name-dictionaries, concordances, indexes, etc. and of course printed editions of the texts, annotated and convenient to use — but also because India has been historically unhistorical-minded (see footnote 15): a concern with dates has traditionally been regarded as secondary to the act of placing one's faith in a teaching. Historical questions are a particularly Western concern. As to why, therefore, modern scholars have failed to note this evidence, it may be kindest to allow each reader to form his own judgement.

36. A half dozen or so of these later discourses speak only of “a certain (unnamed) monk,” or “a group of monks.” Naturally in these cases we cannot know definitely that the monks were contemporaries of the Buddha. However, there is no reason to suppose otherwise: we find other texts wherein unnamed monks converse with the Buddha. There are another half-dozen or so Suttas involving monks who are mentioned nowhere else in the Canon and whose generation therefore cannot be established except by reference to post-Canonical works. Again, this is a feature found in some Suttas that are not later additions. At any rate, we would expect that were there any Suttas involving second generation monks, at least some of those monks would have been well-known leaders of companies, not the obscure or unnamed. No discourses involving nuns, it seems, are later additions.

37. One of these monks, Venerable Sabbakāmī, has some verses (453-58) in the Theragāthā of the Khuddaka Nikāya (see below) — appropriately enough, on the subject of sensuality (kāma). He is specifically identified in the report of the Second Council as being the oldest monk in the world, 120 years of age, and as having been a pupil of Venerable ānanda.

Westerners sometimes express surprise, or more than surprise, at the number of monks reported to have lived to extreme old age. However, it is recognized that the qualities that are co-adjuncts of mental calmness such as lack of bodily stress, etc. contribute to longevity; and since it is the business of monks to cultivate calmness, though not for the sake of long life, it is to be expected that monks would outlive the general populace. The Suttas tell us — Dh. 109, etc. — that longevity is also linked to respect for one's elders. However, since this would not seem to be statistically quantifiable it is unlikely that Western medical science will ever be in a position either to confirm or disprove this thesis.

The Fifth Nikāya

The material which was admitted to the Four Nikāyas during the first century after the Buddha was but a fraction of what was remembered. Much of this material, which included a great deal of verse, [38] must have been in common circulation, the preserve of no single lineage or group of companies; for within the four Nikāyas and also within the Vinaya we find not only one Sutta referring to another[39] but also, here and there, Suttas referring to material which lies outside the first four Nikāyas.[40] There was also new material being generated to fulfil new needs as with the

Pāyāsi Sutta on rebirth, or to describe new events as with Ven. Nārada's talk to King Munda. What was to be done with all of this? To add substantially to the Nikāyas would have established an unfortunate precedent leading to the inevitable dissipation of their integrity; yet to leave the material disorganized would be to abandon much that was worthy to an early destruction. The solution chosen was the creation of the fifth collection, the Khuddaka Nikāya.

Khuddaka means "small" and at first the Khuddaka Nikāya was indeed small. Today, with fifteen separate sections, it is the most voluminous of the Nikāyas, but originally it consisted of probably six or seven separate short texts, each of which had been compiled and preserved, prior to inclusion in the Nikāya, individually on its own merits.

The Theragāthā and Therīgāthā, for instance, consist of the verses of various monks and nuns, respectively. Here there can be no doubt that some of the verses are by second generation disciples (e.g. Venerable Pārāpariya's verses, 920-948), and that the texts grew substantially after the First Council. This is only to be expected: the two collections do not pretend otherwise. The Dhammapada is a collection of popular verses. Quite a few are to be found elsewhere among the Suttas, but as many or more are unique to this compilation. Most of the verses stand alone, unconnected to the others. We have no direct evidence as to the date of its closure, but the arrangement and distribution of the verses suggest that it could well have grown during the first century. The Sutta Nipāta is, like the Dhammapada, a collection of popular verse, but it differs in that its verses form longer poems, each of which is regarded as a discourse. Indeed, some of them have prose attached, as a sort of introductory bunting. A few of the poems appear within the four Nikāyas; the remainder are the most popular of those longer poems that are not included therein. As such, a number of its passages are quoted within the four Nikāyas (as noted above), which has given rise to the mistaken view that the Sutta Nipāta contains the "oldest layer" of texts. Certainly some of the Sutta Nipāta texts are contemporaneous with the first four Nikāyas, but they do not pre-date them.[41]

The Udāna is a collection of eighty solemn utterances spoken by the Buddha on special occasions. The Itivuttaka contains 112 short Suttas, each accompanied by verses, the relevance of which is not always apparent. This fact together with some seeming textual corruptions suggest that it may have had an older and independent life before being incorporated into the Khuddaka Nikāya. If this is so, it indicates what happened to those texts that did not receive the formal protection of organization.

"The Jātaka contains only the verses connected with the 547 tales of previous existences of the Buddha. The (prose) tales are in a commentary of the fifth century A.D., which claims to be translated from Sinhalese (to Pali)....

Professor T. W. Rhys Davids has stated that these tales are 'old stories, fairy tales, and fables, the most important collection of ancient folklore extant,' which we are not able to deny." [42]

Since the Jātaka verses are often incomprehensible without the prose commentary, it is difficult to see how they could predate the prose. The prose, however, would predate the fifth century commentary into which it was translated and collected. The origin of these verses, then, remains indeterminate. It is sometimes thought that since these three texts — Udāna, Itivuttaka, Jātaka — are mentioned as part of the ninefold description of texts (see above) that they must be, like the Sutta Nipāta, part of "the oldest layer" of texts that we now have; but it is more reasonable to suggest that they were so named because the ninefold description was already in existence.

The other eight texts that are today included within the Khuddaka Nikāya are generally regarded as late additions, and need not be discussed.

The formation of this collection probably arose during the century between the two Councils rather

than with the Second Council itself: such developments need time to generate strength and achieve general acceptance. By the time the Council assembled, the force of opinion would have already been in favour of including this new collection in the Canon: the Council's function herein would have been to ratify and reinforce this consensus and, no doubt, to decide upon its organizational details. They would also have had a hand in deciding final organisational details for the other Nikāyas and for the Vinaya. It was possibly at this time, for example, that D. 16 — see Preface, paragraph six — was expanded to its present form, or at least a previous expansion was at this time ratified, by including passages taken from the other parts of the Nikāyas. And, too, those few texts, the “six percent” which had been added to their collections by the various bhānakas, would have been cast now into their final forms.[43]

It needed to be done, for the monks of the Vesālī company, along with their supporters, seem (according to a non-Canonical text, the *Dīpavamsa*, vv. 32ff.) to have refused to accept the ruling of the Council, breaking away and forming their own council, wherein they re-arranged and, it seems, added to the texts to suit their own purposes. During the next 250 years this company split up and resplintered into numerous factions, each having evolved its own set of doctrines and disciplinary codes.[44] None of these texts have survived: again, as with Venerable Purāna, we learn the survival-value of organization.[45] The fact that the Suttas and Vinaya[46] have survived as coherent entities can now be seen to be itself strong evidence that they have survived unchanged.

38. Surprise is sometimes expressed at the quantity of verse in the five Nikāyas. But verse not only has obvious mnemonic value whereby the compilers would give it priority over prose passages, but less obviously but more importantly it has great inspirational value. It is sometimes suggested that not only was verse seldom spoken spontaneously as the texts often report, but also that much of it “must have been” created in a later, more literate time. Such is the prejudice of a prosaic era; but a more poetic age — Elizabethan England, for example — would not have shared this misconception. [Back to text]

39. Although we are unable to cite an example of such a referring Sutta which does not seem to be a later addition, at least one such text — S. XLVI,3 (iv,286-7) — was evidently not a later creation, but was spoken during the Buddha's lifetime. [Back to text]

40. As at, e.g., *Mahāvagga* V,13,9 (i,195-6) = *Ud.* V,6 (59), at S. XII,31 (ii,47-50), at A. III,32 (i,133-4), etc. The above examples all refer to or quote from passages found today in the *Sutta Nipāta* of the *Khuddaka Nikāya*. [Back to text]

41. This notion of older and younger layers of text assumes, contrary to the evidence, that the first four Nikāyas grew over a period of centuries by a process of heterogeneous accretion until they reached their present form. As such, it is part of the syncretistic approach which we have already rejected. Certainly some discourses are older than others inasmuch as they did not all appear simultaneously. Other than the few exceptions already discussed, it took about forty-five years for them to evolve; and it should be no great surprise that various individuals, including the Buddha, might, on occasion, refer to or even quote from what had already been said. [Back to text]

42. Venerable Aggamahāpandita A. P. Buddhadatta Mahāthera, on p. 260 of his collection of monographs, *Corrections of Geiger's Mahāvamsa Etc.* (Ambalangoda, Ceylon, 1957). [Back to text]

43. That the Twelfth Khandhaka account of this Council makes no mention whatsoever of a recitation of the Suttas, nor any decisions as to the fifth Nikāya, nor the placement of later additions within the four Nikāyas, does not mean that they were not done then. First, the report as given omits a number of other important details as well, such as the refusal of the Vesālī company to accept the Council's decisions and to abandon their practices. Second, it would be expected by all monks as a matter of course that whenever a body of monks met, they would review their texts in order to prevent or discover variances. Third, the purpose of the account was to condemn the Vesālī monks. The full list of ten points is censured, item by item, three times in the space of fifteen pages and denounced as a whole many times more. To have reported on other matters would have diluted the force of the anathematization. Finally, in the *Bakkula Sutta* (discussed above) a phrase is inserted — “inasmuch as for eighty years Venerable Bakkula has...” — after each statement of Venerable Bakkula's achievements. This phrase (according to the *Commentary*: MA. iv,193) was inserted by the elders who made the recension of the Teaching. We are not told which elders, but from our own examination we can see clearly that it would have had to have been the elders of this Second Council. [Back to text]

44. Some scholars might question the identification of the Vesālī company with the progenitors of the splinter groups or suggest, more modestly, that only some of these sects evolved from the Vesālī monks, the remainder breaking away from the Councils' lineage at later dates. These are scholarly issues which it would be out of place to discuss here. Perhaps the fullest discussion, together with informative charts, is to be found in the Prefatory Notes to the Aung/Rhys Davids translation of the *Kathā Vatthu* (Points of Controversy, Pali Text Society, London, 1915). [Back to text]

45. Though these texts have not survived as collections, yet scattered fragments have been rediscovered in Sanskrit, and more coherent units have been preserved in Chinese and Tibetan translations. [Back to text]

46. The evolution of the Vinaya is parallel to that of the Suttas. A description of its evolution would be more complex, partly due to the need to consider what is nowadays known as the “old commentary”; but it would follow the same lines of reasoning used herein; and it would arrive at the same conclusions: like the four Nikāyas, the Vinaya achieved essentially its final form during the first century following the Buddha. The question of when the “old commentary” came to be embedded in the text, and of how the Parivāra became semi-attached to the Vinaya proper need not concern us. For a short note on this subject, see the Appendix.

Conclusions

With the closing of the Second Council we have no further Canonical information regarding the history of the Suttas. Gleanings from later texts inform us that a Third Council was held in the time of King Asoka, at which meeting the rift which had opened up more than a century earlier, with the Second Council, now widened and variant forms of doctrine began to emerge which eventually formed what is now known as Mahāyāna. The four Nikāyas were left unchanged while the Khuddaka Nikāya was cast essentially into the form in which we now have it. (A few of the very late additions to this collection — notably the *Buddhavamsa* — appear to have undergone slight further editing, perhaps at the Fourth Council. On this, see Adikaram's lucid, though technical, *Early History of Buddhism in Ceylon* (Gunasena, Colombo, 1946), p. 35.). Also, missions were sent to many countries and the Teaching was successfully transplanted in all directions. Of particular note, the Order was established in Ceylon from whence came many of the later reports and which became the center for study, preservation and practice of the Pali Suttas for many centuries.

About 450 years after the Buddha a famine struck Ceylon. For twelve years food was so scarce that the Order of monks was almost decimated partly, we are told, due to some of the laity turning to cannibalism. Some of the Suttas were in danger of being lost. Monks who were too weak to stand rehearsed the texts where they lay. When at last the famine ended, it was realized that the texts needed to be put into writing for their greater protection.[47] Not only the famine but — according to Adikeram (op. cit., p. 79) — the danger of frequent invasions from South India, the entry into the Order of irresponsible and irreligious people (on which point see Mahāvamsa 33,101), and the fickle favour of kings also played a part in this decision. Accordingly, a Fourth Council was convened, wherein this was accomplished.

In the centuries after this Council the texts continued to be preserved as much by recital as by manuscript, for making even one handwritten copy of the five Nikāyas, of the Vinaya, and of all the material that had evolved and survived alongside them, the Abhidhamma, the Commentaries, the Chronicles, and so forth, would have been a labour of many years and then the manuscript had to be preserved against the manifold dangers of destruction. But by this time the Suttas were firmly embedded in the minds of those who learned them as being sacred and unalterable by as much as a single syllable.

The dangers we have seen to be inherent in an open Canon were long since past. It was no longer possible for additional material to be added to the texts. There still remained the dangers of accidental alteration (copyists' errors, etc: see previous footnote) and of loss due to the disappearance of companies and sometimes the decline of the Order. We need not discuss these in any detail. We know what variations exist in manuscripts that were separated from each other by thousands of miles and hundreds of years, and we are confident that these differences are not significant. Although we cannot assert definitely that no material was lost, at most only a small amount could have disappeared without our knowing of it through the various records that were made relating to the texts, some of which, such as the Asokan edicts were engraved in stone. We can accept that the texts survived, at least for the most part, and with no more than insignificant changes, to the present, weathering various worldly vicissitudes which we need not trace; for we have now explored the origin of the Suttas and discovered how it is that these Suttas which we have today can be reliably regarded as being the actual Teaching of Gotama Buddha.

Footnotes:

47. Although writing had been known in India for perhaps two centuries before the time of the Buddha, apparently the technology of paper and ink was as yet undeveloped. Messages, letters and the like might have been scratched onto the smooth underside of bark, then rubbed with black oil to "ink" the writing, but no way had then been found to preserve for long what was thus marked. No clay tablets have been found from this era, although two brick inscriptions of a Sanskrit Sūtra, dating some centuries after the Buddha, have been found at Nālandā: *Epigraphia Indica XXI*, pp. 177-99.

Well before the time of the famine in Ceylon it had been discovered that when young ola leaves, scraped and boiled, were marked with treated carbon black, the writing produced could be legibly preserved for many years. Only then did recording become worth the effort involved. The results, however, are not entirely in favour of the written record. The critical editions of the texts strongly suggest that almost all the variant readings that are noted therein are the result of copyists' errors. Very rarely do these variant readings make a difference in meaning; usually it is a matter of a word being added or dropped, or differences as regards abridgement, spelling, and the like. [Back to text]

Choosing a Standard

In spite of all this there are still those who will insist that the four Nikāyas as we have them contain material that, though in the guise of earlier texts, are, in fact, later additions.[48] Though few, perhaps, will go so far as to charge the monks with unscrupulous mendacity,[49] some will nevertheless reject many texts as “not original Buddhism.” Their reason for doing so is, almost always, a personal disagreement with the descriptions or instructions found therein. They will often conceal this fact with phrases like “historical doubts”, but in the end it comes down to their unwillingness to believe that a Fully Awakened One could possibly teach anything that they themselves did not agree with.

We do not entertain such notions, for we have not forgotten that we started out by acknowledging our need for guidance, and we do not presume to know as well as (or even better than) our guide. (See Ud. 77 (90-1).) But even so it must be admitted that anyone, and particularly Westerners, coming fresh to this Teaching will almost certainly discover discourses containing material that sounds, to their contemporary ears, improbable. This is a real problem for many newcomers; for it is likely that they will encounter approaches and attitudes which are unfamiliar. Until one has mastered the unsurpassable art of acquiescence (*khanti*), without which learning is impossible, there will naturally be resistance to what demands of us that we surrender those notions and conceits which we hold most dear. This is the difficult part of the Teaching, and to pretend otherwise would be to do a disservice to both the Teaching and the inquirer. And among the first resistances to arise

nowadays will be those involving differences in world views. Since the Teaching comes to us embedded within a cultural context that is in some ways alien to the viewpoint with which we are on comfortable and familiar terms, it is natural that we congratulate ourselves for being so much more advanced. It can be profoundly difficult to recognize that the truths offered by our own culture are neither eternal nor absolute, and need not be valued any more highly than other viewpoints.

An analogy: Suppose it was said that there exist in this very world invisible beings — countless millions of them — which have the power to affect our welfare. Some of them are helpful, but others, unfortunately, cause only trouble and illness. However, there are certain people who wear special costumes and who possess special and powerful means whereby they can actually see these invisible beings. Moreover, they have devised special powders and potions by means of which they can counteract the baneful influence of the harmful beings. True or false? Most Westerners have derided this notion, sometimes vehemently, with snorts and sighs aplenty. But suppose now it were added that these invisible beings are called “germs” and “viruses” and that they have been investigated by white-coated laboratory scientists who possess electron microscopes, and who have discovered antibiotics and other drugs.

“Oh, but that’s different!” many will reply; and indeed it is. But what exactly is the difference? Language, certainly; but beyond that there is also a difference in the conceptual imagery used to account for the experience of illness. The imagery and vocabulary that are familiar are accepted while what is strange is rejected.

We do not wish to suggest by this analogy that the only difficulties in understanding the Buddha’s Teaching are linguistic or cultural: there is, beyond them, the personal difficulty, the difficulty which started us on our quest. We need to assert, cherish, and develop the view that the real difficulty is our own failure to see, as they really are, that craving and conceit which are themselves the condition for our own failure to see, as they really are, that craving and conceit...[50] But before ever coming to that difficulty a newcomer may find himself faced with thorny doubts, and he may not see the source of the thorns. He may assert that it rains due to appropriate meteorological conditions, and scoff at the Suttas’ suggestion that it rains because the rain gods are active (A. V,197 (iii,243)). After all, who has ever seen a rain god? But who has ever seen a meteorological condition?

The difficulty may be illustrated by an example from the author’s own experience. When I first began to inquire seriously into the Buddha’s Teaching, I found — in addition to much that impressed me most favourably — a discourse whose topic was “the thirty-two marks of a great man” and whose point (as I took it) was that these marks were physical and that the Buddha had such marks, ergo he was a great man. Coming from a rationalistic tradition, I was unable to accept this. It approached deification or worse, and seemed totally incompatible with the spirit of investigation that pervaded those Suttas that had most impressed me. Besides, some of these marks — projecting heels, ankles midway in the legs, legs like an antelope’s, no hollow between the shoulders, white hair growing between the eyes, head shaped like a turban, etc. — seemed quite simply freakish. I asked several of the other young Western monks, who confessed that they, too, could not accept this discourse. “Here,” I then decided, “is an obvious case of a later addition: this Sutta had to be invented by those who had never seen the Buddha.”

This view was confirmed when I noticed, in the *Sāmaññaphala Sutta* of the *Dīgha* that when King *Ajātasattu* visited the Buddha for the first and only recorded time, as he approached the pavilion where the company of monks sat, he asked his physician which one of the monks was the Buddha (i,50), and he was told that the Buddha was the one sitting against the middle pillar. “Had the Buddha really been endowed with those peculiar, alien, and odious marks,” I reasoned, “the king would not have had to ask such a question. But even if he did ask, then the obvious answer to be

given would have been that the Buddha was ‘that funny-looking fellow in the middle’.” And then I read the Dhātuvibhanga Sutta, M. 140, wherein it is told how the Buddha, travelling alone, put up one night side by side with a monk who told him that he (the monk) was on his way to meet the Buddha for the first time. Only after hearing a teaching did this monk realize, from the profundity of the discourse, that his companion had to be the Buddha himself. “Surely,” I decided, “if the Buddha had been endowed with those absurd marks, this monk would have known at once who his companion was.”

And so I set aside that discourse on the thirty-two marks, and all was well, until ... I discovered another Sutta on the same subject, and then another, and another, and finally I realized (with some dismay) that the subject was dealt with, sometimes more than once, in every Nikāya except the Samyutta. Had it appeared only once, or maybe twice, I could have set it aside as an oddity and forgotten about it; but here it was popping up all over the place! My appreciation of the other discourses had been growing as their methodology became gradually more familiar and comfortable; but now my confidence in the authenticity of the collection as a whole was shaken. What was I to do?

“Leave it alone,” I was advised. “Use the Suttas for what they’re for: right-view guidance. There’s no Sutta that teaches the existence of a permanent condition, or of a pleasurable condition, or of anything that can be taken as self. Don’t reject what’s precious just because you think you see a few wrinkles in it.” And so for many years I did my best to ignore those “thirty-two marks” discourses and tried to make use of what was manifestly valuable.

During those years I came to a growing understanding of the importance of putting trust in one’s teacher (see note 5b) and a growing conviction that “they who have faith in the Buddha have faith in the highest: they who have faith in the highest have the highest results.” — A. IV,34 (ii,34) The Buddha knew that those who, trusting his advice, lived in accordance with it would do themselves the most good and therefore, with no conceit whatsoever, out of compassion for others, he did and said that which would achieve this end.

Everyone can and does change his appearance to some extent, as the situation requires. For example, when called in by the boss for a tongue-lashing, one may quite literally make oneself smaller by hunching the shoulders, etc., perhaps without even being aware of it; but when showing off before friends one may “walk tall”. Anyone who has practised meditation even to a modest extent is likely to come to an appreciation of the enormous powers that are available to one proficient in advanced levels of meditation. It becomes an easy matter to accept that the Buddha, or for that matter anyone meditatively advanced, even one who has not achieved enlightenment — Devadatta, for example, could alter his appearance to a far greater extent than most people, even to the extent of appearing with all thirty-two marks.

These mark, each of those discourses tells us, belong to the lore of the brāhmana caste. The Suttas, it seems, never assert the correctness of this lore; nor do they digress into a refutation of it. In each case a brāhmana came to the Buddha intent upon judging the Buddha’s worth as a teacher by whether he had these marks.[51] Knowing that appearances don’t matter but that rightly-placed confidence is of great value, the Buddha, it would seem, let those brāhmanas see what would convince them of the truth that he is the “incomparable trainer of men to be tamed” and thereby won them over to acceptance of right conduct and, in some instances, to enlightenment: e.g. the brāhmana Pokkharasādi of the Ambattha Sutta, D. 3.

I am still not particularly impressed that the Buddha could display those thirty-two marks that the brāhmanas believed to be the signs of a great man, for I suspect that even Devadatta could have done so; but these Suttas were not addressed to me. They were intended to inspire faith in the

brāhmanas, who believed in their lore as we do in ours. More impressive is the display of wisdom that uses, rather than disputes with, cultural limitations to lead one to what transcends such limitations. I still have no special use in my own practice for those “thirty-two marks” Suttas, nor for others which, it seems, are also intended for those with a different sensibility — e.g. D. 14 on previous Buddhas and the birth of Bodhisattas; M. 129 on hell-realms and world-monarchs — but they are no longer a basis for doubt and scepticism, or a barrier to acquiescence in what is beneficial.[52] The lesson being, that it is not an act of wisdom to judge and reject discourses on the basis of personal preference or belief (ref. the Kālāma Sutta, A. III,65 (i,188-93)), for if we do so, we then lose the possibility of transcending those preferences and beliefs.

Is it possible, then, to set forth a reasonable standard whereby, when we find ourselves encountering one of those “thorny barriers,” we can act reasonably? Perhaps the following will be relevant.

Having already acquired an overview of the Suttas — as one might inspect the general contours of a road map prior to setting out on a journey, without excessive concern for specific details — we will have noticed that certain passages are found repeatedly, with little variation, throughout the four Nikāyas. If we have the Buddha’s Teaching at all, then surely we have it here: it would be the wildest irresponsibility to assume that the gist of the Teaching is found only outside these core texts. Not only must we accept them as authentic, but also as fundamental, of the essence, for why else would they be so often repeated? These texts can be trusted as being that right-view guidance we have been seeking. Should any of these oft-repeated discourses seem discrepant with one another or with our own views, then this is evidence that there is a difficulty in our own understanding which needs to be uncovered and resolved or abandoned.

We should be in no rush to judge. These Teachings cannot be understood except from their own point of view, and coming to understand that point of view is a growth that takes, usually, more time than we think it will. And we should be careful to take the Suttas quite literally, as saying what they mean and meaning what they say. They speak often of knowing both the letter and the spirit; nowhere do they advise an interpretive approach. We need to change ourselves, not the world, and the world includes the Suttas. To interpret is still to follow our own notions, rather than right-view guidance. Indeed, to interpret is to deny (“...when he says black what he really means is...”).

With this background established, then those discourses which are found but once or twice can be considered. The bulk of them will present no difficulty. They will be seen to be in accordance with the root-texts, being variations or expansions on a theme, as too will those texts which we have identified as later additions to the four Nikāyas. But should any of them seem to be in contradiction with one’s own understanding, then there is an opportunity to examine that understanding, to discover what needs to be surrendered.[53] However, if one is not yet at a stage of development where such acquiescence is possible, then that Sutta can be set aside, which is not to say rejected, until a time when understanding and calmness have been developed sufficiently so that a reconsideration of the text will be useful. By following such a practice one can come to know that, indeed, this Teaching is well-expounded, immediate, non-temporal, evident, leading, to be known individually by the wise.

We set out in search of a guide whereby we could find the way to resolve the root-problem of our personal existence. We have discovered that the Teaching of a Fully Awakened One is at hand, and that there is reason to trust, not reason to doubt, that Teaching. What remains is to put that Teaching to use, make it a personal reality. Restraint, renunciation and purification are difficult, not easy. But indulgence, attachment and defilements can never lead to happiness and peace. What needs to be done is clear. We have reached an end of our inquiry ready, at last, to begin.

Footnotes:

48. Early and later Sanskrit Sūtras of Mahāyāna as well a Tibetan scriptures and other late traditions are full of this. Those who wish to defend these traditions have been known to assume quite gratuitously that since these other traditions are manifestly full of invented material that the Pali Suttas must be also. But if the preceding account is largely correct, then this view must be erroneous. If such a view is nevertheless insisted upon, then its proponents would need to offer a description of the evolution of the Pali Suttas demonstrating a reasonable and human sequence alternative to the one offered herein. Such an account would have to be in accord not only with reason but with the known facts. Even if such an account were made, it could be at best an alternative interpretation, in no way devaluing what has been presented here; but to our knowledge such a description has never even been offered. [Back to text]

49. To such a distasteful charge there can (and should) be no reply (see A. IV,42 (ii,46)), for it is a product of the same attitude which seeks to understand the world in terms of conspiracies. If dishonesty is assumed then “evidence” will inevitably be “discovered” to confirm the assumption. The only way to resolve such a dilemma is to explore carefully the need to make the assumption in the first place. [Back to text]

50. “Ignorance, monk, is the one thing with a monk’s elimination of which ignorance is eliminated and gnosis arises.” — S. XXXV,79 (iv,50) [Back to text]

51. In the Brahmāyu Sutta, M. 91 (ii,133-46), after the marks are displayed, then additionally the Buddha’s conduct is held up to close critical scrutiny over an extended period of time before he is finally acknowledged to be a “great man.” [Back to text]

52. This account of these “thirty-two marks” Suttas will probably satisfy those who come to the Teaching from a rationalistic culture; but there may well be other explanations, suited to those with a different background, no less valid than what is offered here. Whatever increases faith in right-view guidance is proper. “They who have faith in the noble eightfold path have faith in the highest. They who have faith in the highest have the highest results.” — A. IV,54 (ii,34) Translated in the Wheel No. 8. [Back to text]

53. On this point, see the Dīghanakha Sutta, M. 74 (i,497-501), and the Cintā Sutta, S. LV,41 (v,446-8)

Appendix

At the beginning of the century, when the Buddha's Teaching had only recently come to widespread notice in the West, many questions were yet unsettled. Although it was already recognized except, perhaps, among those most hostile, that the Buddha was rather more than a primitive sun-myth, yet many other mistaken ideas were being put forward to explain, or to explain away, the Buddha and his Teaching. Some of these notions sound today quite as naive as the sun-myth theory: but others, despite the evidence, continue to be raised, hence the preceding essay. Doctrinal matters aside, the most fundamental of those concern the place of Pali as a language in Indian history and thought, and the dates of composition and compilation of the various Canonical texts.

Prof. T. W. Rhys Davids — unquestionably the most influential of the early scholars concerned with Buddhism — dealt with these questions at length in various articles and books, the most comprehensive and easily available of which is *Buddhist India*. Published in 1903, although it is touched both by a lingering Victorian ethnocentrism and, doctrinal matters aside, by some lesser judgements since demonstrated to be erroneous, it is nevertheless the earliest general statement of what is, in the main, the accepted view on these questions today.

Although a scholarly examination of these questions will never yield an understanding of the Teaching, yet mistaken notions may well be an obstacle to comprehension. Some, therefore, will find a certain amount of investigation into these points to be of value. While the question of the place of Pali as a language and of the date of the Vinaya have not been part of our inquiry, yet it may be pertinent to quote briefly on these subjects.

On the first point, Rhys Davids concludes that there existed at the time of the Buddha “a language common among the cultured laity ... which bore to the local dialect much the same relation as the English of London, in Shakespeare's time, bore to the various dialects spoken in Somersetshire, Yorkshire, and Essex”; that this “conversational dialect” was in use “not only throughout the Kosala dominions, but east and west from Delhi to Patna, and north and south from Savatthi to Avanti”; and that on this dialect was based “Middle High Indian, Pali, the literary language.”[1]

A scholarly debate has been in progress for the last fifty years (with no end in sight) challenging and defending this judgement. It should be noted, then, that even a “worst-case scenario,” namely, a conclusive and convincing demonstration that Pali was not the language spoken by the Buddha (but see D. 16 (ii,108)), would not require us to change anything in this essay. For if, as some contend, Pali is a western Prakrit while the Buddha spoke an Eastern dialect, all that would be demonstrated is that the final editorial work on the texts was done by monks who hailed from western India. In this regard we should note that the account of the Second Council in the Vinaya repeatedly describes the orthodox monks as being from the west, and the heretics as being from the east. And if, as others contend, Pali as we now have it postdates the Buddha by a century or more, then all that would be demonstrated thereby is that at the Second Council (and, for the Khuddaka, the Third) the decision was made to “modernize” the language.[2] There would be in neither case any need to question the authenticity of the Teaching as we have it.

On the second point we may turn to Rhys David’s *History and Literature of Buddhism* (the “American Lectures”) of 1896 wherein, early in Lecture VI, he remarks:

... the first disruption in the Order took place ... on matters connected with the regulation of the Order itself. One hundred years after the death of the Buddha, according to the oldest account ... there arose a certain party in the Order which proclaimed and practised a loosening of the rules in ten particulars ...

To put an end to the disputes upon these points, a Council of the leading members of the Order was held at Vesali and the heretical opinions were condemned. The long-continued struggle on the question — as important for the history of Buddhism as the Arian controversy for that of Christianity — agitated the whole Buddhist world to its very center ...

Now the ten indulgences are each summed up in a single word: and these words are, each and all of them, conspicuous by their absence from the Books on the laws and regulations of the Order included in the canon (i.e. the Vinaya), except that they appear in an historical account added quite evidently as an appendix (i.e. the Twelfth Khandhaka, discussed in our essay), to the collection of treatises, or Khandhakas ... This fact is of the very greatest importance in determining the date at which those Khandhakas must have been composed. The ten points in dispute were all matters of ecclesiastical law. They all related to observances of the Brotherhood. Is it probable that, in a set of rules and treatises which seek to set forth, down to the minutest detail, and even with hair-splitting diffuseness, all that has any relation to the daily life of the Brethren and the regulation of the Buddhist Order — is it probable that, in such a collection, if, when it was compiled, the struggle on these ten points had already burst into flame, there should be no reference at all, even in interpolations, to any one of these ten disputes? That the difference of opinion on each of the ten points remains altogether unnoticed in that part of the rules and treatises where, in the natural order of things, it would obviously be referred to — that the rules are not in any way altered to cover, or to suggest, any decision on the points in dispute, — and that they are mentioned only in an appendix (= the Twelfth Khandhaka), where the Council held to decide them is described, shows clearly that the rules and treatises, as we have them, must have been put together before the time when the Council of Vesali (= the Second Council) was held.

Lastly, on the question which has concerned us at length — the date of the Suttas — we offer relevant excerpts from Chapter X of *Buddhist India*:

... As to the age of the Buddhist canonical books, the best evidence is the contents of the books themselves — the sort of words they use, the style in which they are composed, the ideas they express. Objection, it is true, has recently been raised against the use of such internal evidence. And the objection is valid if it be urged, not against the general principle of the use of such evidence, but

against the wrong use of it. We find, for instance, that Phallus-worship is often mentioned, quite as a matter of course, in the Mahābharata, as if it had always been common everywhere throughout Northern India. In the Nikāyas, though they mention all sorts of what the Buddhists regarded as foolish or superstitious forms of worship, this particular kind, Siva-worship under the form of the Linga, is not even once referred to. The Mahābharata mentions the Atharva Veda, and takes it as a matter of course, as if it were an idea generally current, that it was a Veda the fourth Veda. The Nikāyas constantly mention the three others, but never the Atharva. Both cases are interesting. But before drawing the conclusion that, therefore the Nikāyas, as we have them, are older than the existing text of the Mahābharata, we should want a very much larger number of such cases, all tending the same way, and also the certainty that there were no cases of an opposite tendency that could not otherwise be explained.

On the other hand, suppose a MS. were discovered containing, in the same handwriting, copies of Bacon's Essays and of Hume's Essay, with nothing to show when, or by whom, they were written; and that we knew nothing at all otherwise about the matter. Still we should know, with absolute certainty, which was relatively the older of the two; and should be able to determine, within a quite short period, the actual date of each of the two works. The evidence would be irresistible because it would consist of a very large number of minute points of language, of style, and, above all, of ideas expressed, all tending in the same direction.

This is the sort of internal evidence that we have before us in the Pali books. Any one who habitually reads Pali would know at once that the Nikāyas are older than the Dhamma Sanganī; that both are older than the Kathā Vatthu; that all three are older than the Milinda. And the Pali scholars most competent to judge are quite unanimous on the point, and on the general position of the Pali literature in the history of literature in India.

But this sort of evidence can appeal, of course, only to those familiar with the language and with the ideas. To those who are not, the following points may be suggestive:

On the monuments of the third century B.C. we find the names of donors of different parts of the building inscribed on those parts (pillars, rails, and bas-reliefs). When the names are common ones, certain epithets are added, to distinguish the donors from other persons bearing the same name. Such epithets are either local (as we might say, John of Winchester) or they specify an occupation (as we might say, John the carpenter, or John the clerk) or are otherwise distinctive. Among these epithets have been found the following:

1. Dhamma-kathika. — “Preacher of the system” (the Dhamma) — the “System” being a technical term in the Buddhist schools to signify the philosophical and ethical doctrine as distinguished from the Vinaya, the Rules of the Order.

2. Petakin. — “One who had (that is, knew by heart) the Pitaka.” The Pitaka[3] is the traditional statements of Buddhist doctrine as contained in the Sutta Pitaka (= the five Nikāyas). The word means basket, and, as a technical term applied to a part of their literature, it is used exclusively by the Buddhists.

3. Suttantika. — “A man who knows a Suttanta (= Sutta) by heart.”

4. Suttantakini. — “A woman who knows a Suttanta by heart.” Suttanta is, again, a technical term used exclusively of certain portions of the Buddhist canonical books, more especially of the Dialogues....[4]

5. Pañca-nekāyika. — “One who knows the Five Nikāyas by heart.” The five Nikāyas, or

“Collections,” as a technical term used of literary works, is applied to the canonical Buddhist texts, and to them only....

The expressions here explained are used on Buddhist monuments and refer to Buddhist books. They are conclusive proof that some time before the date of the inscriptions (that is, roughly speaking, before the time of Asoka), there was a Buddhist literature in North India, where the inscriptions are found. And further, that that literature then had divisions known by the technical names of Pitaka, Nikāya, and Suttanta, and that the number of Nikāyas then in existence was five.

But this is not all. Asoka, in his Bhabra Edict, addressed to the Buddhist Order (the Sangha), recommends to the Brethren and Sisters of the Order, and to the lay disciples of either sex, frequently to hear (that is to learn by heart) and to meditate upon, certain selected passages. And of these he, most fortunately, gives the names. They are as follows:

Ariya-vasāni (now found in the Dīgha Nikāya, in the portion called the Sangīti Suttanta).

Anāgata-bhayāni (now found in the Anguttara Nikāya, vol. iii, pp. 105-108).

Muni Gāthā (now found in the Sutta Nipāta, verses 206-220).

Moneyya Sutta (now found in the Iti-vuttaka, p. 67, and also in the Anguttara Nikāya, vol. i, p. 272).

Upatissa Pasina. — “The questions put by Upatissa” (more commonly known as Sāriputta). There are so many such questions in the books that opinions differ as to which of them is the one most probably referred to.

There is a word at the commencement of this list which may either be an adjective applied to the whole list or the name of another passage. However this may be, this Edict of Asoka’s gives the actual titles of some of the shorter passages included, in his time, in those books, the larger divisions of which are mentioned in the inscriptions just referred to.

Now the existing literature, divided into the same larger divisions, contains also the shorter passages. To suppose that it was composed in Ceylon is to suppose that, by an extraordinary series of chances, the Ceylon writers happened to hit upon just the identical technical terms, two of them then almost fallen out of use, that had been used in these old inscriptions (of which they knew nothing) for the names they gave to the larger divisions of the literature they made. And we must further suppose that, by another extraordinary series of chances, they happened to include in those divisions a number of shorter passages, each of them corresponding exactly to those mentioned by name, long before their time, in Asoka’s Edict, of which also they knew nothing. To adopt such a theory as the most probable explanation of the facts would be nothing less than absurd....

We must take our Pali canonical books then to be North Indian, not Singhalese in origin: and the question as to whether they have suffered from their sometime sojourn under the palm groves of the mountain vihāras in the south[5] must be decided by a critical study of them in their present condition. Towards such a study there are some points that can already be made.

The books make no mention of Asoka. Had they undergone any serious re-editing after the reign of the great Buddhist Emperor (of whom the Buddhist writers, whether rightly or wrongly, were so proud), is it probable that he would have been so completely ignored?

The books never mention any person, or any place, in Ceylon; or even in South India.[6] They

tell us a goodly number of anecdotes, usually as introductions to, or in illustration of, some ethical point. It would have been so easy to bring in a passing reference to some Ceylon worthy — in the same way as the brahmin Buddhaghosa does so often, in his *Atthasālinī*, which was revised in Ceylon.[7] If the Pitaka books had been tampered with, would not opportunity have been taken to yield to this very natural impulse?

We know a great deal now of developed or corrupted doctrine current in Ceylon, of new technical terms invented, of new meanings put into the older phrases. Not one single instance has yet been found of any such later idea, any such later form of language, any such later technical term in any one of the canonical books....

It would seem, then, that any change that may have been made in these North Indian books after they had been brought into Ceylon must have been insignificant. It would be a great advantage if we should be able to find even one or two instances of such changes. We should then be able to say what sort and degree of alteration the Ceylon scholars felt justified in making. But it is clear that they regarded the canon as closed.

While the books were in North India, on the other hand, and the canon was not considered closed, there is evidence of a very different tone. One whole book, the *Kathā Vatthu*,[8] was added as late as the time of Asoka; and perhaps the *Parivāra*,[9] a mere string of examination questions, is not much older. One story in the *Peta Vatthu*[10] is about a king Pingalaka, said in the commentary to have reigned over Surat two hundred years after the Buddha's time; and another refers to an event fifty-six years after the Buddha's death. The latter is certainly in its right place in this odd collection of legends. The former may (as the commentator thinks) have been added at Asoka's Council. Even if it were, that would be proof that they thought no harm of then adding to the legendary matter in their texts.[11] And the whole of the *Vimāna Vatthu*[10] (really only the other half of one and the same work), is certainly very late in tone as compared with the *Nikāyas*.

The same must be said of two other short collections of ballads. One is the *Buddha Vamsa*,[10] containing a separate poem on each of twenty-five Buddhas, supposed to have followed one another in succession. The other is the *Cariya Pitaka*,[10] containing thirty-four short *Jātaka* stories turned into verse. Both of these must also be late. For in the *Nikāyas* only seven Buddhas are known; and *Jātakas*, in the technical sense, are not yet thought of. This particular set of *Jātakas* is also arranged on the basis of the *pāramitas*, a doctrine that plays no part in the older books. The Ten Perfections (*pāramitas*) are qualities a Buddha is supposed to be obliged to have acquired in the countless series of his previous rebirths as *Bodhisatta*. But this is a later notion, not found in the *Nikāyas*. It gradually grew up as the *Bodhisattva* idea began to appeal more to the Indian mind. And it is interesting to find already, in these latest of the canonical books, the germs of what afterwards developed into the later *Mahāyāna* doctrine, to which the decline of Buddhism, in the opinion of Professor Bhandarkar, was eventually so greatly due....”

1. Chapter IX of Buddhist India.

2. In this regard we should note that at the time of the Second Council, North Indian settlements had evolved in social differentiation to the point of being on the verge of coalescing into the sub-continent's first empire (the Mauryan: Chandragupta, Bindusara, Asoka, etc.) of this inter-glacial period. These centuries were by all accounts times of great social upheavals, and it may be expected that — as with English today — language would have been subject to considerable diffraction.

3. *Pitaka*, like *Nikāya*, is a later term, not found in this technical sense in the *Suttas*.

4. By “Dialogues” Rhys Davids means the *Dīgha* and *Majjhima Nikāyas*.

5. *Vihāras* = temples, monasteries. By “in the south” Rhys Davids means Ceylon (where live the Singhalese people.)

6. The single exception, overlooked by Rhys Davids, is in the Udāna (Khuddaka Nikāya), wherein it is stated that Bāhiya Dārucīriya travelled from his dwelling at Suppāraka to Sāvattī to learn the Buddha's Teaching. Suppāraka has been identified with Sopāra, a town just north of Bombay. However, this instance strengthens, rather than weakens, Rhys Davids' argument, for it shows that the compilers of the Udāna, though they knew something of South India, yet had no interest or reason to make more than this single passing reference to it. (Compare, on knowledge of distant parts, M. 93 (ii, 149).) This could hardly have been the case had there been editorial treatment of the texts at a time when the Teaching had already penetrated southward into Kālinga (Orissa) and beyond.

7. Buddhaghosa was the compiler of most of the traditional commentaries, including the Atthasālinī (compiled, not revised, in Ceylon): c. fifth Century, A.D., from South India. (Although the Commentaries were translated from Sinhalese into Pali and compiled at that time, they probably "ceased to grow by about the middle of the first century A.D." — Adikaram, op. cit. p. 41)

8. In the Abhidhamma collection, not Sutta.

9. Now attached to the Vinaya (see footnote 46 of our essay).

10. Of Khuddaka Nikāya.

11. We think it more likely that the entire Peta Vatthu, and the Vimāna Vatthu as well, were added to the Khuddaka Nikāya in the Second or Third Century B.E.