A Retrospective Research on Text Formation in Early Buddhism:
From a Case on Benxiang yizhi jing T36, Translated by An Shigao

Hung Hunglung

Introduction

In 1999, three important scriptures translated by An Shigao 安世高 which had been lost for more than a thousand years were discovered in Japan. They are the handwritten scrolls of Anban shouyi jing 安般守意經, Shier men jing 十二門經, Jie shier men jing 解十二門經, etc. The discovery has evoked a significant upsurge of interest in the research of An Shigao. This paper aims to explore the fundamental meaning of the Benxiang yizhi jing 本相猗致經 T36 (hereafter: T36) translated by An Shigao, and take a step further in verifying if there exists a certain kind of pattern for scriptures composed during Early Buddhism by comparing several scriptures which are concerned with T36.

On Benxiang yizhi jing T36

In the essay “An Seikō yaku no Zō agon to Zōichi agon” 安世高譯の雜阿含と増一阿含 [Samyuktagama and Ekottarikagama translated by An Shigao], Japanese scholar Hayashiya Tomojirō 林屋友次郎 (1938) mistook A. V. 21–22 Gārava-s for its corresponding Pali version. Actually, the correct corresponding Pali version is A. X. 61–62. Yet in a research on T36 by another Japanese scholar, Ui Hakuju 宇井伯壽, Ui concluded that there exists no corresponding text in the Pali canon. Recently, according to a research done recently by the American scholar Jan Nattier, she also asserts that there exists no corresponding Pali version for T36.

From the title of T36, we can see that “Purimā koṭi” was translated to “本相 (prior condition)” by An Shigao, and was translated to “本際” by Samghadeva. Buddhism believes there is no “first cause” for all phenomena that come into being. Everything is just arising from causes and conditions, and perishing when these causes and conditions disintegrate. The word “猗” in the title of this scripture is equivalent to the word “倚,” which means “依
(depending on).” Therefore, “畜致” is equivalent to “依致,” which is the same as “從致” in T36 as well. In examining the Pali version, clearly, the word “idappaccayā” was translated to “本因縁” by An Shigao. The word “Purimā” means “the preceding one,” while the word “ida” means “this one.” Both words were translated to “本” by An Shigao. All in all, the word “本” used by An Shigao in this scripture served linguistically as an article or determiner.

On the Chapter 5 of Madhyamāgama T26

There are 16 sutras (42–57) in 習相應品 (Chapter 5, on associating upanisā [hereafter: Chapter 5]) of Zhong ahan jing 中阿含經 (Madhyamāgama T26 [hereafter: T26]). In terms of these 16 sutras, comparing sutra nos. 44–48 (hereafter: t44–t48) and t56–t57 with their corresponding Pali versions, the word “習” is obviously a translation from the Pali word “upanisā.” The word “習” has also been used in t54–t55. Unfortunately, the corresponding Pali versions are not available for comparison at this time. However, from the fact that the word “習” appearing in t55 was used to describe the sequential relationship between causes and effects for the “twelve links of dependent arising,” and the word “upanisā” was also used to describe the “twelve links of dependent arising” in S. XII, 23, in its Pali version, we therefore can deduce that the word “習” appearing in t54–t55 was also a translation from the word “upanisā.” The word “upanisā” was generally translated to “緣 (condition)” or “因 (cause)” in the Chinese Tripitaka. The word “習” also carries the meaning of “薰習 (perfuming)” or “親近 (to become familiar with).” Therefore, it is reasonable that the word “upanisā” was translated to “習.” Aside from t51, which we are going to discuss below, we are certain that there are at least another 9 sutras in this chapter which use the word “習.” We therefore can conclude that the phrasing of the title “習相應品” for this chapter has its proper reasons.

From a different point of view, we can find that T36 translated by An Shigao perfectly corresponds to t51 of T26 as translated by Samghadeva in the second year of the Long An Era in the Eastern Jin Dynasty 398 C.E. Also, it is very likely that both texts were translated from the same original copy since their contents all elaborate on becoming intimate with a great teacher (親近善知識), hearing the correct teaching (聞善法), thinking accurately (正思惟) and practicing three marvelous activities (三妙行), which are the four sequential steps for becoming a srotāpanna (stream-enterer). In other words, when one is
initiated into the practice of Buddhism, he has to get close to a good spiritual teacher and by following that person’s advice to study, contemplate and practice the Buddha’s teachings, he will eventually reach ultimate enlightenment. The sutra which is most similar to T36 in the Pali canon is A. V. 62 Tanhāsutta. After comparing the contents between T36 and the Tanhāsutta, we can find that the word āhāra, which generally means “食 (nutriments)” as in “catvāra āhārah (四食),” was translated to “従致” by An Shigao, but was translated to “習” by Samghadeva. In t51, the phrase “為習” was used more than 20 times. Prior to t51 being translated, the phrase “為習” was also used more than 20 times in several sutras such as the Yin chiru jing 陰持入經 T603 translated by An Shigao. In T603, the word “習” was a translation from the Pali word “samudaya,” Samudaya is one of the four noble truths; generally it was translated to “集,” but An Shigao translated it to “習,” which means “the origination of suffering.” We believe that while translating t51, Samghadeva must have been aware of the existence of T36, and had made reference to the phrase “為習” translated by An Shigao. But merely from the word “習” itself, it is not easy to see that it also carries the meaning of “因 (cause).” Therefore, in t52 and t53, Samghadeva translated the word āhāra to “食,” which not only carries the general meaning of “food, nutriment” but also has the special meaning of “supporting condition.” However, regardless whether they are general or special meaning, they all match the meanings of the word āhāra shown in t51, t52 and t53.

Text Formation

In examining these scriptures further, in terms of their structural formation, no matter whether they are T36, t51, t52, t53, or even the Tanhāsutta, they all consist of the same four-paragraph contents. We can divide these contents into four basic structures as A, B, C and D as follows:
A: What is the supportive condition for craving ‘to be’? Ignorance is the reply. . . . What is the supportive condition for associating with bad friends? Keeping evil persons is the reply.
B: Keeping evil persons lead to associating with bad friends. . . . Thus these are the supportive conditions for the craving ‘to be.’
C: What is the supportive condition for wisdom and liberation? The seven enlightenment factors is the reply. . . . What is the supportive condition for associating with good and
virtuous friends? Keeping a good person is the reply. 13)  

D: Keeping a good person leads to associating with good and virtuous friends. 14)...  

Thus these are the supportive conditions for wisdom and liberation.

Hence the structure of the main contents of T36, t51, t52, t53 and the Tanhāsutta can be divided into four segments as A, B, C and D as below:

T36: \[A^* \quad B \quad C \quad D^*\]
t51: \[A^* \quad B \quad C \quad D^*\]
t53: \[A^* \quad Sp \quad B \quad C \quad Sp \quad D^*\]
Tanhāsutta: \[A \quad B \quad Sp \quad B \quad C \quad D \quad Sp \quad D\]
t52: \[A^* \quad B \quad Sc \quad A \quad B \quad C \quad D \quad Sc \quad C \quad D^*\]

Except for the Tanhāsutta, these other four sutras possess the pattern of opening-formula. For convenience, we therefore can refer to the first paragraph as A*; as for the Tanhāsutta, because it does not have such a pattern, we refer to it as A. Similarly, we refer to the last paragraph, which possesses the pattern of closing formula, as D*. As for the Tanhāsutta, since it does not have such a pattern, we refer to it as D. As for the language used in these scriptures, “Sc” is a “complete simile,” which states the sequential steps for rain drops from the sky eventually turning into the ocean. “Sp,” a “partial simile” of Sc, is the condensed form for this simile. In Mahayana scriptures such as the Lotus Sutra, many vivid and lively stories were widely utilized to similize the doctrines of Buddhism. Actually, in the Agamas, many plain and interesting stories were also utilized by Buddha or his disciples to similize the doctrines of Buddhism.

Basically the formation of the texts of Buddhism scriptures, from the earlier era with their plain, unadorned and short styles, gradually evolved into an embellished and lengthy form, which is universally recognized by scholars. In general, the compiling of the Samyuk-tāgama, Madhyamāgama and Dirghāgama also followed this model. Not only does this show that the text format evolved from simple to complex, it also shows their sequential development during the successive periods of time.

The arrangement of all the 16 sutras in Chapter 5 of T26 also follows the pattern of this sequential order. As stated above, Chapter 5 mainly elaborates on the sequential steps of practicing the four intimates to become a stream-enterer. Practicing the three marvelous activities or practicing the Dharma in accordance with the Dharma is its core, and the path to liberation through the three practices of Buddhism—morality, meditation and wisdom—
is the teaching for Sangha members. But teaching of the other three factors—to think accurately, to hear the correct teaching, and to become intimate with a great teacher—are also for laypeople.\(^{15}\) After reviewing the compiling of the various sutras in Chapter 5, we can find that the structures generally follow the sequence from simple to complex. Their examples are as below:

- t42, t43, t47, t48: to practice the Dharma (morality, meditation, wisdom, liberation).
- t44: to think accurately (and also to practice the Dharma).
- t45, t46, t49, t50, t55: to hear the correct teaching (shameful, respectful, faithful and also to think accurately and to practice the Dharma).
- t51, t52, t53, t54, t56, t57: to keep oneself as a good person and to associate with good and virtuous friends (and also to hear the correct teaching, to think accurately, and to practice the Dharma).

After analyzing the relationships of the text structure of t51, t52 and t53, we can find that the contents of t52 (= ABABCDCD) are an exact repeated duplicate of t51 (= ABCD), with an added simile that is twice repeated. In comparing t53 with t52, it is obvious, that in t53 (ABCD), the duplicated texts from t52 have been crossed out, and hence t53 has become similar to t51 (ABCD). But compared with t51, t53 has kept two condensed similes (= Sp Sp) within its contents. Therefore, we believe that t52 was compiled prior to t53 and that t53 is an abridged and condensed version of t52. Obviously, the similes within t52 were complete and unabridged when the similes was first preached. But when being preached the second time, a partial simile would be easy for the audience who had already heard the teaching once to recall the whole simile. Regarding the Tanhāsutta (= ABSpB CDSpD), its structure is similar to that of t53, but with part of the text contents (= BD) repeated. Therefore, for scriptures comprised of the same basic structures and similes, their contents would develop gradually from a simple type to complex form. Here below, we can derive the following formula (pattern):

F1: The simple original text.
F2: Complete duplication of the original text, with the insertion of an additional simile (or duplication of the simile).
F3: Partial duplication of the original text, with the insertion of part of the simile (or duplication of part of the simile).

Therefore, we can determine the sequential relationship of text formations between t51,
t52, t53 and the *Tahhāsutta* as follows: t51 (F1) → t52 (F2) → t53 and the *Tahhāsutta* (F3)

In reviewing the other two groups of t45, t46 and t47, t48, we can find that the structures of their contents also match the above formula (pattern): ("S" indicates a simile):

**t45: A*B**

\[ A^* = (T1, p. 486, a7-13) \quad B^* = (T1, p. 486, a13-19) \]

**t46: A*SABSB**

\[ A^* = (T1, p. 486, a23-29) \quad S = (T1, p. 486, a29-b2) \quad A = (T1, p. 486, b2-8) \]
\[ B = (T1, p. 486, b8-13) \quad S = (T1, p. 486, b13-15) \quad B^* = (T1, p. 486, b15-21) \]

**t47: A*B**

\[ A^* = (T1, p. 486, b24-27) \quad B^* = T1, p. 486, b27-c1 \]

**t48: A*SABSB**

\[ A^* = (T1, p. 486, c4-7) \quad S = (T1, p. 486, c7-9) \quad A = (T1, p. 486, c9-11) \]
\[ B = (T1, p. 486, c12-14) \quad S = (T1, p. 486, c14-15) \quad B^* = (T1, p. 486, c15-19) \]

Therefore, the sequential relationships regarding text formation between these two groups are: t45 (F1) → t46 (F2); t47 (F1) → t48 (F2)

In addition, the contents of t56 and t57 also overlapped with each other. The contents of t57 are identical to the second half part of t56, but with the addition of extra stories of dialogues between the Buddha and his attendant, the reverent Meghiya. It thus appears that the contents of t56 are much more complex than that of t57, and such a pattern is in contradiction to the aforementioned pattern, which is from brief to complex. Based on the aforementioned pattern, the time of the formation of the text with the addition of similes should be later than that of the original text. But the former part of t56 does not use any similes; instead, it deals with conventional stories and explains the actual background of the preaching conducted by Buddha. Therefore, after removing this former part regarding historical background, t56 turns into t57, which deals only with the preaching of pure theoretical philosophy. Finally, the four sutras in the two groups which are comprised of t42, t43 and t49, t50 are only similar to each other; they do not show a repetitive duplication against the original text. Therefore, they are different from the pattern mentioned above.

**Conclusion**

Based on the above discussions, and with help from the currently available Pali *Tahhāsutta* for comparison, we can conclude that T36 and t51 (本際経) of T26 were translated
by different authors from the same original copy, which can be further traced back to its original Indian text. In addition, the vocative case “bhikkhave” appears 28 times in T36, and this vocative case also appears 26 times in the corresponding text of the \( \text{Tan}h\=asutta \). Therefore, it is quite certain that T36 was translated from the original Indian text. Finally, regarding the grouping of texts according to the arrangement of their contents, such as Chapter 5 of T26, there exists a pattern, which is from brief to complex in sequence, i.e. from a brief original text to a complete text with repetitively duplicated content, then from a repetitively duplicated text to a partially duplicated text.

---

1) E.g., a new version of \textit{Foshuo sidi jing} 佛説四諦經 [Scripture of the Four Noble Truths Preached by Buddha], which is different from no. 32 in the extant Taisho Canon, has also been discovered. See \textit{Itokura いとくら}, no. 5, International College for Postgraduate Buddhist Studies (2009.12), pp. 7–8.

2) \textit{Bukkyō kenkyū 佛教研究} [The Journal of Buddhist study] 1, no. 1, pp. 11–50.


4) See Jan Nattier, \textit{A Guide to the Earliest Chinese Buddhist Translations: Texts from the Eastern Han and Three Kingdoms Periods} (Tokyo: The International Research Institute for Advanced Buddhistology, Soka University, 2008), p. 50, footnote 50: “. . . there appears to be no corresponding text in the Pāli canon.”

5) \textit{avijjūpanisā sāṅkhārā, sāṅkhārūpanisāṁ viññānā, viññāṇūpanisāṁ nāmarūpaṁ, . . .} (S. II. p. 31).

6) In fact, Daoan 道安 also mentioned that this scripture was translated from the \textit{Madhyamāgama}. See Roll 2 of \textit{Chu sancang ji jī 出三藏記集: One Roll of Benxiang yizhi jing} (Daoan mentioned that it originated from \textit{Madhyamāgama}) (T55, no. 2145, p. 6, a24).

7) In the Chinese scripture \textit{Fangguang bore jing 放光般若經} translated by Mokchala, though we can also find the Chinese translation of “\( \text{wei xi} \) 習,” it means different things.

8) Four times in \textit{Yinchiru jing 陰持入經}; two times in \textit{Renbenyusheng jing 人本欲生經}; five times in \textit{Sidi jing 四諦經}; one time in \textit{Samyuktāgama}; one time in \textit{Daodi jing 道地經}; and 10 times in \textit{Apitan wufaxing jing 阿毘陀五法行經}.

9) Looking at the currently available scriptures translated or compiled by An Shigao, we can find that the Chinese-translated word “\( \text{xi} \) 習” appears around 200 times. This is quite unusual for scriptures translated in the days of Samghadeva.

10) In the T36, together with the other three scriptures from \textit{Madhyamāgama}, the structures of these four scriptures all share the same style of their opening and closing formula, while the format of the \textit{Tan}h\=asutta of the Pali version does not follow this style.

11) But the Pali text lacks the sentence “Keeping bad friends is the reply.”

12) The same as footnote 3.
A Retrospective Research on Text Formation in Early Buddhism (H. Hung) (197)

13) But the Pali text lacks the sentence of “Keeping good and virtuous friends is the reply.”
14) The same as footnote 5.
16) But the four sutras in these two groups were not all preached by the Buddha. The t45 and t47 were preached by the Buddha, while t46 and t48 were preached by Śāriputra. Since Śāriputra was praised by the Buddha for being foremost in wisdom, he often preached on behalf of the Buddha, therefore his teachings have also been treated as preached by the Buddha.

〈Key words〉 Prior condition 本相, Depending on 從致, Upanisā 習, Supporting condition 食, Text formation

(Associate Professor, Dharma Drum Buddhist College)