How Many Dhammapālas Were There?

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Introduction Dhammapāla is known as one of the great commentators of the Theravāda tradition after Buddhaghosa. However, as compared to his significance, the true facts of Dhammapāla’s existence remain shrouded in mystery. There are gaps of several centuries in the period in which scholars date his lifetime, with some suggesting the fifth century and others the tenth century. In addition, while there are fourteen separate classical texts whose authorship is attributed to Dhammapāla, there has long been a debate as to whether all of these can be acknowledged truly as his works. This has led some to advocate the “two-person theory” that posits the existence of a Dhammapāla I and a Dhammapāla II as a hypothetical solution to this problem. Moreover, in recent years, on the grounds that it was Dhammapāla who introduced new doctrinal concepts not prevailing in the Theravāda tradition in the Indian subcontinent, it has been pointed out that assuming Dhammapāla should refer to multiple people, one of them may have been a foreign entity influencing the Theravāda tradition.

Thus, Dhammapāla may be seen as a mysterious figure; shedding some light on the true facts of his existence may broadly clarify not only his individual situation or that of Theravāda Buddhism but also our overall picture of the northern and southern schools of Buddhism. However, despite previous arguments regarding their necessity, studies that focused on Dhammapāla as an individual remain insufficient. Therefore, this paper focuses on the body of work attributed to Dhammapāla to examine the order in which it was established and the problem of whether it can be seen as original work or forgery.

1. Temporal Relationship of Works First of all, let us consider the order in which the various works attributed to Dhammapāla were established. Prior to such a discussion, let us get an overview of the materials to be handled in this paper. The
authorship of many great classical texts has been attributed to Dhammapāla, all of which may be sorted into the following eight groups:

1. *Nettipakarāṇa-atṭhakathā* (*Netti-a*)
2. *Abhidhamma-anuṭikā* (*Abhi-anu-ṭ*)
3. *Pramatthadipani* (*Pd*)
4. *Visuddhimagga-mahāṭikā* (*Vis-ṭ*)
5. *Nikāya-ṭikā* (*Nikāya-ṭ*)
6. *Nettipakarana-ṭikā* (*Netti-ṭ*)
7. *Jātaka-ṭikā*
8. *Buddhavamsa-ṭikā*

Among these, multiple classical texts are included in (2) *Abhi-anu-ṭ*, (3) *Pd*, and (5) *Nikāya-ṭ*. The *Abhi-anu-ṭ* includes sub-sub-commentaries on the seven books of the Abhidhamma, *Pd* includes the seven commentaries on the *Udana*, *Itivuttaka*, *Vimānavaśthu*, *Petavatthu*, *Theragāthā*, *Therīgāthā*, and *Cariyāpiṭaka*, and the *Nikāya-ṭ* includes four books of sub-commentary on the *Dīghanikāya*, *Majjhimanikāya*, *Samyuttanikāya*, and *Aṅguttaranikāya*.

In addition, since the recensions of (7) *Jātaka-ṭikā* and (8) *Buddhavamsa-ṭikā* remain unpublished, in this paper, I will devote my consideration to the six groups ranging from (1) *Netti-a* to (6) *Netti-ṭ*. When we consider the particulars of these materials, the temporal relationship of the first five groups (that is, with the exception of the *Netti-ṭ*) is found to be as follows:

(1) *Netti-a* → (2) *Abhi-anu-ṭ* → (3) *Pd* → (4) *Vis-ṭ* → (5) *Nikāya-ṭ*

Since we do not find any citation relationships that would cause any contradiction in this order, there seems to be little possibility of something such as the simultaneous compilation of (2) *Abhi-anu-ṭ* and (3) *Pd*.  

2. About Two-Person Theory  

Thus, by confirming the writing order of works authored by Dhammapāla, the two-person theory that has been seen to date as a leading hypothesis is negated. This is because while this theory posits two figures, namely an earlier Dhammapāla I as the author of the commentaries in (1) *Netti-a* and (3) *Pd* and a later Dhammapāla II as the subsequent author of the sub-commentaries in (2)
Abhi-anu-ṭ, (4) Vis-ṭ, and (5) Nikāya-ṭ, the fact that (2) was established prior to (3) implies that this order is incorrect.

In addition, Katsumoto Karen, who has discussed the definition of pāramitā in the context of Theravāda literature, has recently pointed out that expressions in the Cariyāpiṭaka-aṭṭhakathā resemble those used in Mahāyāna Buddhist literature and that based on the fact that exaggerated expressions are used frequently in the Cariyāpiṭaka-aṭṭhakathā in comparison to the Dīghanikāya-ṭikā, (1) the two works were written by different authors, and (2) the author of the Cariyāpiṭaka-aṭṭhakathā may have been a member of the Abhayagiriivihāra school or some other Mahāyāna-esque Theravāda tradition. However, this inference is not valid.

This is because, firstly, the difference in exaggeration appears to derive from the fact that while the Cariyāpiṭaka-aṭṭhakathā explains the practices of the Bodhisatta, the Dīghanikāya-ṭikā explains the practices of the Sāvaka. Secondly, the fact that doctrine from the sources of a northern tradition was introduced to Theravāda sources is not something that is unique to the writings of Dhammapāla (or the Cariyāpiṭaka-aṭṭhakathā). For example, while Dhammapāla introduced the theory of saṃtati pariṇāmaviśeṣa in the Indian subcontinent, this theory had already been adopted in the Abhidhamma-mūla-ṭikā (Abhi-mūla-ṭ) written by Ānanda. The introduction of the theory of saṃtati pariṇāmaviśeṣa has also been noted for having failed to destroy the Theravāda doctrinal system of Mahāvihāra. The two philosophies comprising the doctrine of Theravāda, which claims first and foremost that “only that which is present exists in reality,” and the theory of saṃtati pariṇāmaviśeṣa are able to coexist owing to the depth of their mutual affinity. A similar example has been pointed out by Hayashi Takatsugu (2011). As he points out that while the concept of sādhāraṇa-karman was introduced to Theravāda in the Indian subcontinent by Dhammapāla, the concept of sādhāraṇa-karman was itself evaluated as something that did not betray the ideological stance of Theravāda Mahāvihāra as represented by Buddhaghosa.

3. About Single-Person Theory Thus, even while deeming the doctrine from northern tradition sources as appropriate, Dhammapāla and other commentators provided commentary on Theravāda literature without damaging the general framework of the Mahāvihāra doctrinal system. Accordingly, consistency with the doctrine of northern Buddhism does not by itself allow us to make direct links with the
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ideological characteristics of the author in question. From the above, it does not appear that there is any positive evidence on which to posit two separate Dhammapālas.

As I mentioned in the previous section, while the two-person theory of Dhammapāla has been influential in academic circles up to the contemporary period, this does not mean that there have not been dissenting opinions. A. Pieris (1978), in a systematic rebuttal to the two-person theory, argues that the authorship of (1) Netti-a, (3) Pd, (4) Vis-t, and (5) Nikāya-t can be attributed to a single Dhammapāla. Although Pieris’s claim in this regard has not carried much weight among academics, recent scholarship has reported strong ideological affinities within the body of work attributed to Dhammapāla; furthermore, when it became clear that (2) Abhi-anu-t, which had been thought to have been established later was in fact completed prior to (3) Pd, arguments began to emerge that the two-person theory needs to be re-examined. Thus, in response, in this paper, I would like to present a perspective on re-evaluating the one-person theory by pointing out an ideological characteristic that appears within the body of work attributed to Dhammapāla; that is, high authority is given to the Netti.

Next, let us consider Dhammapāla’s relationship to the Netti. The Netti is a classical text that describes a method for interpreting scriptures, and it is believed to be written by Kaccāna, a direct disciple of Buddha. In the Theravāda tradition, Dhammapāla has traditionally been regarded as the author of a commentary (the Netti-a) and a sub-commentary (Netti-t) in the Netti. Of the two, the latter is not generally accepted as an original work by Dhammapāla, since it would be exceptional for a Theravāda commentator to provide further commentary on one of his own texts. Therefore, in this paper, on the provisional basis of this hypothesis, I shall re-examine the one-person theory of Dhammapāla through a consideration of the commentary, Netti-a.

To begin with, when clarifying the positioning of the Netti-a within Dhammapāla’s oeuvre, the work of L. de Silva provides a key. In the introduction to her recension of the Dīghanikāya-ṭikā (London: PTS, 1970, vol. I, p. xliii.5–23), on the grounds that “the method of commenting on the Brahmagālasutta accords exactly with that of the Netti,” de Silva concludes that the author of the Netti-a and the author of the Dīghanikāya-ṭikā were the same person. This is an important indication. In this paper, I have already laid out the order in which the body of work attributed to Dhammapāla was established, so the attribution of authorship of the first (Netti-a) and the last (Dīghanikāya-ṭikā) works to
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the same person strongly suggests the possibility that all of these works can be attributed to Dhammapāla (although, de Silva herself excludes Abhi-anu-t from the original works of Dhammapāla).

Nevertheless, in order to substantiate de Silva’s argument, we also need to prove that the method of scriptural interpretation used for the Netti was unique to Dhammapāla alone. For instance, if we prove that the method of scriptural interpretation used for the Netti was a common practice even before it was introduced by Dhammapāla, then de Silva’s argument would no longer be valid. While de Silva does not say anything on this point, when we compare works by Dhammapāla to those by his predecessors Buddhaghosa and Ānanda, the tendency to emphasize the Netti is observed for Dhammapāla alone. On this basis, in this paper, I would like to make the following three points:

I. While references to the Netti in works by Buddhaghosa and Ānanda are extremely rare,

II. In the Vis-ṭ (VRI, vol. I, p. 257.4–5) and Majjhimanikāya-ṭikā (VRI, vol. I, p. 71.11–12) attributed to Dhammapāla, there are several instances where the Netti is referred to as a pāḷi. This terminology is specific to works by Dhammapāla and is not found elsewhere.

III. In this sense, “pāḷi” refers to the text referenced by a commentary, and especially after the time of Buddhaghosa, it has been primarily pointed as a term in canonical literature acknowledged within the tipiṭaka. However, Buddhaghosa treats the Netti as non-canonical, and does not include it in the tipiṭaka.

Under such circumstances, the fact that Dhammapāla calls the Netti a pāḷi and accords it a position of high authority can be evaluated as an ideological characteristic of Dhammapāla alone. In addition to this, we have confirmed (a) the validity of de Silva’s argument that the author of the Netti-a and the author of the Dīghanikāya-ṭikā were the same and (b) that a stance emphasizing the Netti appears throughout the body of works attributed to Dhammapāla. These facts strongly indicate that the body of works attributed to Dhammapāla may be attributed to a single person.

Conclusion Therefore, in this paper, considering the above information, I have (a) established the temporal relationship of the body of works associated with Dhammapāla as (1) Netti-a → (2) Abhi-anu-t → (3) Pd → (4) Vis-ṭ → (5) Nikāya-t, and (b)
presented evidence that all of these works can be attributed to “a single Dhammapāla.”

Notes

Abbreviations
PTS Pali Text Society. Unless otherwise noted, all texts are based on the editions by the PTS.

Bibliography
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