The View on the Three Piṭakas of the Mahāvihāra School:

Disappearance of the True Dhamma, Transcribed Texts, and Codex Worship

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Introduction

This paper aims to consider the Mahāvihāra School's view on the three piṭakas from the following perspectives: (1) beliefs about the compilation of the three piṭakas and their disappearance; (2) transcribed texts; and (3) codex worship.

1. Compilation and Disappearance of the Three Piṭakas

In Theravāda Buddhism, the three piṭakas forming the basis of faith and doctrine were formed by three councils held after the death of the Buddha. However, as the teachings of the Buddha waned, they are thought to have been gradually lost and finally completely disappeared. Similar views on the three piṭakas have been confirmed in Sarvāstivāda Buddhism as well. However, interpretations differ on two points: (1) whether the councils are to be positioned as being held for compiling the three piṭakas and (2) whether the teachings had already begun to decline.

1.1. Compilation of the Three Piṭakas

Theravāda Buddhism positions the councils as meetings for compiling the three piṭakas and believes that at least one of the three councils held would need to approve certain documents for them to be listed in the three piṭakas. The three piṭakas also included multiple documents that recorded events after Buddha's death, and later commentators have expressed a strong interest in "which council these documents were approved at to be listed in the three piṭakas."¹⁾

Sarvāstivāda Buddhism, in contrast, does not always view these councils as being about the compilation of the three piṭakas. In the lore of the first council preserved in the

Mūlasarvāstivādinaya Kṣudrakavastu, there is a record of the sūtra, vinaya, and mātṛkā being compiled.²⁾ The differences between the mātṛkā and Abhidharma piṭakas are problematic because they do not agree with the three piṭakas, which came from the sūtra, vinaya, and Abhidharma piṭakas. Within the mātṛkā, there is a reference to the three words—saṃgītiparyāya, dharmaskandha, and prajñapti—in addition to categories of dharma such as catuḥ-smṛtyupasthāna and catuḥ-samyakprahāṇa.³⁾ With regard to these three words, the *Abhidharmakośaṭīkā Lakṣaṇānusāriṇī* understand them to be a reference to the three books of *Saṃgītiparyāyaśāstra*, *Dharmaskandhaśāstra*, and *Prajñaptiśāstra* within the seven books of the Abhidharma piṭaka.⁴⁾ The authors of these three books were all disciples of the Buddha when he was on Earth, which makes this belief possible. Thus, the issue is the relationship between the councils and the four other books compiled by Buddha's disciples when they were active after his death. However, in the Sarvāstivāda literature, the circumstances of the compilation of these four books have never been described in relation to approval in the councils.

In other words, the lore of the councils within Theravāda Buddhism itself is a basis for proving the authenticity of the three piṭakas. However, there is little evidence of awareness within Sarvāstivāda Buddhism of seeking the authenticity of the three piṭakas in the councils.

1.2. Disappearance of the Three Piṭakas

The three piṭakas compiled as a result of the councils disappeared over time. However, the various schools have different opinions as to when they were lost.

Northern transmissions of Buddhism such as the Sarvāstivāda School believe that the three piṭakas started to get lost shortly after the death of the Buddha. According to beliefs common to such transmissions, it is noted that all Dharma-store were maintained up until the Śāṇakavāsin period; however, later, beginning with the Upagupta period, it became impossible to do so.⁵⁾ Sarvāstivāda literature states that the *Ekottarikāgama* originally had up to 100 chapters but explains that currently only 10 remain.⁶⁾ For Northern transmissions such as the Sarvāstivāda School, the three piṭakas that were in their possession became imperfect because most of the elements comprising them had been already lost. Furthermore, they believe that, even today, the schools are in the process of losing them.

In contrast, the Theravāda School believes that the three piṭakas compiled by the three councils have not been lost at all. They understand that the three piṭakas have been continually maintained in their perfect form since the time of the councils.⁷⁾ This view of the

three piṭakas is peculiar to them and unseen in the northern Buddhist traditions.

2. Transcribed Texts and True Dhamma (Saddhamma)

This view of the three piṭakas having been “handed down with nothing being lost” has influenced the role of transcribed texts. According to Theravāda lore, after the Buddhist repression that occurred around the first century BC, the scattered elders reconvened in Ceylon, confirmed that not even a word or phrase from the three piṭakas had been lost, and set forth the three piṭakas as the basis of the True Dhamma (Saddhamma). However, at that time, the Theravāda were anxious about transmitting the three piṭakas orally as had been done up until then and newly incorporated textual transmissions of transcribed text accordingly, thus initiating a transition from orality to literacy.⁸⁾ Thus, scriptural transcription among the Theravāda began as a religious group project and in essence was a means of extending the life of the True Dhamma (Saddhamma). However, the role of transcribed texts in the Sarvāstivāda was basically supplementary teaching material to aid the chanting of the three piṭakas.⁹⁾

As explained, the three piṭakas in Theravāda Buddhism are the basis of the True Dhamma (Saddhamma), and scriptural transcription began as a way of extending the life of the True Dhamma (Saddhamma). In light of these facts, one may infer the possibility of the belief that “transcribed text itself is the True Dhamma (Saddhamma).” However, a consideration of Theravāda lore demonstrates that the loss and disappearance of the three piṭakas are based on whether people remember it,¹⁰⁾ and, according to a subcommentary, the pātimokkha, pabbajjā, and upasampadā (referred to as three piṭakas that will survive until the end) are “monks who were ordained and entered the priesthood.”¹¹⁾ Based on the above, the three piṭakas referred to as constituent elements of the True Dhamma (Saddhamma) are limited to what humans have retained in memory, and there is no role for codices or inscriptions as the True Dhamma (Saddhamma) is distinct from human existence. This understanding is confirmed within Sarvāstivāda Buddhism.¹²⁾

3. Codex Worship

However, descriptive records that come from transcribing texts in order to allow the True Dhamma (Saddhamma) to live on can be confirmed within Mahāyāna sūtras as well. In addition, in Mahāyāna sūtras, transcribed texts are placed in a stūpa or a shrine in lieu of the

Buddha's remains, and worship services for the transcribed text are extolled as having great merit.¹³⁾ In India, many stūpas and shrines with the *Pratītyasamutpāda gāthā* installed in them have been discovered.¹⁴⁾ They are known for their codex worship.

In Ceylon, this wave of codex worship arrived, at its peak, in approximately the ninth century, though it received a cold reception in Theravāda Buddhism.¹⁵⁾ In the *Saddhamma-dīpanī*, written around the 12th century, shrines with codices (perhaps *Pratītyasamutpāda gāthā* inscriptions) are discussed in addition to the shrine containing the Buddha's interred remains and shrines with bowls and clothing used by the Buddha.¹⁶⁾ However, Sāriputta, the author of *Saddhammadīpanī*, views shrines with such codices installed negatively.

One possible reason why codex worship was never adopted by Theravāda Buddhism is that it was not possible to see transcribed texts at par with the remains of the Buddha. In other words, within Theravāda Buddhism, the existence of the Buddha's remains was seen as one element for measuring the survival or decline of the True Dhamma (Saddhamma).¹⁷⁾ In addition, after the death of the Buddha, the Buddha's remains replaced the living Buddha and became the object of memorial worship, though transcribed texts were not viewed as a way to measure the survival or decline of the True Dhamma (Saddhamma).¹⁸⁾ The three piṭakas, the basis of the True Dhamma (Saddhamma), are limited to what is memorized by people; therefore, even though the idea that "the three piṭakas themselves are the basis for the True Dhamma (Saddhamma), and text transcriptions were introduced as a means of ensuring the survival of the True Dhamma (Saddhamma)" was passed down, transcribed texts could never replace the Buddha's remains.¹⁹⁾ The Mahāvihāra School in the 12th century merged with the Jetavanavihāra School and the Abhayagiri School to form Theravāda Buddhism, which can be viewed as an actual repudiation of codex worship in Ceylon.

Conclusion

This paper clarified the following three points about the Mahāvihāra School's view on the three piṭakas: (1) Mahāvihāra School (Theravāda Buddhism) understands that their three piṭakas are compiled as a result of three councils and preserves them integrally. (2) Given that Mahāvihāra School considers the True Dhamma (Saddhamma) to be distinct from human existence, it is what humans have retained in memory rather than what is there in codices or inscriptions that defines the three piṭakas as the True Dhamma (Saddhamma). (3)

The Mahāvihāra School gives the codex worship a merely negative value, because it is not possible to see transcribed texts at par with the remains of the Buddha.

Notes

1) See Shimizu (2016). 2) Chinese, T24, 408b07–11; Tibetan, P: ne 298b5–8, D: da 316a.1–5. 3) There is some confusion in the Tibetan translation of this section, with some Chinese translations leaving out the word “prajñapti.” In this paper, the three words are saṅgītiparyāya, dharmaskandha, and prajñapti based on the *Nyāyānusāra* (T29, 330b11–19) and the Tibetan translation (P: ne 298b5–8, D: da 316a1–5). 4) See Odani ed. (2009: 27). The same part of the *Mūlasarvāstīvadavinaya Kṣudrakavastu* is also quoted in the *Nyāyānusāra* (T29, 330b). See Baba (2017: 131, 159 note 7). However, the *Nyāyānusāra* does not explicitly state that these three words point to the three books of the Abhidharma piṭaka. 5) See the *Mahāvibhāṣā* (T27, 79b) and the *Mahāsaṅghika Vinaya* (T22, 548b). 6) See Honjō (2010: 179–180). 7) See Endō (2004, 2013: 123–142) and Baba (2008: 213–214). 8) ANA. (I, 92). 9) See Nishimura (2017: 253–267). 10) ANA. (I, 88–89). 11) DNT. (III, 106), VibhMT. (210), VibhAT. (210). 12) See the *Mahāvibhāṣā* (T27, 917c) and the *Nyāyānusāra* (T29, 775b). 13) See Shimoda (1997, 2013). 14) See Boucher (1991). 15) See Narada (2002) and Mori (2015: 194–199). According to historical descriptions, Jetavanavihāra Buddhism accepted codex worship, of which Theravāda Buddhism was critical. In addition, six *Pratītyasamutpāda gāthā* inscriptions thought to have been used in codex worship have been unearthed in Ceylon, but only one of them is in the Pali language, which was typically used in Theravāda Buddhism. 16) Sd. (I, 152). 17) ANA. (I, pp. 87–93), SNA. (II, 202–204), DNA. (III, 898–900), MNA. (IV, 114–117), VibhA. (431–433). 18) Iwai (2012). 19) As a social reason for transcribed texts being unable to have the same value as the Buddha’s remains, it must be kept in mind that “Buddha’s teeth” were brought from India to Ceylon in the fourth century, and afterward, protecting them became a symbol of kingship and Buddhism. Meanwhile, it was around “Buddha’s bowls” as the core of worship and memorial that Buddhism flourished in Gandhara. See Kuwayama (1990).

Abbreviations

- ANA *Manorathapūraṇī: Buddhaghosa’s Commentary on the Aṅguttara-Nikāya*. Ed. M. Walleaser and H. Kopp. 5 vols. London: Pali Text Society, 1924–1957.
- DNA *Sumaṅgala-vilāsinī: Buddhaghosa’s Commentary of the Dīgha Nikāya*. Ed. T. W. Rhys Davids, J. E. Carpenter, and W. Stede. 3 vols. London: Pali Text Society, 1929–1932.
- DNT *Dīghanikāyaṭṭhakathāṭīkā Līnatthavaṇṇanā*. Ed. Lily de Silva. 3 vols. London: Pali Text Society, 1970.
- MNA *Papañcasūdanī: Majjhimanikāyaṭṭhakathā of Buddhaghosācariya*. Ed. I. B. Horner. 5 vols. London: Pali Text Society, 1937–1938.
- PTS Pali Text Society. Unless otherwise noted, all texts are based on the editions by the PTS.
- Sd *Vinayapiṭake Sāratthadīpanī-ṭīkā*. Dhammagiri-Pāli-ganthamālā 96–98. 3 vols. Iḡatapurī: Vipāśyanā Viśodhana Vinyāsa, 1998.
- SNA *Sārattha-ppakāsinī: Buddhaghosa’s Commentary on the Saṃyutta-nikāya*. Ed. F. L. Woodward. 3 vols. London: Pali Text Society, 1929–1937.
- VibhA *Sammoha-vinodanī: Abhidhamma-Piṭake Vibhaṅgaṭṭhakathā*. Ed. A. P. Buddhadatta. London: Pali Text Society, 1923.

- VibhAT *Vibhaṅga-anuṭṭikā*. Dhammagiri-Pāli-ganthamālā. Igatapurī: Vipāśyanā Viśodhana Vinyāsa, 1998.
- VibhMT *Vibhaṅga-mūlaṭṭikā*. Dhammagiri-Pāli-ganthamālā. Igatapurī: Vipāśyanā Viśodhana Vinyāsa, 1998.
- VRI Vipassana Research Institute. Chaṭṭha Saṅgāyana Tipiṭaka, based on Dhammagiri-Pāli-ganthamālā edition.

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