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Postscript

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Silent Mastery: The Concealed Art of Buddhist Writing

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1 Introduction: Survivorship Bias

When the topic of performance is treated in the academic field of Pali studies, it is almost inevitable to begin with the oral performative origins of the so-called *Nikāya* literature.[1] Indeed, the early development of Buddhist textual composition is considered to have taken place in an oral milieu, one in which writing was either unknown or virtually ignored (see McGovern 2024; Shaw 2024). While useful insights have been provided by the study of the orality of early Buddhist literature, an overfixation on the oral can blind us to the significant way in which the actual texts that have come down to us are the product of written culture. After all, whatever we know about orality is based on the written texts that have survived. Yet our knowledge of the circumstances in which early Buddhist texts were written is extremely limited (Allon 2018: 227). Thus, we need to be attuned to the way in which writing

1 For a state of the art on the orality of early Buddhist texts see: McGovern 2019; Allon 2021; Shulman 2021; Anālayo 2022.

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shaped the form in which the oral tradition was preserved to the present day and ask questions about how writing (see Walker 2024), and later on printing and audio recording (see Shaw 2024; Stuart 2024) likely interfaced with oral traditions even from their inception. Since the present issue touches on several problems that affect the oral and written performative nature of Pali texts, this Postscript aims to articulate some reflections and questions on the written nature of the literary record.

2 Impact of Early Writing

When confronted with long repetitions, lists, and formulas, scholars are quick to explain that these features are distinct features of oral literatures. But the question immediately arises: If repetition, formulas, and so on, are features of orality, why are they written? Our understanding of literary media, after the work of Erick Havelock, Marshall McLuhan, Walter Ong, Ruth Finnegan, and others, teaches us that a change of medium involves a change of content – to use McLuhan's dictum: "the medium is the message" (McLuhan 1964: 7).[2] From McLuhan's oeuvre we may retrieve the important principle, namely that it is in the nature of a medium to conceal itself and deflect the attention of the experiencer toward the "content" of that medium. One wonders if the concealment of the written character of Buddhist texts in an oral wrapping (*evaṃ me sutaṃ*… "Thus have I heard …") is a poetic strategy of early redactors. As Horace said: *ars est celare artem* (it is art to conceal art). Why not consider the possibility that the silence on writing in the Pali canon is deliberate?[3]

Writing among Buddhists was probably used from the time of Asoka or earlier.[4] According to the Dīpavaṃsa and the Mahāvaṃsa chronicles (ca. fourth/fifth centuries CE), the Pali canon was written around the first century BCE. Presumably, the method of writing down at that time would be

2 For a general introduction to McLuhan's thoughts, see McLuhan 1964. Recently, Bryan Levman has published a book that treats Pali texts as representatives of an oral medium (2020). For an introduction to oral textual arts, see Finnegan 1992.

3 For the absence of references to writing practices and materials in early Buddhist texts, see Allon 1997: 1–3.

4 Datings of Buddhist manuscripts with radiocarbon give dates as early as Asokan times; Allon and Salomon 2010: 10–11n39; Drewes 2011: 332n2. There are signs that writing was used among Buddhists earlier than the first century. More recently, Hermann Tieken (2023) has argued that the written epistolary genre was in use in India before Asoka, which implies that writing may have been in use, at least in the Maurya chancellery, before the third century BCE. Cousins (2013: 109ff.) was of the opinion that Buddhist texts were probably already written in mainland India before they reached Sri Lanka in the first century BCE.

based on the writing technique on palm leaves by professional scribes, who would simply listen to *bhāṇaka*s and transcribe the oral text like professional scribes: "what was currently being remembered and recited was repeated in the presence of scribes, who wrote it down from dictation" (Norman 1997: 78).

In the chronicles' reports no mention is made of the probable editorial intervention by the scribes and curators of the redaction. With that I mean, for instance, a selective editorial approach in terms of deciding which recitations were written down and which were not, mixing one tradition with another, unifying criteria, and so on, much in the same way that a pop song we listen to in any music platform is the result of a complex process of post-production in the studio.

We do not know much about how writing was introduced and used. As Allon has argued:

> We do not know whether writing was utilised as an aid to composition or transmission before this time [first century BCE]; but it has been suggested that there is some evidence for a manuscript tradition in the case of certain texts before this date. Again, we do not yet fully understand what impact writing, or the writing down of the canon, had on the material and its transmission.
>
> ALLON 1997: 3

How can we be sure, then, that certain early texts that appear to us as oral compositions were not originally written compositions? Oskar von Hinüber, for instance, has observed that the formula *evaṃ me sutaṃ* (Thus have I heard), which before he had signaled as a mark of oral composition, does not necessarily imply orality, but it is found as a later redactional feature in materials that were supposedly written. He compares this with the written redaction of Sanskrit sutras where the equivalent formula *evaṃ mayā śrutam* is used in texts that were composed by writers.[5] Von Hinüber also highlights the fact that the Vinayapiṭaka seems to be an attempt to constitute a closed system of the Buddhist church's Law and we can see there the hand of "one or more redactors (*Redaktoren*)", that is to say, writers (1989: 22ff.; see also Allon 1997: 114). Finally, von Hinüber insightfully suggests that the famous four *mahāpadesa*s

5 It seems reasonable, for instance, to assume that the *Kathāvatthu*, as much as it may represent oral debates, is a written work trying to develop certain ideas, not necessarily trying to record a real debate that took place historically (see Gethin 2023). As Drewes points out: "mnemic preservation of texts has always been more prestigious than writing in South Asia and texts preserved mnemically were believed to be more reliable. Sri Lankan tradition may have represented itself as having long shunned writing for this reason" (2011: 332n2).

in early Buddhism – instructions regarding the addition of textual materials into the Dhamma and Vinaya – would have already referred to written materials against which one could compare new materials.[6]

The transition from orality to an aurality that involves writing (Collins 1992) must have been complex and not always linear. Peter Skilling has also argued in favor of a complex development of different *piṭaka*s among different schools, through different mediums. His analysis of short written texts in Middle Indic of Asoka's time, naming Buddhist Jātaka tales, indicates that writing Buddhist text could be a normal activity even when the *bhāṇaka* schools were thriving:

> It would be absurd to expect the use of writing to have replaced the oral practices of the reciters suddenly or abruptly. The period from the second century BCE to the second century CE was an important one for the development of Buddhist scriptures. During this period the reciters thrived, grand monuments were erected and embellished, and manuscript culture developed. Recitation, depiction, and writing flourished side by side.
>
> SKILLING 2009: 71

To conclude this point, I think that the impact of writing should probably not be expected everywhere, or everywhere to the same degree. But it is also possible that we do not see certain effects of writing on Pali texts because we are blinded by the literary skill of the redactors.

3 Formulaic Style and Memory

The formulaic style of early Buddhist texts obeys the creative patterns of oral literature. This same formulaic style becomes very much part of the written culture of the early texts as well, let alone later written texts in the Theravāda tradition. The usual approach to this problem is to take certain texts as authentic transcriptions of an underlying oral lore, and separate them from later written compositions (for example, the Milindapañha) that would have simply copied the style of the *Nikāya*s. While this may well be true, it is nevertheless important to highlight the fact that the written tradition absorbs certain stylistic features of the oral, to the extent that they also become part of the written style. I would like to argue that it is virtually impossible to distinguish stylistic divergences between hypothetical "originally oral" and "originally written"

6 A "clear indication to a written tradition" (*klare Hinweise auf eine schriftliche Überlieferung*): Von Hinüber 1989: 29. For early writing in India see also von Hinüber 1994 and Falk 1993a.

texts of early Buddhists, mainly because all these texts are all written.[7] This poses a formidable methodological challenge to anyone intending to prove that they were "originally" not written.[8]

The subject of the oral stylistics is intertwined with the subject of memory. A great deal has been written on the formulaic style and memorization (see McGovern 2024). Within the early Pali tradition, writing may be seen as a substitute for memory. But here again we encounter two traditions of writing and memorization that stand in sharp contrast.

On the one hand, we have lists. These resemble the telegraphic sutras, such as Pāṇini's *Aṣṭādhyāyī*.[9] Lists are supposed to be a favorite element in oral literature, they are short, they help memorization, and they are used as a kind of flowchart for narrative composition (Gethin 1992). Lists avoid repetition.

On the other hand, we have the narrative sutra, beginning with *evaṃ me sutaṃ/evaṃ mayā śrutam*, and the literary themes that have been recently studied by scholars such as Allon (2021), Anālayo (2022), and Shulman (2021). This type of narrative text is based on formulas and it abounds in repetitions. It is recurrently built around lists, but goes in rounds over the items of the list. It is closer to what we would imagine as a literary performance, public storytelling.

All in all, we have two methods, one is repetitive and the other is not, but both are explained as aids to memorization. In my opinion, the second one, the narrative sutra, is not optimal for memorization. As McGovern and others have argued, the repetitive formulaic style is precisely the way to give a literary shape, in performance or in writing, to the lists that already have been committed to memory.

To this discussion on memory and performance we would also need to include verses. Doctrinal lists are extremely rare in verses, and certain types of verse tend to be used in a unique lyrical mode, "they are usually dramatized dialogue, not narrative, often organized in groups with refrains" (Warder 1967: 136, see also the analysis of the Suttanipāta verses in McGovern 2024).

The question now arises: If the oral tradition optimizes memorization, why not go for the best method, say, lists, and exclude the others? Furthermore, when the texts were written, all these modes – list, narrative, and verse – were preserved too. But they are not simply stylistic relics of the oral period. They

7 "Originally oral" is, indeed, a conceptual aberration. In folkloristics it makes no sense at all to talk about "original" oral tradition. No version can be taken as an original as we always have variation, and no master forms. I thank Ülo Valk for pointing this out to me.

8 See also previous note.

9 Here and in the next paragraph I use the term "sutra" deliberately in a generic sense, following Allon 2021.

continued, and continue, to be productive throughout the history of written Pali literature. They may or may not be intended for memorization. But they certainly do not presuppose oral composition and transmission.

Here it is important to make clear that when a teacher, in a monastery, is reading a book aloud and the students are repeating, that is not oral transmission, because the source of the text is not the mouth of the teacher, but the written book he is reading, a printed book for that matter. A few years ago I attended a speech by one of the living *tipiṭakadhara*s in Myanmar. In his own account of his path to memorizing extensive parts of the Tipiṭaka, he made it very clear that it was tough, because it was a lonely journey; lonely here means he alone with the books.

For all these reasons, I would like to make a case for the separation of *memory* and *orality vs. writing* into two different, albeit closely linked, discussions.

4 Composition

Among the decisions of the early Buddhist writers, we could probably count the decision to tailor the text in a certain manner, in the patchwork fashion that early Buddhist narratives exhibit. The texts that we have received present elements that suggest, if not a written origin, at least some significant development in writing strategies. For instance, the use of abbreviations such as *sāvatthinidānaṃ*, "Sāvatthi introduction" (Gethin 2007),[10] which summarizes an entire paragraph in one word, appears as a sign of written culture.[11] These writing strategies cannot be easily separated from the style of composition of the suttas. The *sāvatthinidānaṃ* "shortcut" is found in texts that seem to unpack all the possible permutations of two or more lists or formulas, particularly in the *Saṃyutta-nikāya*.[12] As I will show in the next lines, this permutation of "play of suttas" – to reuse Shulman's "play of formulas" (2021: 149 ff.) – may not simply be a method for storing information, but the very nature of this literary genre that we call *saṃyutta*.

10 Similarly, the use of *peyyāla*s ("ellipses"), clearly an essential element of early Buddhist texts and a sign of written culture. These are marked with syllables such as *pe, pa, la*, and others.

11 The fact that a certain feature of a text has the purpose of aiding memorization does not mean that it is the product of oral culture.

12 The same process is observed in the Abhidhamma literature (Gethin 2020), probably because these two textual traditions share a similar oral matrix. For the relationship between lists, Abhidhamma, and writing, see Anālayo 2014: 24–25.

In the *Saṃyutta-nikāya*, a theme may be treated in all possible manners through a sequence of suttas that follow the same structure. These are certainly not suttas representing different "occasions" (*samaya*s) when the Buddha or someone else had a dharmic conversation. This exhaustive method allows the text to display, kaleidoscopically, all the possible modes of treatment of a certain theme in cyclical structures, much like the Abhidhamma. I personally do believe that this method is inspired by a living oral tradition, but what we see in the texts is the compromise that redactors had to reach between an oral tradition that they may have known and the new format, the written, that forces them to condense and shape the text in certain ways.

As an example, let us look at the Diṭṭhisaṃyutta of the Khandha-vagga, the third book of the *Saṃyutta-nikāya*. The section consists of a sequence of ninety-six suttas.[13] All of these ninety-six suttas begin with the following formulation including the *sāvatthi*[*nidānaṃ*] shortcut:

> *sāvatthi. kismiṃ nu kho bhikkhave sati, kim upādāya kim abhinivissa evaṃ diṭṭhi uppajjati.*
>
> Sāvatthi [*introduction to be expanded*]. What being there, oh bhikkhus, adhering to what, indulging on what, the following view arises?[14]

After this formula we find a line or more citing a specific wrong view. Subsequently, the Buddha explains that this wrong view is rooted in the five aggregates, and he goes on to question the monks on the relationship between the aggregates and impermanence, suffering and no-self. This section applies to all ninety-six suttas.

The final passage of each sutta changes from chapter to chapter. Suttas in the first chapter always end as follows:

> *yato kho bhikkhave ariyasāvakassa imesu chasu ṭhānesu kaṅkhā pahīnā hoti, dukkhe pi' ssa kaṅkhā pahīnā hoti, dukkhasamudaye pi 'ssa kaṅkhā pahīnā hoti. dukkhanirodhe pi 'ssa kaṅkhā pahīnā hoti. ayaṃ vuccati bhikkhave ariyasāvako sotāpanno avinipātadhammo niyato sambodhiparāyano ti.*

13 In the PTS edition by Leon Feer this corresponds to *Saṃyutta-nikāya* III page 202 and following.

14 Translations from the Pali are my own unless otherwise indicated.

> Because doubt on these six points has been abandoned for the noble disciple, doubt on suffering has been abandoned for him, doubt on the origin of suffering has been abandoned to him, doubt on the cessation of suffering has been abandoned for him, this one, bhikkhus, is called a noble disciple, one who has entered the stream, one who will not be reborn in an infortunate destiny, one who is firmly destined to full awakening.

The first sutta in the second chapter of this section is exactly like the first sutta of the first chapter, only the last paragraph changes and it is maintained for the entire chapter:

> *iti kho bhikkhave yad aniccaṃ taṃ dukkhaṃ, tasmiṃ sati yad upādāya taṃ abhinivissa evaṃ diṭṭhi uppajjati:* [line/s describing a certain view]
>
> Thus indeed, oh bhikkhus, what is impermanent is suffering, and that being so, indulging on what one adheres to, the following view arises: [line/s describing a certain view]

In this section of the *Saṃyutta-nikāya*, chapters are called *gamana* in some manuscript traditions. Bhikkhu Bodhi translates *gamana* as "trip," thus the first chapter is called "first trip," the second, "second trip," and so forth. Bodhi adds a note on the variations of the final passage: "This [last paragraph of every sutta] distinguishes the suttas of this 'trip' (*gamana*) from those of the preceding trips. Similarly, the fourth trip is distinguished simply by the concluding argument" (2000: 1098n267). It seems, then, that these *gamana*s are to a great extent redundant. They represent three "round trips," as we always begin the next trip from the same point of departure, but end in a new place – suppose, we always fly from New York to some destination, then back to NY, fly to another destination, then back to NY, and so on.

It is not necessary to assume that this sequence of suttas represents how the *Saṃyutta-nikāya* was, or should be, performed as an oral teaching. In the written text, a series of suttas form a cluster of meaning, although from an emic perspective each sutta is supposed to represent a separate, independent occasion. In other words, what I am suggesting is that *the relation between the suttas in the Saṃyutta is a posteriori*: it is a stylistic decision, like the decision to combine formulas into a new sutta. The emic notion that the *Saṃyutta-nikāya* was a living oral collection arranged topicwise, and its written form simply a sort of stenographic transcription of it, is difficult to accept. It presupposes that these independent suttas had a life of their own, and from that neutral

space they could be collected and arranged topicwise. But one may simply read one of these suttas in context to see that it is part of a larger and more complex narrative whole.

In the same way that in the Aṅguttara and the Abhidhamma it is the number that inspires the list, and the list inspires the sutta; similarly the Saṃyutta reflects a way of composition that draws its inspiration from a certain topic or network of relations and combinations. It seems more sensible, to me, that a Saṃyutta mode of oral composition, performance and transmission may have existed, and the written literary genre that we know as *Saṃyutta-nikāya* is inspired by it.

5 Conclusion

With the reflections articulated in this Postscript, I am not denying the existence of a primordial oral tradition. I am simply showing two ways to look at the literature: one is looking at the early *Nikāya*s as the end of the oral tradition, a sort of crystallization of the oral; the other is looking at them as the first steps of a writing tradition, one that is experimenting with the texts in a new medium and new needs, for example, the need to establish a material, tangible limit to the text. Intentionally or not, the written tradition is creating a new text and crucially assisting the fixation of what we call "canons."[15]

An important advantage of taking the literature as written, is that we have evidence for it. Whether the oral tradition that preceded early writings was more or less similar to the written evidence or not, or how exactly the written corpus reflects a primordial orality, is something we may never be able to ascertain. Whereas I think it is fair to assume the existence of some primordial and purely oral tradition that preceded writing, I think it is risky, and unnecessary, to build arguments on the nature of the original teachings of the Buddha based on theories of oral composition that are, finally, based on written texts.

15 In this article I focused on the Pali scriptures, but I think the contribution of Gāndhārī scholarship is truly crucial to our understanding of the role of writing as a creative medium in early Buddhism. For those who are interested in writing and early Buddhism more broadly, may I simply refer, here, to two publications that already tackle the role of writing in early Buddhism: Harrison and Hartmann 2014; Salomon 2018. For more resources and information, see Stefan Baums and Andrew Glass's project: www.gandhari.org.

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