

THERAVADA BUDDHIST LITERATURE

Overview Early Buddhism is known as the Theravada ('Way of the Elders', sometimes called the 'Lesser Vehicle'). Key to the radical vision of early Buddhism was its championing not only of new ideas but also articulating them in languages other than Vedic Sanskrit. This change is the first indication of the enduring importance of language in the subcontinent, something that continues to animate cultural and political discussion even today. The historical Buddha (6th c. BCE) is said to have taught in his local north Indian dialect (or Prakrit). After his death, his teachings were transmitted orally (writing did not appear until several centuries later) until King Ashoka (3rd c. BCE) used Prakrit for his famous rock edicts that propagated Buddhist teachings across the subcontinent. Early Buddhism was thus spread by word of mouth, and by manuscripts that have not survived, throughout the subcontinent, as well as over the Himalayas into Tibet and China, and eventually Japan and Korea, where it evolved new doctrines and a new pantheon known as the Mahayana (or 'Greater Vehicle'). The Buddhism that first developed in India and then spread to Sri Lanka and later to Burma is what we today call the Theravada. The literature of Theravada Buddhism has been miraculously preserved in a compilation that scholars think began to be written down in Sri Lanka in about 100 BCE. This is known as the Pali Canon, named after the written language used by the early Buddhists.



(A bookcase with the standard edition of the Pali Canon, Bodh Gaya, India)

This enormous body of texts was later codified and commented upon by Buddhaghosa in about 500 CE. His edition of the Pali Canon is what we have today. It is referred to as the *Tripitika* ('Three Baskets', simply because the palm-leaf manuscripts were stored in baskets). Each basket or section has a separate kind of text. 1. The *Vinaya* or 'Discipline' section contains rules governing Buddhist monks who, by the time of the compilation, had gathered in large monasteries. 2. The *Sutta* or 'Aphorism' division is sub-divided into five parts, most of which contain discourses, teachings and sayings attributed to the Buddha. 3. The *Abhidharma* or 'Metaphysics' section is devoted to philosophical explanations of the other sections. These latter two sections (aphorism and metaphysics) define the two main genres of early Buddhist literature. The first teaches by storytelling and by example, such as the famous *Jataka* tales, whereas the second instructs by discourse and by analysis, often providing an explanation for the stories and examples in the first.

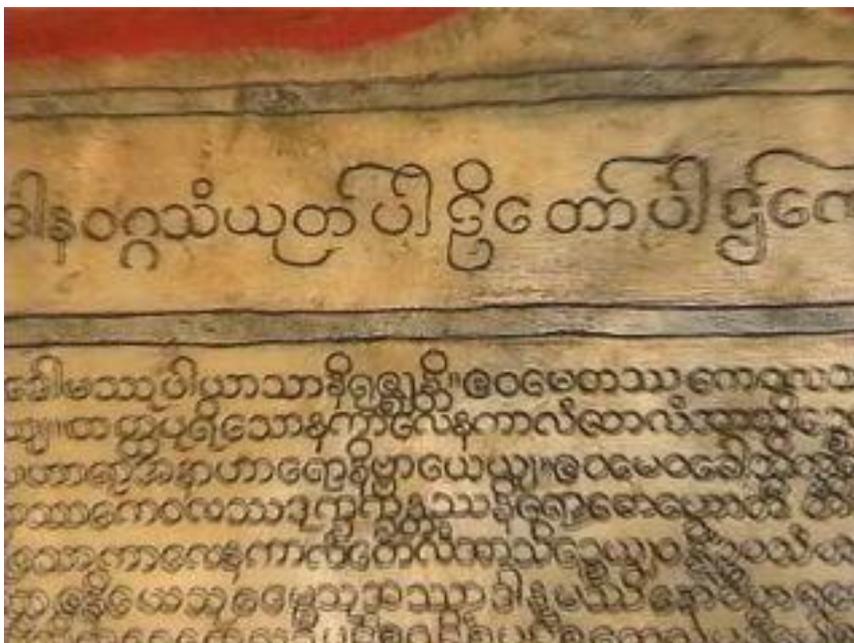
Most of this early Buddhist literature, with its ancient language and complex concepts, is difficult for anyone to follow, even if he or she is a Buddhist. However, there are two texts that became so popular that they claimed an existence outside the canon. The first of these is the *Dhammapada*, which began life as part of the 'aphorism' section of the Pali Canon. The other, not found within the Pali Canon but still important for early Buddhism, is the *Milindapanha* ('The Questions of Milinda').

Both these texts continued to evolve, adding new material, copied and translated by various scribes and scholars, so that they are now accessible in English translations.



(early Pali texts were written on palm-leaves, wrapped in cloth and stored in boxes)

In addition to these recorded texts, the Pali Canon also stimulated an extensive commentarial literature, much of which is still untranslated and some of which has not survived. Other early Pali texts also exist outside the canon. For example, the famous compiler of the canon, Buddhaghosa, wrote *Vissuddimagga* ('Path of Purification'), which is a magisterial commentary and explanation of Buddhist doctrine with an emphasis on meditation. Because it introduced new ideas, however, it is not considered canonical.



(Pali text written in Burmese script on palm-leaf, date unknown)

History

The teachings of the Buddha were first transmitted orally. According to Theravada tradition, the key person in the oral transmission of Buddhism was a disciple named Ananda, who sat by the side of the historical Buddha when he died. Over the centuries, the oral texts were expanded and refined until they first written down, probably in about 100 BCE and then later codified as the Pali Canon in Sri Lanka in approximately 500 CE. Theravada Buddhist literature was then translated into Sanskrit, Tibetan and Chinese, in which traditions the teachings evolved into Mahayana Buddhism. The Theravada tradition, however, remained strong in Sri Lanka before spreading to Burma and Cambodia, where it was further developed by local scholars. Both Burmese and Cambodian Buddhists wrote sophisticated commentaries in Pali and also composed their own texts, mostly focused on techniques of meditation. From the fifteen century onward, Burmese Buddhists wrote texts in Burmese using a poetical form called the *pyu*. In the previous century, Thai Buddhists wrote an historical epic, called 'The Three Worlds of King Ruang,' which explains the universe in terms of early Buddhist cosmology. Today, Pali texts continue to be written in Sri Lanka, though to a lesser extent than before. The Pali Text Society, founded in London in 1882, has published several hundred volumes of Pali literature, some with English translation.

Cultural significance The influence of Theravada Buddhism on Indian culture is immense. Several of the most fundamental concepts and practices in Indian religions, such as karma, transmigration, non-violence, meditation and *nirvana/moksa* (or release from the karmic cycle), emerged in Hindu, Buddhist and Jain scholarly schools. But the Buddhists refined and articulated these key concepts in their current form. Moving away from philosophy, we noted that early Buddhist sculptures in the centuries before the Christian Era represent some of the finest examples of Indian art in any period. Buddhism was significant also in social terms because it broke the Brahmins' domination on religious thinking, challenged their sacred status and appealed to a rising middle-class of merchants and traders in the urban centres that developed from about 500 BCE to 500 CE. During that time, several of the major kingdoms of India (Ashokan, Satavahana, Kushana) adopted Buddhism as a state religion, while others patronised Buddhist monks and scholars, building great monasteries and stupas. Although Buddhism eventually declined in India, starting in about 1000 CE, for reasons that are not entirely clear, it never disappeared from the subcontinent and large congregation of monks continued to exist into the early modern era, especially in the east and south. From the late 19th century, with the 'discovery', study and translation of the Pali Canon, Buddhism has continued to grow in India (and elsewhere, such as Sri Lanka and Burma, as well as Europe and America). A neo-Buddhist movement arose in India in the early 20th century, drawing inspiration from early Buddhism in order to fight for social justice against the caste system. This social reform movement was spearheaded by B R Ambedkar, a Hindu who converted to Buddhism, helped to draft the Indian constitution and served as law minister in the first government of independent India. The neo-Buddhist movement has more recently morphed into the Dalit (formerly 'Untouchable') movement, which is spread all over the country. Buddhism as a major religion may have faded from India a thousand years ago, but today there would be very few people indeed who did not know of the historical Buddha.

Key texts

1. *Dhammapada* The *Dhammapada* ('Verses on Dhamma/Dharma') is by far the best-known part of the immense Pali Canon of Theravada Buddhist texts. It is a collection of sayings and anecdotes traditionally attributed to the historical Buddha. The text contains 432 verses organised into 26 chapters, each devoted to a single topic such as 'The Fool', 'The Venerable', 'Old Age', 'The Self', etc. The *Dhammapada* thus performs the essential task of translating the complex philosophy of Buddhism into a 'manual for everyday living,' much like the animal fables in the *Jataka* tales and the *Panchatantra*. One can easily imagine an ordinary person in India in, say, 500 CE, or indeed someone in Japan in 1950, picking up this text and studying it closely in order to understand what it means to be a Buddhist.

The sample given below is from the translation by M. Müller, 1881

All that we are is the result of what we have thought: it is founded on our thoughts, it is made up of our thoughts. If a man speaks or acts with an evil thought, pain follows him, as the wheel follows the foot of the ox that draws the carriage.

All that we are is the result of what we have thought: it is founded on our thoughts, it is made up of our thoughts. If a man speaks or acts with a pure thought, happiness follows him, like a shadow that never leaves him.

For hatred does not cease by hatred at any time: hatred ceases by love, this is an eternal rule.

He who seeks his own happiness by hurting or killing beings, never finds happiness and will not escape from his sufferings.

He who seeks his own happiness not by hurting or killing beings but by purifying oneself; will find happiness and ends all sufferings.

Do not speak harshly to anyone; those who are spoken to will answer you in the same way. Indeed, Angry speech is painful and retaliation may overtake you.



(Silver coin, with portrait of Milinda [Menander], c. 150 BCE)

2. *Milindapanha* A second popular and often-translated text from the Pali Canon is the *Milindapanha* ('The Questions of Milinda'). This text differs from the *Dhammapada* in the basic fact that it is not considered canonical by the Theravada tradition in Sri Lanka or Thailand, although it is accepted as such in Burma and China. The text presents itself as a dialogue between Nagasena, a Buddhist monk, and Milinda (Milander, Menander), a Greek king who ruled the Indo-Greek kingdom of Bactria in northwest corner of the subcontinent in the second century BCE. The dialogue format of the text may have been suggested by the same device used in the *Upanishads*, but it also serves to bring the reader/hearer into the text. The text has no named author and is believed to have evolved, like so many early Indian texts, by oral tradition over a period of centuries. Scholars believe that it was first written down, probably in Sanskrit, in the first or second century CE. The oldest surviving manuscript of the *Milindapanha* is written in Pali and has a date of 1495 CE. This copy also suggests that it is incomplete, and that large sections are missing.

The extract provided here below (from a translation by V. Trenckner, 1880) comes from the first chapter ('Self') and contains the famous metaphor of the chariot, which was also used in the Hindu *Upanishads*.

King Milinda went up to Nagasena, exchanged polite and friendly greetings, and took his seat respectfully to one side. Then Milinda began by asking: "How is your reverence known, and what sir, is your name?"

"O king, I am known as Nagasena but that is only a designation in common use, for no permanent individual can be found."

Then Milinda called upon the Bactrian Greeks and the monks to bear witness: "This Nagasena says that no permanent individual is implied in his name. Is it possible to approve of that?" Then he turned to Nagasena and said, "If, most venerable Nagasena, that is true, who is it who gives you robes, food and shelter? Who lives the righteous life? Or again, who kills living beings, steals, commits adultery, tells lies or takes strong drink? If what you say is true then there is neither merit nor demerit, nor is there any doer of good or evil deeds and no result of karma. If, venerable sir, a man were to kill you there would be no murder, and it follows that there are no masters or teachers in your Order. You say that you are called Nagasena; now what is that Nagasena? Is it the hair?"

"I don't say that, great king."

"Is it then the nails, teeth, skin or other parts of the body?"

"Certainly not."

"Or is it the body, or feelings, or perceptions, or formations, or consciousness? Is it all of these combined? Or is it something outside of them that is Nagasena?"

Still Nagasena answered: "It is none of these."

"Then, ask as I may, I can discover no Nagasena. Nagasena is an empty sound. Who is it we see before us? It is a falsehood that your reverence has spoken."

"You, sir, have been reared in great luxury as becomes your noble birth. How did you come here, by foot or in a chariot?"

"In a chariot, venerable sir."

"Then, explain sir, what that is. Is it the axle? Or the wheels, or the chassis, or reins, or yoke that is the chariot? Is it all of these combined, or is it something apart from them?"

"It is none of these things, venerable sir."

“Then, sir, this chariot is an empty sound. You spoke falsely when you said that you came here in a chariot. You are a great king of India. Who are you afraid of that you don’t speak the truth?”

Then he called upon the Bactrian Greeks and the monks to bear witness: “This King Milinda has said that he came here in a chariot but when asked what it is, he is unable to show it. Is it possible to approve of that?”

Then the five hundred Bactrian Greeks shouted their approval and said to the king, “Get out of that if you can!”

“Venerable sir, I have spoken the truth. It is because it has all these parts that it comes under the term chariot...Just as it is by the existence of the various parts that the word ‘Chariot’ is used, just so is it that when the aggregates of being are there we talk of a being.”

“Most wonderful, Nagasena, most extraordinary that you have solved this puzzle, difficult though it was. If the Buddha himself were here he would approve of your reply.”

Reading

Richard Gombrich, *Theravada Buddhism*, 2006

Oskar von Hinuber, *A Handbook of Pāli Literature*, 2000

K R Norman, *Pali Literature*, 1983