

Some Thoughts on the Theravāda Exegetical Literature

By

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1. Introduction

The Exegetical (Commentarial) Literature or *Aṭṭhakathā*, which serves as the encyclopedia of Theravāda¹ Buddhism, provides the most complete and accurate information on the contents of the Pāli Canon (*Tipiṭaka*). Almost all the Three *Piṭakas* (Collections) have their own Commentaries. The *Suttapiṭaka* (Collection of Discourses) contains altogether Nineteen Books, the *Vinayapiṭaka* (Collection of Disciplinary Rules) contains Five Books and lastly, the *Abhidhammapiṭaka* (Collection of Higher Doctrines) contains Seven Books.² To my understanding, the Commentaries have the best possible explanations of these Thirty One Books of the Canon. For, if I should give a teaching on a particular doctrinal matter in the Canon, without suggesting referral to the Commentaries (Exegesis), you would be easily taken away by my own dogmatism. They, therefore, protect the Buddha's teachings from misinterpretation.

Recent funding has allowed a number of scholars to make several independent studies in this extensive field of literature. One that immediately came to my attention is

¹ Theravāda (the Doctrine of Elders) is believed to have been preserved in an unbroken chain of oral (*bhāṇaka*) tradition in India. Although the name Theravāda as a Buddhist school does not occur in any of the surviving books written in India, its Canonical literature was first put into written form in Sri Lanka during the 1st century BC. It is a popular name especially in the Commentarial and Chronical Literature composed in Sri Lanka. In the Commentaries, many details are given about the Theravāda tradition. For instance, the *Mahāvihāra* (the Great Monastery) was a centre of Theravāda tradition offered to Arhant Mahinda by King Devanampiya Tissa.

² These figures are taken from the up-to-date records of the 6th Buddhist Council (*Chaṭṭasaṅghāyana*) convened at Rangoon, Myanmar in the year 2500 Buddhist Era (1959 CE).

Dr. E. W. Adikaram who has made a major contribution to the examination of the Pāli *Aṭṭhakathā* (commentaries) in their original sources. When using them, he attempted to reconstruct the history of Buddhism in Sri Lanka. There has also been extensive and comprehensive research by Dr. Friedgard Lotternmoser, Dr. Sodo Mori and Dr. T. Endo who have thrown much light on the development of Theravada Buddhism reflected in the Canon (*Tipiṭaka*).³ Here I shall give some thoughts on the Theravāda Exegetical Literature.

2. Its Origin and Development

The *Aṭṭhakathās* of the present day are recorded to have been composed in the 5th Century AD by some distinguished Commentators like Buddhaghosa, Dhammapāla, Buddhadatta and a few more. In India, the original Pāli Commentaries were lost. So these great monks were assigned by their respective Āchariyas to travel to Ceylon (Sri Lanka) to translate the then existing Sinhalese Commentaries back to the original Pāli. It is believed that the origin and development of *Aṭṭhakathās* was even much earlier. To make any sort of claim of the earlier origin of this Exegetical Literature would be quite speculative. However, considering the available canonical and exegetical sources with sound reference, the factors that must have led to such literature can be traceable.

Firstly, we know that in the First Council, only the Dhamma and Vinaya were recited by 500 Arhants. There is no mention of the *Abhidhammapiṭaka* or the *Aṭṭhakathās* (Commentaries). However, between the Second and Third Council many things happened

³ Endo, Toshiichi: *Buddha in Theravada Buddhism – A study on the Concept of Buddha in the Pāli Commentaries*, Forward page by N.A. Jayawickrama, September 1997.

in the history of the *Sāsana*. The first schism occurred and with that many schools arose. With the help of Emperor Asoka⁴ (273-232 B.C.), Buddhism was popularized and expanded. While it witnessed an important development, there were some serious side effects as well. Due to the many privileges given to those adhering to the Buddhist faith, heretics joined the Saṅgha and pretended to be real Buddhist monks. We know, realizing such exploitative behavior, the Third Council was convened, so that the heretics wouldn't spoil the True Teachings.

Here it is reasonable to say that the *Aṭṭhakathās* (Commentaries) might have been composed in the Second and Third Councils as a means to protect the purity of the teachings of the Buddha. To support this idea, we can take Arhant Mahinda into our account. When he came to Sri Lanka, he brought along the Commentaries (Exegeses) with him. So it is clear that the Commentaries were available in India at that time and must have been composed between the Second and Third Councils.

Secondly, it was the traditional trend of the religious schools in India to have commentaries to their own canon. For example the Vedas have their own commentaries known as “*Brāhmaṇas*”. In the Upanishad as well, they have “*Bhāṣya*” as their own

⁴ Vishwanath Prasad Varma, *Early Buddhism and its Origin*, page 423-433: It is not possible to say if Asoka belonged to any particular sect either of the Theravāda or of the Mahāsaṅghikas. In the Bhadra Edict, it appears that he has in his mind the entire Buddhist Saṅgha as one big organization. Asoka is regarded having summoned the Third Buddhist Council for suppressing heretical trends in the Saṅgha and prescribing punishment for those who disrupt it. As a Buddhist, Asoka followed the path of non-violence in practical life. In Rock Edict I, he says that no animal should be sacrificed here (*iha*). According to James M. Macphail, Asoka, p. 49, the prohibition of animal sacrifice “must have given great offence to his Hindu Subjects.” After the death of Asoka who had done so much for the strengthening of the Buddhists Saṅgha, there was a Brahmanical Revival. Signs of the reassertion of the old ritualistic creed and cult were shown. One possible reason for the reaction against Buddhism and the revival of the Brahmanical creed may be that possibly due to its being associated with the monarchical patronage of Asoka, the Saṅgha became contaminated with regal and aristocratic affiliations and thus, to some extent at least, it might have forfeited the sympathies of the people.

commentary. In the same way, even in the Buddhist Canon, the disciples felt that Commentaries should be composed following this tradition.

Thirdly, another reason that might have led to the origin and development of the exegetical tradition is that the language used in the time of the Buddha cannot be understood in later periods. It must have changed in usage. So in order to make those words understandable, commentaries were composed.

3. The Canonical and Exegetical Difference

If we consider the scope of the broad canonical literature of the Pāli Canon, the first characteristic that quickly appears is that the discourses are mostly given by Buddha and then there are also a handful of discourses given by his immediate disciples. The Buddha taught the Dhamma in different ways in the Canon. *Pariyāya-desanā* is a form of discourse that is given, explaining in different ways. *Nippariyāya-desanā* is explaining the Dhamma to a point. *Sankhitta-desanā* is explaining in brief which is subsequently continued by some expert disciples who are capable of further analyzing those brief discourses of the Buddha. *Nītārtha-desanā* is a teaching in which the meanings are already drawn out and explicit and there no need of further explanation. And lastly there is *Neyārtha-desanā* in which the meanings are not drawn neither out nor implicit. The meanings need to be further drawn out. So such teaching methods were used by Buddha in the Canon.

In the *Cūḷavedallasutta*, Bhikkhunī Dhammadinnā has given a discourse on the Noble Eight-fold Path and their connection with the *Tisikkhā*. There is also Ven. Sāriputta in the *Sammāditṭhisutta* giving a discourse explaining broadly about the Right View. There are many such discourses given by the immediate disciples of the Buddha found in the canonical literature.

In the exegetical literature however, the presentation of the Dhamma is not usually by the Buddha, but by some well-versed monks. Taking one *Sutta*, these Commentators comment word by word. For example one that is very common in the Canonical Literature is the beginning remark by Ven. Ānanda: “*Evaṃ me sutaṃ*”. The Commentators will comment in details on who, where, when, what, why, to whom was this particular *Sutta* delivered. If the Commentators came across concepts like *atta* (soul), *kamma* and so on, they would give the opinions of the Buddha and also opinions of others.

In the canon, there are same words appearing in many discourses like the word *kamma*, so the Commentators would combine all those descriptive meanings of the term and explain systematically. However, the Commentators do not give their own opinions. Instead they would explain that on such and such an occasion and place, Buddha had explained like this and like that.

4. Exegetical Characteristics of the Canon

If we look into the many discourses found in the Canon, we can find that there are many explanations, clarifications and interpretations given to the teachings of the Buddha. Some of the immediate disciples of the Buddha like Ven. Sāriputta, Anuruddha, Mahākaccayana and so on wanted to highlight the exact meanings of those words uttered by the Buddha. Therefore, sometimes we see those prominent disciples giving discourses highlighting those meanings, explaining in detail and clarifying those terms that appeared in the original discourses of the Buddha. *Saccavibhaṅgasutta*, *dhātuviḥāṅgasutta*, *sammāditthisutta* and *kammavibhaṅgasutta* are some of them.

Saccavibhaṅgasutta was delivered in a way to give a detailed explanation of the *Dhammacakkhapavattanasutta*. In this particular discourse, the disciple has added some additional parts to the original teaching of the Buddha. *Satipaṭṭhānasutta* is another example. The same *sutta* we find in two different *Nikāyas* is not exactly same. The *Satipaṭṭhānasutta* in *Majjhimanikāya* is different from the *Satipaṭṭhānasutta* in *Samyuttanikāya*. The *Satipaṭṭhānasutta* of the *Majjhimanikāya* is an addition to the *Satipaṭṭhānasutta* of the *Samyuttanikāya*. So if we consider the commentarial characteristics, we can see that even the original discourses of the Buddha found in the Canon have their own Commentaries.

Another example of commentarial character in the early discourses is the *Cūḷavedallasutta* of *Majjhimanikāya* given by Bhikkhunī Dhammadinnā, in which she explains how the Noble Eight-fold Path is connected to the Three *Sikkhas* (Disciplines). The explanation provided by her is not available in the discourses of the Buddha. There

she not only explains the wider scope of the Three *Sikkhas* (Disciplines), but also the *Phalas* (fruits).

So all these are examples of exegetical characteristics found in the early discourses. Some have complete commentarial features. *Mahāniddeśa* of *Khuddakanikāya* is a commentary to the *Pārāyanavagga* of *Suttanipāṭa*. *Patisaṇṇidāmagga* also is an exposition added to the textual literature.

It is not only in the *Sutta-piṭaka*, but also in the *Vinaya-piṭaka* and the *Abhidhamma-piṭaka*, that many exegetical characteristics are clearly seen. *Abhidhamma-piṭaka* as a whole is a kind of commentary. The contents of the first two books *Dhammasaṅgī* and *Vibhaṅga* can even be found in the *Dasuttarasutta* and *Saṅgītisutta* of *Aṅguttara-nikāya*. So even in the *Abhidhamma-piṭaka*, which was not directly expounded by the Buddha, we can find all terms used in the *Suttas*.

5. The importance of the Exegetical Literature

The importance of the commentaries reflects the very construction of the history of Theravāda Buddhism in a concise manner. For, the commentaries touch upon many social aspects, not only the teachings of the Buddha. Yes, they definitely are meant for explaining the difficult terms and teachings that appeared in the Canonical Literature. However, as a whole, the commentaries are a great means to access the Buddha's biography, the history of Buddhist dispensation, geographical expansion in India, the political history of India from the 5th century BC to 3rd Century BC in particular, and then

also the religious, cultural, social and economical history of Sri Lanka. In the Canonical literature, we have *Cullavagga* which gives information on the 1st and 2nd Councils. *Parinibbānasutta* also gives some details about the Buddha's passing away, the cremation and the distribution of the relics to the neighboring states. Apart from these, we have no other sources, except the Commentarial Literature. *Samantapāsādikā* and *Sumaṅgalavilāsinī* contain much of the details about the important incidents which took place after the 2nd Buddhist Council up to the first Century AD.

Among the many Commentarial works, one that cannot be ignored is *Visuddhimagga* by commentator Buddhaghosa, which holds an important place more than the others. This is because the *Visuddhimagga* is a Commentary to all the Texts. Choosing one verse from a discourse of the Buddha as the subject topic, Buddhaghosa explains all the doctrinal aspects, related to both the theory and practice. For example:

“*Sīle Patitthāya naro sappañño,*

Cittaṃ paññaṃ ca bhāvaye

Ātāpi nipako bhikkhu

So imaṃ vijataye jaṭaṃ”

(When a wise man, established well in Virtue,

Develops Consciousness and Understanding,

Then as a bhikkhu ardent and sagacious

He succeeds in disentangling this tangle)⁵

⁵ Ñānamoli, Bhikkhu, translated from the Pāli: *The Path of Purification (Visuddhimagga)* by Bhadantācariya Buddhaghosa.

In this particular verse, Buddhaghosa has incorporated all the teachings of the Buddha. In defining *Sīla* (morality), he mentions almost all the *Suttas* that talk about *Sīla*. The same thing also applies with regard to *Citta*, *Pañña*, and so on. In explaining *Paticca-samuppāda* (Dependent Co-arising), we can easily understand the admirable knowledge of Buddhaghosa with regard to the Canonical Literature. He never missed a single discourse relating to the discourses on *Paticca-samuppāda* (Dependent Co-arising) in *Sutta-piṭaka*. The whole *nidānavagga* of *Saṃyutta-nikāya* is full of discourses on *Paticca-samuppāda*. Buddhaghosa has consulted not only the *Suttas* available in the *Saṃyutta-nikāya* but also the discourses that deal with the theory of Dependent Co-arising in the other *Nikāya* as well, for example: *Mahānidānasutta*, *Mahāpadānasutta*, and *Mahātariṅgā-saṃkhasutta*.

Another important aspect of the Commentaries is the revelation of the history of Sri Lanka. Dr. E. W. Adikaram in his book ‘*Early History of Buddhism in Ceylon*’ states: “Not seldom has one to read scores of pages in a Commentary before one comes across a reference to a person or place or event connected with Ceylon.”⁶ When Arhant Mahinda arrived in Ceylon with his companions, Devanampiya Tissa was the king of the Island who accepted and provided all the facilities to establish Buddhism in his kingdom. He arranged the occasion for Arhant Mahinda to have Dhamma Talks in well-attended assemblies. Most of the sons of the Sri Lankan families became monks and they were offered higher ordination at a newly constructed *Sīma* (boundaries) which is known as

⁶ Adikaram, E.W.: *Early History of Buddhism in Ceylon*, Introductory page.

Mahāvihāra. The contribution made by Arhant Mahinda for the establishment and development of Buddhism in Sri Lanka is well described in the Commentaries.

6. Conclusion

The commentaries as further expositions on Buddhist doctrines serve as a great source of history of Theravāda Buddhism. But, as I have argued above, the main purpose of the Exegetical Literature was to protect the purity of the teachings of the Buddha in accordance with the way of Theravada. The Commentators have commented discourse by discourse and presented the points of the Dhamma, their characteristics and purpose. They have used illustrations, provided historical accounts, pointed out if there were any synonymous words and gave grammatical explanations of some relevant terms that were found in the Canon. Since the earliest commentarial characteristics can be found within the Canon itself, therefore, the origin and development of the Exegetical Literature must have taken place much earlier than what we know. So the Commentaries are in fact nothing but the miscellaneous teachings of the Buddha.

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