The Oral Composition and Transmission of Early Buddhist Texts

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It is generally agreed that early Buddhist literature, of which the Pāli texts of the Theravāda canon are the most numerous and best preserved examples, was composed and transmitted orally. This is considered to be the case for the following reasons:

1. There is no reference to writing or writing materials in the principal Pāli nikāyas, though there are many references to learning and reciting discourses (see below).

2. Although there are a few passages in the Pāli Vinayapitaka which indicate that the art of writing was known at the time when these Vinaya texts were put into their present form, these do not refer to texts and their preservation.

3. Despite detailed rules governing the use of all items used by monks and nuns, the Vinaya has no rules governing the use of writing materials.

4. There is no archaeological evidence for the use of writing in India during the early phase of Buddhism, that is, before the time of Aśoka – although this view may have to be revised in the light of recent finds in Sri Lanka of Brāhmi characters on potsherds dating from this period.

5. Finally, many of the stylistic features of these texts indicate an oral origin.

As just noted, there are many passages in Pāli canonical texts depicting monks and nuns learning and reciting the Buddha’s teachings and discourses, which seem to indicate that during the Buddha’s lifetime material was formulated so that it could be remembered and recited. In a passage occurring in the Vinaya and Udāna, for example, it is reported that the Buddha asked the monk Soṇa to expound the Dhamma. In response Soṇa
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recited the *Atthakavagga* (*sabbān' eva atthakavaggikāni sarena abhāsi*), the name now given to a group of verse *suttas* in the *Suttanīpaṭa*. In the *Vinaya* mention is made of monks who are expert in the *suttas* chanting a *sutta* (*suttanītikehi suttantaṃ sangīyantehe*). In the *Sangiīsutta* of the *Dīghanikāya* a distinction is made between the Buddha teaching the Dhamma, a monk teaching the Dhamma to others as he has heard and learnt it, and a monk reciting the Dhamma as he has heard and learnt it (*sajjhāyaṃ karoti*). In the *Suttaivibhanga* of the *Vinaya* there is a particularly interesting *pācittiya* rule which prohibits those who have not taken the higher ordination from being taught the Dhamma by being made to recite it word by word (or “line by line”, *padaso dhammaṃ vāceyya*). The formulation of this rule arose because certain monks were teaching some laymen in this manner. The old commentary takes this as a particular form of recitation, almost in the manner of Vedic chanting. The commentator Buddhaghosa (Sp 741) interprets this passage as referring to a particular manner of reciting verse. Although it is somewhat obscure, it certainly seems to imply that students were made to learn fixed texts by heart. Again, there are many references to reciting the *Paṭimokkha*. On one occasion, for example, the Buddha refused to recite the *Paṭimokkha* because the assembly of monks was not pure. And finally, there are many passages which refer to monks being learned, having heard much, grasping and remembering the Dhamma, and so on.

Despite these references, we do not know what material was actually composed during this period, nor the form and manner in which it was composed. Nor do we understand the relationship of this material to the original discourses, or the relationship of these initial compositions to Buddhist texts as we have them today.

All schools of Buddhism agree that soon after the death of the Buddha a council, or *saṅgīti*, was held to confirm and rehearse the Buddha’s teaching. Some schools also maintain that *saṅgītis* were held at other times in the history of the Buddhist community. Also, the Theravāda tradition, for its part, considers that after the first *saṅgīti* a tradition of specialisation arose whereby groups of monks, called *bhānakas*, began to specialise in the knowledge and recitation of particular collections of texts.

What material was rehearsed at the first *saṅgīti* (and at those which followed) and whether, in fact, fixed texts were “recited” on these occasions is likewise uncertain. We do not yet understand the way in which the *bhānaka* system worked, nor its impact on the material being transmitted.

The Theravāda tradition maintains that its texts were first written down in the 1st century BCE in Sri Lanka, while information about the use of writing in the other Buddhist schools is generally lacking. The Theravāda account, occurring first in the *Dīpavamsa*, is extremely brief, consisting of two verses only. We do not know whether writing was utilised as an aid to composition or transmission before this time; 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.

The period of oral composition and transmission can probably be measured in centuries. R. Gombrich has suggested “three to four centuries”. But as S. Collins has argued, the Buddhist tradition also remained in various ways an oral/aural one, despite the introduction of writing; that is, the monks and nuns recited and listened to oral as well as written texts.

With early Buddhist texts being composed and transmitted orally it is not surprising that they exhibit so many striking features which appear alien to the modern reader and which, as stated earlier, are generally taken to be indicative of the oral status of this material. Stylistic features alone do not prove that a given text was originally oral, for written texts can, for various reasons, deliberately mimic the style of texts belonging to an earlier, oral phase of the tradition. Besides, the impact of the new medium on the style of the texts being composed would not have been immediate. But as there are other reasons for taking this to be an oral literature, we can regard the stylistic features of these texts as being, at least in part, a product of their oral origins.

For some decades now a field of study has developed in the West which has attempted to understand the way in which oral literature is composed and identify its peculiar characteristics. Particularly important to the foundation of this field were Milman Parry’s studies of Homeric epic verse. Parry argued that many of the stylistic features of these texts indicated that this literature had its origins in an oral tradition, and he developed the theory that in an oral epic tradition the poet creates his poems as he performs with the aid of what he referred to as formulas and themes, which are the building blocks of the performance. In consequence, every performance of the poem was a new creation, although each version may have been very similar. In an attempt to confirm these ideas Parry and A. B. Lord conducted field work in what was then Yugoslavia where a living tradition of oral epic verse survived. After Parry’s death, Lord continued these studies and further developed this theory. Most importantly, he emphasised the improvisatory nature of oral performance, regarding “oral” to be “formulaically improvised”. He therefore argued against the conception of fixed, memorised texts in oral traditions, stating, for example, that “sacred texts which must be preserved word for word, if there be such, could not be oral in any except the most literal sense”. In response to this, some have considered that the rote learning of a lengthy text and its verbatim repetition is the product of a culture which knows writing for, they argue, it is only through a fixed, written text that we can have the notion of word-for-word fixity. But Lord’s tendency to see his model as universally valid and his attributing of particularly restricted meanings to certain terms have been criticised by a number of scholars. The Parry-Lord model may
describe what occurs in the Homeric or Yugoslav traditions, or even be appropriate to oral epic traditions in general, but oral traditions are diverse, and what holds true for one may not be appropriate for another.

Many factors can influence the character of an oral literature and its method of composition and transmission: the nature of the information being relayed; the attitude towards this material and the extent to which accuracy is required; the character of the performers or composers, their status in society, the type of training they have undergone and the circumstances under which they perform; the nature of the audience and its expectations and therefore its demands on the performer or performers; the medium used (verse or prose) and whether the performance requires musical accompaniment.

The Buddhist and Yugoslav-Homeric traditions differ in virtually all of these factors. In epic verse traditions the medium is verse, and for the most part, epics portray the lives and activities of heroes. They are often performed to musical accompaniment, and in the Yugoslav case at least, they are primarily performed for entertainment. Also, performances are very much public events and the audience has an important influence on what is performed, or at least, on what episodes are performed and the degree to which each is elaborated. The status of the performers is also particular: they are bards or poets who perform individually, not communally, and they have usually acquired their performance skills through a long period of training. In contrast, in the early Buddhist tradition prose is by far the most dominant medium. The function of the literature is to preserve the teaching of a religious leader and the rules deemed necessary to guide the conduct of the members of that religious community. The information being transmitted is often complex, consisting of descriptions of practices and detailed analyses of concepts and psychological processes, all of which require a high degree of accuracy. The "performers" were monks and nuns, and increasingly they were members of monastic institutions. They came from diverse social backgrounds: some were brahmans who presumably had undergone their traditional training, others would have had no formal training in literary/performance skills. And finally, material was performed communally, as well as individually and privately.

This last factor seems to be one of the most overlooked. Yet it is particularly important, for communal or group recitation or performance requires fixed wording. It is not possible for more than one individual to perform at the same time in the manner described by Parry and Lord without producing utter chaos, for in that method each individual creates his compositions anew each time he performs.

The first application of the ideas of Parry and Lord to early Buddhist literature was L. S. Cousins' article "Pali oral literature" (1983). Cousins argued that in the earliest phase in the production of Buddhist literature the monks performed accounts of the Buddha's discourses and presented his
teaching in the manner proposed by the Parry-Lord model, that is, with “a strong improvisatory element” (p. 9). With time this material then came to be fixed due to its religious authority (p. 6). The differences between accounts of the same event or teaching found in different collections within the Pāli canon and between the parallel material belonging to different schools are evidence for an initially improvisatory stage, for such variations, he states, “are too frequent to arise from the natural variation of a manuscript tradition or even from a rigidly memorised oral tradition” (pp. 5–6).34

R. Gombrich, in a paper entitled “How Mahāyāna began” (1990b),35 argued against the improvisatory stage proposed by Cousins, seeing early Buddhist texts as “deliberate compositions which were then committed to memory, and later systematically transmitted to pupils” (p. 24), because, he states, “the whole purpose of the enterprise ... was to preserve the Buddha’s words” (p. 22). Further:

The early Buddhists wished to preserve the words of their great teacher, texts very different in character from the general run of oral literature, for they presented logical and sometimes complex arguments. The precise wording mattered” (p. 21).36

An investigation of the stylistic features of early Buddhist texts can, I think, make an important contribution to this debate.37 As part of my Ph.D. research a number of the most prominent stylistic features of the prose portions of Pāli canonical sutta texts, and more specifically, of the prose of the Dīghanikāya, the first book of the Suttapiṭaka, were investigated.38 The following discussion is based on this research.39

One of the most dominant characteristics of the prose portions of Pāli canonical sutta texts is the use of standardised phrases or passages to express or depict a given concept, action or event. These standardised phrases have been variously called “formulas”, “clichés”, “stock expressions”, “stock phrases” and “stereotyped phrases”. For the most part I will use the term “formula”.40

The narrative portions of Pāli sutta texts contain numerous passages which depict someone approaching another person, and the phrases used to depict these approaches are formulaic. The material encountered is extensive and diverse, and I will therefore restrict myself here to a discussion of those approach-formulas which are based on the unit yena...ten' upasāṃkami, upasāṃkamitvi, “x approached y, having approached (he did such and such)”.41

The material in the Dīghanikāya can be divided into two groups. The formulas of the first group depict someone approaching the Buddha, a monk or another person, and a monk approaching the Buddha or another monk. The simplest formula within this group depicts the approach of the visitor, then his or her interaction, usually verbal, with the person approached. In the more complicated formulas the visitor approaches,
shows some form of respect, adopts a particular posture (standing or sitting), then speaks with the person approached. A particular range of fixed units of meaning is employed within each division of this overall structure to construct distinct formulas. Which units of meaning are employed, and hence which formula type and specific formula is used, depends on the narrator, the classification of the person approaching and the person approached, their attitude towards each other, and the purpose of the visit.

So, for example, when a brahman is depicted approaching a king, the following combination of units will be used:

(Then) + the brahman approached the king. Having approached + he said this to the king.

In contrast, the formula used to depict a brahman approaching the Buddha in order to question him will be:

(Then) + the brahman approached the Bhagavat. Having approached, + he exchanged greetings with the Bhagavat, and having exchanged agreeable and courteous talk (with him), + he sat down to one side. + Seated to one side, the brahman + said this to the Bhagavat.

This is characterised by respect being shown and the showing of this particular form of respect, by the brahman sitting down rather than standing, and by the brahman speaking first. There are also certain forms of address associated with this interaction.

Again, the following combination of units will be used to depict a monk approaching the Buddha when he has been summoned by him:

(Then) + the monk approached the Bhagavat. Having approached, + having paid homage to the Bhagavat, + he sat down to one side. + To the monk who was seated to one side + the Bhagavat said this.

In contrast to the previous formula, this is characterised by the monk showing this particular form of respect and by the Buddha speaking first. Again, there are certain forms of address encountered in such an approach.

The second group of formulas depict the Buddha approaching someone and a monk approaching someone other than the Buddha or another monk. Here the situation is quite different. Not only do the structures of these formulas differ from those of the previous group, but these formulas also utilise a completely different range of fixed units of meaning. Although the factors which determine the use of particular fixed units of meaning, and hence the overall formula, are the same, their relative importance differs markedly from the first group. Here the purpose of the approach is the fundamental determinant of the formula used, with the wording of approaches of different purposes differing greatly from each other. We have in effect “purpose built” formulas.
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So, for example, the formula used to depict the Buddha visiting an ascetic is:

Then the Bhagavat approached the ascetic. Then the ascetic said this to the
Bhagavat: 'May the Bhagavat come, venerable sir. Welcome to the Bhagavat,
worthy sir. It is long, venerable sir, since the Bhagavat took the opportunity
to come here. May the Bhagavat, venerable sir, be seated. This seat has been
prepared.' The Bhagavat sat down on the prepared seat. Having taken a
lower seat, the ascetic sat down to one side. The Bhagavat said this to the
ascetic who was seated to one side.45

But the formula used to depict the Buddha attending a donor's meal is:

Then the Bhagavat, dressing in the morning and taking his bowl and robe,
approached the house of the brahman together with the community of
monks. Having approached, he sat down on a prepared seat. Then the
brahman personally satisfied and served the community of monks headed by
the Buddha with the finest hard and soft food. Then, when the Bhagavat
had finished his meal and had washed his bowl and hands, the brahman
took a lower seat and sat down to one side. The Bhagavat said this to the
brahman who was seated to one side.46

The formulas of this category are generally characterised by the
following features: (1) the Buddha or monk is depicted getting dressed and
taking his bowl and robe when the visit is a public one; (2) the approach is
to the place of the person who is approached rather than to the actual
person; (3) the Buddha or monk does not show respect to the person
visited; rather, some gesture of respect or subordination is shown by the
person approached; (4) the Buddha or monk sits down on a prepared seat;
and finally, (5) such approaches usually occur in sutta-narrator passages.
Features 2, 3 and 4 tend to subordinate the person being approached to the
Buddha or monk who is approaching.

The study of the material in the Dīghanikāya shows that the wording of
passages which depict the common event of someone approaching another
person has been standardised in this text to the extent that only a limited
range of stock phrases or formulas is exhibited.47 These formulas have set
structures and are composed of a variety of possible fixed units of meaning.
As mentioned, which units are employed, and hence which formula type
and specific formula is used, depends on certain factors. Given a knowledge
of these determining factors, the wording of a particular approach is,
in the majority of cases, predictable.48 At minimum, this indicates that there
is an overall homogeneity to the narrative portions of this collection of
suttas.49 Whether there was a tendency to use a standardised diction from
the beginning, or whether standardisation was undertaken at the great
sāṅgītis, or councils, or later by the bhāṇaka tradition or when the canon was
written down, is yet to be determined.
There are two principal, alternative methods for the composition of oral literature and therefore for early Buddhist texts. The first is that proposed by Parry and Lord for oral epic verse and taken by Lord as the only method possible in oral cultures. In such an improvisatory method no two performances are exactly alike. If the early phase of Buddhist literature was one of composition-in-performance, then those texts which we consider to be representative of this period must be seen to be ‘frozen’ versions of a particular performance. The second method entails the composition of a fixed text which is then memorised and transmitted verbatim.

The standardised diction outlined here can be seen as an aid to composition within both of these methods: whenever a particular approach needed to be portrayed, the wording was already available. In other words, these formulas acted as prefabricated building-blocks. In addition to this, the use of a standardised and predictable diction would also have aided the learning by heart and recitation of a large body of fixed material; that is, within a tradition of the composition and transmission of fixed texts this feature would have a mnemonic function.

This research on the formulaic diction of these texts becomes particularly interesting when the wording of passages which depict similar concepts, actions or events found in different Sutta-pitaka and Vinaya-pitaka texts are compared. For example, the event of Māra approaching the Buddha towards the end of the Buddha’s life is found in the Dīghanikāya, Udāna, Samyuttanikāya, and Aṅguttaranikāya. In the Dīghanikāya and Udāna occurrences we have the fullest formula with Māra approaching the Buddha, standing to one side, then speaking:

Then, not long after the venerable Ānanda had departed, Māra the evil one approached the Bhagavat. Having approached, he stood to one side. Standing to one side, Māra the evil one said this to the Bhagavat.

In the Samyuttanikāya we have a briefer formula with no mention of Māra standing to one side:

Then, not long after the venerable Ānanda had departed, Māra the evil one approached the Bhagavat. Having approached, he said this.

But in the Aṅguttaranikāya the passage is so brief as not even to mention the approach, merely reading:

Then, not long after Ānanda had departed, Māra the evil one said this to the Bhagavat.

Here, as in other instances, it is seen that the Dīghanikāya and Udāna are the most wordy texts. This means that, although the suttas of the Dīghanikāya are longer than those to the Aṅguttaranikāya primarily because of differences in their structure, the use of a more elaborate and detailed diction by the former is certainly a contributing factor.
We saw earlier that the formula used in the Dīghanikāya to depict the Buddha or a monk approaching an ascetic is characterised by the ascetic showing respect to the Buddha or monk and not vice versa, by the ascetic addressing the Buddha or monk in a reverential manner, and by the ascetic taking a lower seat; all of which tends to subordinate the ascetic to the Buddha or monk. Further research shows that this formula is particular to the Dīgha- and Majjhima-nikāyas. In contrast, the Samyuttanikāya, Aṅguttaranikāya and Vinayaapiṭaka use a simpler formula which depicts the Buddha or monk greeting the ascetic, sitting down to one side, then speaking to him.58 When depicting such encounters with ascetics, the authors of the Samyutta, Aṅguttara and Vinaya seemed to have considered it unnecessary to portray the Buddha or monk being honoured in such an exaggerated manner.

Again, differences exist between the various canonical texts in their wording of the “going to an invited meal” approach-formula mentioned earlier. In contrast to the previous example, the same basic formula is used in each text, but the syntax of the fixed units of meaning and presence of particular units differs from text to text. For example, in the Dīghanikāya and Udāna we have the Buddha approaching the donor’s house “together with the community of monks” and sitting down, while in the Majjhimanikāya, Aṅguttaranikāya, Suttanipāta and Vinayaapiṭaka we have the Buddha approaching the donor’s house, then sitting down “together with the community of monks”; that is, these latter texts associate the unit “together with the community of monks” with the verb depicting the action of sitting down rather than with the verb portraying the approach.59 Also, in the Dīhanikāya, Majjhimanikāya, Udāna and Suttanipāta we have the donor “taking a lower seat and sitting down to one side” after the meal, while the Samyuttanikāya, Aṅguttaranikāya and Vinayaapiṭaka fail to include this “taking of a lower seat” phrase.60

The situation seems to be quite complex, with a text such as the Udāna, for example, following the diction of the Dīhanikāya with regard to some formulas, but not others. It is possible that such differences may have resulted from the bhāṣaṇaka tradition, or period of specialisation. Alternatively, differences in diction may have resulted from the way in which each text was used by the Buddhist community. In other words, it is possible that different texts were intended for different audiences and had different functions and that their wording was modified accordingly. Or again, in some cases these differences may be due to the different manuscript traditions of these texts. Further research certainly needs to be undertaken to properly identify and understand such differences.

Another common feature of the prose portions of Pāli canonical sutta texts is the tendency to proliferate similar word elements and units of meaning to form sequences or “strings”. We frequently encounter sequences of two, three or more adjectives or adjectival units qualifying the same noun,
a number of nouns all acting as the subject of the same sentence or as the object of the same verb. We encounter sequences of adverbs modifying the same verb, or a number of parallel verbs occurring together in the same sentence, and so on. Wherever such sequences of parallel word elements or units of meaning occur, they are arranged according to what will be referred to here as the Waxing Syllable Principle; that is, in sequences which consist of similar word elements or units of meaning of an unequal number of syllables, the words or units of meaning of fewer syllables must precede (to use an expanded form of Pāṇini’s phraseology, via Caland). For example, in the Udumbarikasihanādasutta we find an ascetic telling the Buddha that he had challenged him “as he was foolish, confused, and unskilled”: yathā-bālāna yathā-mūlhenā yathā-akusalena. This consists of a string of three adverbial expressions. The first has 5 syllables, the second 5 syllables and the third 7 syllables; that is, the pattern is 5+5+7. This arranging of elements according to an increasing syllable length tends to produce a crescendo effect in these sections of the text, and to a certain extent parallels enumeration, another important stylistic feature of this literature.

The exception to this general principle is where a sequence, and especially a long sequence, can or must be divided into groups on the basis of associations in meaning or grammatical or morphological form, in which case the Waxing Syllable Principle only works within each group, restarting again with the next group. For example, the stock description of the lowly-talk engaged in by ascetics, which also occurs in the Udumbarikasihanādasutta, consists of a long list of topics of conversation. This list can be divided into groups on the basis of associations in meaning: rāja-kathā cora-kathā mahāmatta-kathā, “talk of kings, thieves and ministers”. This has a 4+4+6 syllable pattern. This group is then followed by senā-kathā bhaya-kathā yuddha-kathā, “talk of armies, fear and battle” (4+4+4 syllables); anna-kathā pāna-kathā vattha-kathā sayana-kathā, “talk of food, drink, clothing and bedding” (4+4+4+5 syllables); mālā-kathā gandha-kathā nāti-kathā yāna-kathā, “talk of garlands, scents, relatives and vehicles” (4+4+4+4 syllables); gāma-kathā nigama-kathā nagara-kathā janapada-kathā, “talk of villages, towns, cities and districts” (4+5+5+6). And so on. The pattern of this list so far is thus 4+4+6, 4+4+4, 4+4+4+5, 4+4+4+4, 4+5+5+6.

This ordering principle is not only apparent in the more obvious sequences of adjectives and adjectival units, nouns and noun phrases, adverbs and verbs, but it also seems to be operational in the ordering of parallel units of meaning which occur in different, but nonetheless closely associated, clauses, sentences and paragraphs, and in the ordering of sequences of parallel sentences or semi-independent units of meaning, as well as a number of other structures, such as those involving saddhiṃ. A number of examples encountered in the material studied have problematic patterns. Solutions to these can often be found if certain amendments are
accepted — a _svarabhakti_ vowel not scanned or a word thought to be a later insertion omitted — or if only the immediately parallel units are compared. It also seems that conceptual considerations or the desire to produce a particular word play may occasionally override the Waxing Syllable Principle. A few examples await plausible solutions.

It is particularly common in these sequences for the component elements, and especially the initial members of the sequence, to share sound and metrical similarities. In the above example of _yathā-bālena yathā-mūlena yathā-akusalena_, it is seen that, apart from the obvious sound similarities due to _yathā-_ being the first member of each compound, the endings of all three are virtually identical: _-lena/-lēna/-lēna_. Again, the first two compounds differ only in their core syllables: _-bā-_ and _-mū-,_ which are both labial consonants in conjunction with long vowels. The two initial compounds of this sequence therefore share the same metrical patterns and are virtually identical in sound. The _-ū- _of the second member (_-mūlena_) is also echoed in _-akusalena _of the third. Hence, there is a tendency in these texts to proliferate similar word elements and units of meaning, that is to expand the wording, while at the same time there is a tendency to bring this expanded wording closer together by choosing words which share sound and metrical similarities.

This phenomenon of ordering similar word elements according to their syllable lengths has been known for some time, but an analysis of the nature and extent of its application within Pāli texts has not been undertaken before.

The proliferation of similar word elements and units of meaning and the ordering of the member elements of such sequences according to the Waxing Syllable Principle, which thus produces an overall crescendo effect, tends to give a rhythm and homogeneity to this material. This rhythm and homogeneity is then greatly enhanced when, as is frequently the case, the member elements also share sound and metrical similarities. The presence of rhythmical patterns in prose, and especially in long prose texts, must have been extremely important to those who performed or recited this material, and may be functionally parallel to the rhythm produced in verse by metre.

As with the use of formulas, the structures briefly discussed here would, by acting as an organisational principle, function as aids to composition within both of the compositional methods outlined above. However, within a tradition of the composition of fixed texts, which are designed to be memorised, this combination of stylistic features would also have functioned as a mnemonic aid, for it is surely easier to remember a sequence of words arranged in this manner according to syllable length. Similarly, it is easier to remember two different words when they share sound similarities and have the same metrical patterns. And again, the presence of some form of rhythm would also have facilitated the memorisation and recitation of this
material. But whichever method we consider to be that utilised for the composition of these texts, it is seen that the choice of words and their arrangement was heavily influenced by the fact that these texts were composed and transmitted orally.

The final stylistic characteristic that will be discussed here is repetition. By repetition I mean the repetition of sentences, passages or whole sections of the text, and the repetition of set structures. This discussion is based on the study of repetition in one sutta of the Dighanikāya, the Udumbarikasāhanādasutta, the 25th sutta of this collection.

In order to establish the degree to which this particular sutta is repetitive, the text of the PTS edition was scanned into a word processor and all abbreviated passages were reconstructed. It was then possible to establish the word count for the complete sutta and for those sections which were being repeated, and hence to calculate what percentage of the text was repetitive.

In order to quantify repetition, the level at which the repetition is occurring within the text and the type of repetition involved must be established. Repetition can occur at a number of levels. A passage is repetitive at a primary level when it does not form part of a passage which is itself repeated within the text. If it does, then it is repetition at a secondary level. Sometimes repetition at a tertiary level is discernible.

In this study five categories or types of quantifiable repetition were established. They are: Verbatim Repetition (VR), Repetition with Minor Modifications (RMM), Repetition with Important Modifications (RIM), Repetition of Structure Type-1 (RS-1) and Repetition of Structure Type-2 (RS-2).

In Verbatim Repetition a passage is repeated word for word with no modifications needing to be made by the one who recites or performs this material. For example, the stock description of the lowly-talk engaged in by ascetics mentioned earlier is repeated verbatim four times in this sutta, representing about 5% (4.5%) of the text. Or a long passage which describes three stages of what the Buddha considers to be true ascetic practice, and which represents about 6% of the text, is repeated verbatim three times, making up about 17% of the sutta. In total 30% of the Udumbarikasāhanādasutta involves Verbatim Repetition at a primary level.

Passages which are repeated with alteration to only a small proportion of their wording were classified as Repetition with Minor Modifications. For example, it is not uncommon to form the opposite of a passage expressing a positive or negative state by merely repeating that passage and adding or omitting certain prefixes or particles. Just under 35% (34.5%) of this sutta involves this kind of repetition on a primary level.

The third category, Repetition with Important Modifications, involves repetition of a passage, but with important changes to the wording, whether in syntax, grammatical number, tense or person, or enlargement
or contraction of the wording. Material of this category represents about 4% (3.8%) of the sutta studied.

Two types of repetition of structure were also established. In the first type a structure is repeated along with virtually all of its wording, but with key elements replaced to produce differences in meaning. So, for example, in the common passage which depicts the practice of the four brahmavihāras, or divine abidings, the same structure and wording is repeated four times, first for loving kindness (mettā), then for compassion (karunā), then sympathetic joy (muditā), and finally, for equanimity (upekkhā). In this way each repetition differs by only one word.

In many passages of this class, the elements which differ in each repetition share morphological, sound or metrical similarities, or similarities in structure (or some combination of these), thereby minimising the impact of the changes being made. For example, in this sutta, after defeating the ascetic Nigrodha in debate, the Buddha criticises him for not having the following thought:

Enlightened (buddho) the Bhagavat teaches the Dhamma for enlightenment (bodhāya); tamed, or controlled (danto), the Bhagavat teaches the Dhamma for control (damathāya); calmed (santo), the Bhagavat teaches the Dhamma for calm (samathāya); crossed over (tīnpo), the Bhagavat teaches the Dhamma for crossing over (taranāya); extinguished (parinibbuto), the Bhagavat teaches the Dhamma for extinguishing (parinibbānāya).

The initial element of each parallel sentence (buddho, danto, santo, tīnpo, parinibbuto) is a past participle. The first four have the same number of syllables and equal metrical patterns, and sound similarities are evident at least in danto and santo. In the second group of elements which differ in each repetition, damathāya and samathāya are morphologically parallel, share the same number of syllables and have the same metrical pattern. They differ, in fact, only in their initial letter. Similarly, the last two elements in this group, taranāya and parinibbānāya, are morphologically similar. In this way, the elements which differ in meaning within each repeated structure appear similar in outward form. The effort involved in making the required modifications is thereby minimised for the reciter.

A total of 16% of this sutta is composed of material of this RS-1 category.

In those passages which were classified as Repetition of Structure Type-2, a basic structure is repeated, but with far less repetition of the wording, or in some cases, with modification to the structure of the wording which is replaced. Material of this category represents nearly 3% (2.5%) of this sutta.

In total almost 87% (86.8%) of the Udumbarikasīhanādasutta involves quantifiable repetition of one kind or another at a primary level. This is surely a significantly high proportion of the text. It must also be noted that the verbatim end of the scale is particularly well represented.
Repetition is undoubtedly a mnemonic device. This is based on the simple observation that the more frequently a passage, unit of meaning or word is repeated the more likely it is to be remembered. Or as a verse in the *Dhammapada* states: “non-recitation is the rust of incantation.” The repetition encountered in Buddhist texts has frequently been taken to have a mnemonic function, but few have elaborated on their statements or investigated repetition in any systematic manner.

I have so far argued that the first two stylistic features discussed in this paper could have functioned as aids to composition both within a tradition of composing material during the performance in an improvisatory manner and in a tradition of composing fixed texts which were to be transmitted verbatim. In addition to this, it was proposed that these features would also have had a mnemonic function within the latter tradition. In contrast to this, it is difficult to see the gross forms of repetition just discussed – the repetition of whole passages, with or without modification, and the repetition of structures with the replacement of various proportions of their wording – and the scale on which this is pursued, that is the proportion of the text involved, as anything other than proof, or at least as a very strong indication, that these texts were designed to be memorised and transmitted verbatim. In contrast, material such as the contemporary Yugoslav epics studied by Lord (1960) or the contemporary Indian epics studied by Smith (1991), Beck (1982) and Roghair (1982), which is composed “during the performance”, although exhibiting many forms of repetition, does not exhibit the form of gross repetition encountered in Pali *sutta* texts.

The five categories of repetition established in the study upon which the above discussion of repetition in the *Udumbarakṣasiṇāṇādasutta* is based can be graded according to the degree to which they each facilitate the learning and retention of this material. Verbatim Repetition obviously represents the greatest aid to memory. The greater the percentage of a text that is verbatim repetitive the easier it is to learn and remember. At a primary level, 30% of the *Udumbarakṣasiṇāṇādasutta* consists of repeated passages of this classification.

The remaining four types of repetition each encompass a range of differences. In terms of the modifications to be made by the reciter, and hence the effort involved in making such changes, the Repetition with Minor Modifications and Repetition of Structure Type-1 categories on the one hand, and the Repetition with Important Modifications and Repetition of Structure Type-2 categories on the other, are seen to be parallel and to encompass a similar range of differences.

As mentioned, almost 35% of the *sutta* studied involves Repetition with Minor Modifications at a primary level. Another 16% involves Repetition of Structure Type-1. Together these two categories, which are similar in terms of their mnemonic significance, represent about 51% (50.5%) of this *sutta*. 
The study also showed that almost 4% of this *sutta* involves Repetition with Important Modifications at a primary level and that approximately 3% involves Repetition of Structure Type-2. Together these two parallel categories represent about 6% (6.9%) of this *sutta*.

As 87% of the *Udumbarikasihanādasutta* involves some form of quantifiable repetition on a primary level, 13% of this text is therefore only encountered once. Much of this consists of the opening and closing sections of the *sutta*. Although not occurring again, the passages and elements which make up this 13% commonly involve non-quantifiable forms of repetition (as do those which are repeated again) and may be found in other *suttas* of the *Dīghanikāya*.

Many of the passages which are repetitive at a primary level in the text are themselves composed of or incorporate quantifiable repetitive elements, which is repetition at a secondary level. For example, a passage which is repeated verbatim may itself be composed of a passage repeated verbatim twice. This secondary passage therefore occurs four times in the text. This secondary repetition would further increase the familiarity of the material being learnt and facilitate recitation.74

This study has focused on one *sutta* in the *Dīghanikāya*. But much of the material found in both the repetitive and non-repetitive passages of this *sutta* is also encountered elsewhere in the *Dīghanikāya*, which of course is significant if a body of *suttas* such as are contained in the present *Dīghanikāya* was learnt and transmitted by a particular group of monks or nuns. This repetition decreases the uniqueness of the material which is not repeated again within this *sutta*, and increases the familiarity of those passages which are.

Further, various forms of non-quantifiable repetition are an integral part of all passages, whether these passages are repeated again within this particular *sutta* or not, whether they are found in other *suttas* or are unique to this *sutta*, whether classified as being repetitive at a primary or secondary level. Passages are built up through the proliferation of similar word elements, units of meaning and structures. Many elements share sound and metrical similarities. Vocatives of address and particles such as atha kho and kho are continually used as markers throughout the *sutta*. Certain verbs are repeated in their non-finite forms to resume the following clause.75 The wording used to express or depict a given concept, action or event is standardised, and diversity of vocabulary is avoided. And so on. In this way, although we have been able to quantify gross repetition of certain classifications, there are many forms of repetition employed by this class of Pāli text which cannot be quantified, yet which must also be considered to facilitate greatly the learning and recitation of this material. Repetition thus thoroughly permeates every dimension of this class of Buddhist literature.

The characteristics of the prose portions of Pāli canonical *sutta* texts discussed in this paper show that the authors of this material attempted to minimise differences and maximise similarities. They did this by using a
standardised diction (which we have referred to as formulas), by proliferating similar word elements often chosen for their sound and metrical similarities, and by pursuing repetition on a truly large scale, to mention but a few. Of these stylistic features, it is gross repetition which provides the greatest evidence that these texts were composed as fixed texts which were to be memorised and transmitted verbatim. As previously mentioned, these stylistic features do not prove that this literature was essentially an oral one, for written texts can utilise or mimic characteristics of an earlier oral tradition. Nor do they prove that these texts were conceived as fixed texts. But when combined with such historical factors as accounts of communal recitation, events which required a fixed text, then we are surely on firmer ground.

Although I have attempted to show that the early Buddhist *sutta* texts were, in the words of R. Gombrich, “deliberate compositions which were then committed to memory”, I would certainly agree that accounts of what the Buddha is supposed to have said and discourses on his teaching would have been given by the monks and nuns after the Buddha’s death in an improvisatory manner, at times drawing heavily on memorised material, or as R. Gethin (1992) has argued, by using lists as a foundation. Such discourses may then have become the basis of later fixed texts. But these accounts and discourses were fundamentally different from the essentially fixed, memorised texts transmitted by the community, however imperfectly. Finally, the Parry-Lord model does not exhaust the oral or literary/performance dimension of oral cultures. In ancient, pre-literate India there was a strong tradition of composing fixed, religious texts which were designed to be memorised and transmitted verbatim.

Notes

7. See R. A. E. Coningham, 1993. S. U. Deraniyagala dates these finds to 600–500 BC; R. Allchin/R. A. E. Coningham tentatively date them to 400–450 BC.
9. References to Pāli texts are to the Pāli Text Society’s editions. Abbreviations of titles of works and of terms and signs follow the Epilegomena to Vol. I of the Critical Pāli Dictionary.
In the introduction to his important and influential publication, D. Smith, 1987, esp. h4., manner evolved over many generations. For examples of the criticism of the use of stylistic features or formulaic density as an inappropriate. A number of. For a brief overview. pp. pitakattayafii,16.

J. Brough, 1985. The Oral Composition and Transmission of Early Buddhist Texts. 55

13. Vin IV 14-5; cf. PED s.v. pada (padaro).
15. E.g. bahussuto hoti sutadharo sutasannicayo (M I 356); so ca bhikkhu bahussuto hoti āgatāgamo dharmadhāro vinayadhāro mātikādhāro padāto syatto maddhāt tagi kukkussatiko sikkhikāmo (Vin I 337). Cf. S. Collins, 1992 (for a brief description of the teaching and learning process, see esp. p. 124).
19. For examples of differences which may be due to the bhāgaka tradition, see below. See also G. von Simson, 1977, p. 486; O. von Hinüber, 1990, chap. X; K. R. Norman, 1989, pp. 34, 50.
20. A. K. Warder (1980, p. 294) mentions Bu-ston’s account which states that all schools committed their texts to writing in the 1st century CE or earlier. Warder (pp. 345-6) also refers to the Sarvāstivādin account which states that they wrote theirs down in 100 CE.
22. J. Brough, 1962, pp. 28-9, 218-19. The Pali version of the verse to which Brough refers has sa sayatī, where the other versions support an original sa sayatā. Brough (ibid., p. 218) dismisses the possibility that such a transposition of syllables could have occurred in the course of purely oral transmission as, he states, “such a supposition would indeed imply an unbelievably slipshod paramparā. But in manuscript copying this is a common and readily understandable error.” However, such a transposition seems equally possible in oral transmission. Cf. S. Collins, 1990, fn. 25.
26. G. Bonazzoli (1985, esp. p. 267) and H. Bakker (1989, pp. 330-32) both argue that, in the case of the purāṇas, stylistic features do not necessarily indicate oral composition. They both see the purāṇas as resulting from an interplay between oral and written transmission. For examples of the criticism of the use of stylistic features or formulaic density as an indicator of oral or written origins which are encountered in the wider field of oral literature research, see for example, A. B. Lord, 1975, pp. 12-20; 1986, p. 478; 1987; J. M. Foley, 1985, pp. 26-7, 42, 50, 56.
27. For a brief overview of Parry’s work, see H. Lloyd-Jones (1992) and the introductory essay to J. M. Foley (1985).
28. Parry defined the formula as “a group of words which is regularly employed under the same metrical conditions to express a given essential idea”, a definition which has remained prominent in the discussion of oral literature. This has obvious limitations for our purposes for we are dealing with prose and the metrical dimension or requirement is therefore inappropriate. A number of scholars have argued for the exclusion of the metrical component from the definition of a formula. See, for example, P. Kiparsky, 1976, pp. 84, 87; M. O’Conner, 1980, pp. 104-106; G. H. Roghair, 1982, pp. 60-6; O. M. Davidson, 1988; cf. J. D. Smith, 1987, esp. pp. 596-7, 602.
29. In the introduction to his important and influential publication The Singer of Tales (1960, p. 4), Lord set out his definitions: “stated briefly, oral epic song is narrative poetry composed in a manner evolved over many generations by singers of tales who did not know how to write; it
consists of the building of metrical lines and half lines by means of formulas and formulaic expressions and of the building of songs by the use of themes. This is the technical sense in which I shall use the word ‘oral’ and ‘oral epic’ in this book.”


31. I. M. L. Hunter, 1985. But lengthy verbatim recall could, in fact, be verified by a group of specialist reciters. As will be shown in the following studies, there are also many stylistic features which can aid the oral transmission of a fixed text.

32. See, for example, J. D. Smith, 1977. Lord’s response to Smith’s criticism is found in A. B. Lord, 1987, p. 65ff.

33. Although not thought to be a memorised text, the contemporary oral Indian epic of Pābuji exhibits a high degree of stability, which J. D. Smith (1987, pp. 600–602; 1989, p. 33) attributes to the religious status of the hero. Thus a religio-philosophical dimension may result in an even greater degree of stability, or even fixity.

34. There is, in fact, much scope for such changes to occur within a “rigidly memorised tradition”. This is discussed in greater detail in the conclusion to my Ph.D. thesis (see note below).

35. This article first appeared in 1988 in the Journal of Pāli and Buddhist Studies.

36. The only other work which has attempted to address the question of the method used by the early Buddhists for the composition of their texts is R. Gethin’s “The Māttakā: memorization, mindfulness and the list” (1992). Gethin, like Cousins, considers the delivery of discourses and accounts of what the Buddha said to have been an improvisatory affair, and the differences between parallel versions of the same text as resulting from such a method. The various versions of the Dasaottarasutta (Dasaottararatna), for example, differ in their inclusion or omission of certain lists because they represent different performances of what is essentially the same list-giving discourse (ibid., pp. 157–8).


38. The thesis title is Some stylistic features of the prose portions of Pali canonical suttas and their mnemonic function. It was submitted to the University of Cambridge in September 1994.

39. These studies were restricted to an analysis of prose, because, as stated, this is by far the most dominant medium used by the early Buddhists. It is also particularly interesting as most oral literature is verse. I chose to work with Pali canonical sutta texts, not because they are the oldest, but because they represent the most complete and best preserved body of texts representative of the early phase of Buddhist literature.

40. This diversity of terminology in part reflects a general uncertainty as to what actually constitutes a “formula”, “stock phrase”, and so on, and whether, say, a “formula” is different from a “stock phrase” or “stock expression”. A detailed discussion of the terminology and definitions is presented in my Ph.D. thesis.

41. The inclusion of the unit “then”, atha kho, depends on the context.

42. E.g. D II 237 atha kho bhā Mahāgāvinda brāhmaṇa yena Renu rāja ten upasamkami, upasamkamivi Renuṃ rājānam etat avoca.

43. E.g. D I 236 atha kho VassethaBhāradosajā māṇava yena Bhagavā ten upasamkamīnu, upasamkamivā Bhavavātā saddhiṃ sammodajā sammodanāyath kathāṃ sārāṇyāṃ vīśvāsātīva ekamantāṃ nīsīthāti. ekamantāṃ nīsīno kā Vassetho māṇavo Bhagavatām etat avoca.

44. E.g. D II 144 āyasmin Aṇanda ... yena Bhagavā ten upasamkami, upasamkamivā Bhavatām abhiśvijātīva ekamantāṃ nīsāti. ekamantāṃ nīsīno kho āyasminno Aṇandaṃ Bhagavatām etat avoca.

45. E.g. D I 178–9 atha kho Bhagavā yena samayāppavādakā āsukhāko ekaśākalo Mālākāya āraṇa ten upasamkami ... atha kho Bhagavā yena Pajjāpādo paribbajāko ten upasamkami, atha kho Pajjāpādo
The examples not mentioned in this paper of complicated and particularly detailed approaches, and of those which do not quite conform to the norm, show that these structures were not blindly imposed upon the material. The authors of this material were fully capable of breaking with the norm where necessary. Meaning was still the ultimate determinant of dictation.

The stylistic features discussed in this paper may have had other functions besides aiding blindly imposed upon the material. The authors referred to as "mnemonic aids" (B. A. Rosenquist, 1987, pp. 82–3) and "mnemonic elements" (J. D. Smith, 1989, p. 40). It is used in this paper in the sense of "aiding the learning and recall of a memorised text" (A. B. Lord, 1987, p. 67, makes the distinction between remembering and memorising, cf. J. D. Smith, 1989, pp. 36–7). The stylistic features discussed in this paper may have had other functions besides aiding composition. However, space does not permit a discussion of these here.

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Most other occurrences of this formula omit *purisakathām*. All occurrences read *lokakkhāyikām samuddakkhāyikām itibhāvabharakathām*. Cf. D I 7–8, 66, 178–9; III 54; M I 513; II 1, 23, 30; S V 419ff; A V 128–9; Vin I 188; IV 164.

The identification of specific classes of sound similarities, such as alliteration, assonance, homoioteleuton, etc., are not important here, for, as noted by J. Gonda (1959, pp. 376–7), such distinctions were probably not made. What mattered was the repetition and similarity of sounds.

See W. Caland, 1931; J. Gonda, 1959, e.g. pp. 60–4, 125f. G. von Simson, 1965, e.g. §§ 2.3, 2.7, 8.4–6; H. Smith, Epilegomena to the Critical Pāli Dictionary, p. 35* wax. comp.; O. von Hünüber, 1990, chap. VII; 1993, pp. 104–113. O. von Hünüber (1994) is the most detailed study so far published. Unfortunately, it arrived on my desk after my own studies were completed and the current paper was delivered.

The complete text is 34% larger than the abbreviated PTS version.

For example, the passage *pūna ca param Nigrodha tapasti taṇāṃ samādāyati, bhoganesu vodāṣaṃ āpajjati “idaṃ me khamati, idaṃ me na-kkhamatī” ti. so yam hi kho ‘ssa na-kkhamati taṃ sāpeko pājaḥati, yam puna’ assa khamati taṃ gathito mucchilo ajjhāpāno anādīnavadassati antissaraṇaṃṇiḥ paribhūjati* (D III 43) is later repeated as *pūna ca param Nigrodha tapasti taṇāṃ samādāyati, bhoganesu vodāṣaṃ āpajjati “idaṃ me khamatī, idaṃ me na-kkhamatī” ti. so yam hi kho ‘ssa na-kkhamatī taṃ anapēko pājaḥati, yam puna’ assa khamati taṃ agathito amucchilo anājihāpāno anādīnavadassati nissaraṇaṇaṃṇiḥ paribhūjati* (D III 46).

* E.g. D III 49–50.

The complete sutta has a word count of 5,871. The word count for the passages which have been classed as VR is 1,761. The word counts for the other four categories are: RMM 2,028; RIM 222; RS-1 937; RS-2 149. The five categories have a total word count of 5,097, which represents 86.8% of the text.

Dhp 241 *usajjhatamandanto* (Narada Thera’s translation).


For example, of the passages which are VR at a primary level, 78.9% consists of quantifiable repetition of one kind or another. In total 53.4% of the material which is repetitive on a primary level involves quantifiable repetition on a secondary level.

In the above discussion of approach-formulas, for example, *upasamkami, upasamkaminti (“... he approached. Having approached”) and ekamantaṃ nissī, ekamantaṃ nissiṁ (“... he sat down to one side. Seated to one side”) were encountered.


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