



A CRITICAL STUDY OF HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF BUDDHISM IN BUDDHIST CANONICAL LITERATURE

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Abstract

This research is a critical analysis of the historical growth of Early Theravada Buddhism as recorded in the Pāli Tipitaka in terms of its doctrines, textual structure and its socio-historical background. It shows how the Vinaya, Sutta and Abhidhamma Pitakas evolved, written as they were, after being transmitted orally, and the contributions of oral recitation and memorization, recitation by community of monks, and the monastic councils in maintaining the integrity of the doctrines. The study examines the role of socio-political dynamics, such as royal patronage by Emperor Ashoka, and the effect of early Sangha organization in the preservation, stratification and transmission of the canon. Through a study of the internal growth of the texts, including the brief aphoristic texts such as the Dhammapada to later narrative additions such as the Buddhavaṃsa, the paper shows how the Pāli Canon retained continuity whilst also responding to changes in history and culture. The results show that Early Theravada Buddhism struck a balance between doctrinal orthodoxy and dynamic growth, laying down the Pāli Tipitaka as a religious authority and a critical historical source of the Buddha doctrine.

Keywords: Early Theravāda Buddhism, Pāli Tipiṭaka, Vinaya Piṭaka, Sutta Piṭaka, Abhidhamma Piṭaka.



1. INTRODUCTION

The earliest and most full record of the Buddha as preserved in the Theravada tradition is early Theravada Buddhism, preserved in the Pāli tipitaka. The traditions developed in the Indian subcontinent in the 6th century BCE revolve around the main doctrines of impermanence (anicca), non-self (anattā), dependent origination (paṭiccasamuppāda), and cessation of suffering (nibbāna). These doctrines are contained within a system of moral discipline (sila), a system of meditative development (samadhi), and wisdom (panha), the three constituents of the Noble Eightfold Path. The Pāli Tipiṭaka is therefore not only a doctrinal storehouse but also a guide to practical realization which is the shaping of the spiritual path of monastics as well as the lay followers.

The Pāli Tipiṭaka is divided into three large books: the Vinaya Piṭaka, containing rules of monastic discipline; the Sutta Piṭaka, containing discourses handed down in the names of the Buddha and his disciples; and the Abhidhamma Piṭaka, which codifies the teachings into a detailed philosophical system. These documents were first memorised and passed orally, based on accurate memorisation and communal recitation in order to maintain accuracy. This oral tradition survived over the centuries with the help of monastic councils, which standardized the recital and delivery of the teachings in order to ensure consistency in the doctrines.

The Pāli Tipitipaka in early Indian history was influenced by the socio-political and cultural condition of India. The First Council, held at Rājagaha shortly after the Buddha's passing, played a pivotal role in codifying the Vinaya and Sutta collections. Later councils, such as the Second at Vesālī and the Third under Emperor Aśoka, further refined and standardized the canon, while also supporting the spread of Theravāda Buddhism to regions such as Sri Lanka. These endeavors have made the canon to survive over the centuries and geographical boundaries so that it can become the basis of Theravada practice and identity.

1.1. Objectives of the Study

- To examine the doctrinal, textual, and historical development of Early (Theravāda) Buddhism in the Pāli Tipiṭaka.



- To analyze how socio-political, cultural, and patronage factors influenced the preservation and transmission of the Pāli Canon.
- To critically assess continuity and transformation within the Pāli Canon's historical evolution.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Abeysekara (2018) suggested that the current discourse of religion, which was influenced by colonialism, tended to find success by distancing itself from the origin (arche) of a tradition and the changes that followed it. His argument was that the continuity of lived religious life in discursive and embodied traditions was distorted as a result of this rhetorical division. By insisting on the inseparability of form and life, his work re-examined the problem of distinguishing between origins and transformations, a challenge that has remained to have a significant impact on the present historiography of Buddhism.

Bretfeld (2019) considered Theravada Buddhism as historically interdependent group of traditions in the countries of Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, and some areas of Vietnam, and in more recent diasporic communities around the world. Although he observed that these traditions were not homogeneous, they had intertwined religious histories and a common set of liturgical, ritual, exegetical and narrative materials. His discussion highlighted the reason behind the use of the term Theravada as a generic term in spite of local differences.

Dalton (2023) discussed the complexity of the definition of the Buddhist canon, stating that in India the tripiṭaka, sutra, vinaya and abhidharma, was seen as the totality of buddhavacana, but the contents differed between schools. In East Asia and Tibet, he observed that several canons still coexisted, which had different arrangements and inclusions. Dalton also noted that some of the sutras, like the Avataṃsaka, purported to contain the teachings of other buddhas besides Shakyamuni, but nevertheless described him as the main speaker. He also highlighted the recent production of tantric ritual manuals in the West, generated by Tibetan teachers to be used by international students, showing the continuing flexibility of Buddhist canonical production.



Moore (2015) studied ancient Buddhist canonical works to determine the possibility of a political theory therein. He decided that early Buddhism had a normative preference in enlightened monarchy as the ideal of lay government and a view of politics as being relatively trivial, in the larger picture of human affairs. Moore also claimed that this political vision was interesting in that its undervalued politics, rejected the existence of a permanent self, and embraced a naturalistic view of ethics, which has possible lessons to teach the modern political theory.

Thero (2022) studied the development of the idea of the Buddha in the Pāli Canon and its commentaries, following the development of doctrine through time. The paper has pointed to the way that the early literature stressed the ethical, meditative, and instructional aspects of the Buddha, and later commentary developed his metaphysical and cosmological importance. Through the examination of Vinaya, Sutta, and Abhidhamma Pitakas passages, Thero was able to show how narrative structures and categorizations of doctrines gave a coherent description of the Buddha. The historical context and monastic interpretation in the perfection of these concepts was also stressed by the research, demonstrating the balance between continuity and adaptation of the Pāli Canon in Early Theravada Buddhism.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK & METHODOLOGY

The section provides the conceptual background and the research methodology used to critically analyze the historical formation of Buddhism which is represented in the canonical texts of Buddhism, a doctrinal approach combined with the historical-contextual approach.

3.1. Theoretical Framework

The research uses a multifaceted method in which textual analysis, historical criticism, and philology are incorporated in order to analyze the history of the Early Theravada Buddhism as recorded in the Pāli Tipitaka. Textual analysis attends to the linguistic style, narrative forms, and thematic content of the canon, and discerns levels of composition, formulaic patterns, and doctrinal emphasis in various texts. Historical criticism places these texts in their socio-political and cultural contexts, with special interest in the role of royal patronage, especially during the reign of Emperor Asetka, and how regional political circumstances influenced the creation, preservation and



transmission of the canon. Philological approaches can be used to trace the history of terminology, concepts and linguistic forms in the Pāli Tipiṭaka, thus allowing one to determine chronological evolution, textual stratification and the incorporation of new doctrinal elements over time. Collectively, these methods give a holistic picture of the internal history and the development of the Pāli Canon.

3.2. Methodological Steps

The study also has a systematic approach in order to have a thorough and critical study of the Pāli Canon:

- **Comparative Reading of Nikāyas:** All major Nikāyas are analyzed in a comparative way in order to discover common themes, consistency of doctrine, and stylistic trends. This move assists in revealing textual interrelations and internal growth in the canon.
- **Chronological Arrangement of Texts:** The texts are arranged in a tentative chronological order according to linguistic indicators, doctrine, and historical allusions. This enables one to trace the development of teachings as oral tradition to written collections.
- **Cross-Referencing to outside Sources:** The outside evidence is used to support the internal evidence in the texts; the inscriptions, archaeological discoveries, and early commentaries. This cross referencing puts the canon in its larger historical and cultural context.
- **Synthesis of Findings:** Textual, historical and philological insights are combined to trace internal growth and stratification of the Pāli Tipitaka. This synthesis shows how Early Theravada Buddhism was able to preserve its doctrines in the face of changing historical and socio-cultural circumstances.

4. HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT IN EARLY BUDDHISM

The history of Early Buddhism is closely connected with the creation, collection and transmission of the Pāli Tipitaka, the earliest canons of Theravada tradition. The early Sangha was left with the daunting task of keeping the teachings of the Buddha alive after his parinibbana, having no written records. The monastic community, conscious of the weakness of oral transmission through the

ages, developed stringent means of providing correct transmission of teachings. The socio-political and cultural environment of early India- which was characterized by the rise of kingdoms, various philosophical movements, and changing norms of society also played a role in the preservation and organization of the teachings. Recitation and memorizing were not only mnemonic activities but they were also incorporated into the communal rituals that strengthened moral behavior, doctrinal knowledge, and monastic solidarity. These practices over time would set the stage and eventually give rise to a codification of the teachings of the Buddha and eventually the development of a systematic canon that could be used over time and across geographical divides to inform both monastic and lay practitioners. Palm-leaf manuscripts, such as the one pictured in Figure 1, were the traditional form of early written preservation of these texts, which was used to preserve the Pail Canon.



Figure 1: Palm-Leaf Manuscript of the Pāli Canon – traditional medium for preserving early Buddhist texts

The maintenance of the Buddha teachings was of utmost importance to the Sangha in the immediate aftermath of Buddha passing. Literacy was wide-spread but the materials used in writing were not many so the teachings were mainly preserved through oral transmission. Mnemonic devices Monks used elaborate memory aids, such as repetitive recitation, formulaic language, and group recitations, which guaranteed an outstanding degree of accuracy in



transmission. It was then codified and collectively confirmed in the First Council at Rajagaha, presided by one of the main disciples of Buddha, Mahakassapa. Great monks were assembled to recite and codify the Vinaya and Sutta collections and establish standard texts and methods of recitation. The council not only strengthened doctrinal unity, but also created a formal method of preserving the integrity of the teaching, a precedent followed by later councils and the development of the canon as a written set of documents a century later.

About one hundred years following the death of the Buddha, the Second Council was held in Vesali in reaction to increasing disagreement about the monastic discipline. There were differences that had emerged on the interpretation and application of Vinaya rules and this was threatening both the ethical coherence and unity of the Sangha. The council renewed the original monastic rules, made the unclear rules clearer, and provided disciplinary dispute resolving mechanisms. These measures enhanced communal solidarity and made sure that the monastic practice was not going against the intended ethical system of the Buddha.

A great step in the history of the Buddhist movement was taken in the 3rd century BCE when the Third Council was held in Pataliputta at the instance of Emperor Ashoka. It was the first council in which doctrinal consolidation was achieved along with active missionary activity. The council standardized the Pāli Canon and harmonized texts and regions thereby facilitating spreading of Buddhist teachings to other countries other than India, notably to Sri Lanka. Courtesy of the royal patronage of Ashoka, monasteries were created, scholarly pursuits were sponsored, and ethical and meditative doctrines were systematically disseminated. The Third Council enabled textual standardization as well as the geographical spread of Early Theravada Buddhism, so ensuring that the tradition could persist as a coherent tradition, able to adapt without losing essential doctrines.

These councils and the customs of oral transmission show the early Sangha in its devotion to the teachings of the Buddha, in both loyalty and flexibility. They bring into relief the interrelationships among communal discipline, continuity of doctrine, and historical conditions, illustrating how Early Theravada Buddhism transformed itself, as an oral tradition, into a codified canonical form that could survive centuries and be transported into other cultural contexts. The close coordination



between oral recitation, council discussions and royal support made the Pāli Tipitaka a living archive of the Buddha teachings, the basis of Theravada identity and practice through time.

5. STRUCTURE OF THE PĀLI TĪPIṬAKA

The Pāli Tipitaka commonly known as the “Three Baskets” is the entire collection of the teachings of the Buddha as they have been preserved within the Theravada tradition. The tripartite structure is indicative of the comprehensive vision of the Early Buddhism where ethical guidelines are intertwined with practical teachings and philosophical reasoning. This organization makes sure that the canon deals with various aspects of spiritual growth and it can serve monastic practitioners and lay followers. Each of the three Pitakas: Vinaya, Sutta, and Abhidhamma have different but related purposes which form a complete system of teaching and practicing the teachings of the Buddha. The Pāli Tipitaka structure is not only a literary categorization, but it also reflects the pedagogical and doctrinal interests of the early Buddhist communities, which helped to memorize, transmit, and use the doctrine throughout the generations and territories.

1) Vinaya Piṭaka

The Vinaya Piṭaka forms the guiding principal on the life of a monastic and contains specific regulations, codes of ethics and disciplinary measures that are necessary in the maintenance of the Sangha. It addresses the entire scope of monastic behavior, such as ordination rituals, everyday life, communal duties, dispute resolution, and how to appropriately use material goods. These regulations were not only meant to maintain ethical integrity but they were also meant to facilitate community harmony so that monastics could coexist harmoniously and act as representatives of the teachings of the Buddha. In addition to its regulatory role, the Vinaya focuses on moral development, respect among each other, and spiritual discipline, and it shows how ethical behavior is the foundation of meditative practice and doctrinal knowledge. The Vinaya institutionalized behavior in an organized way, and thus guaranteed that the Sangha could preserve the purity of doctrine, confidence in society, and be a living example of Buddha teachings.

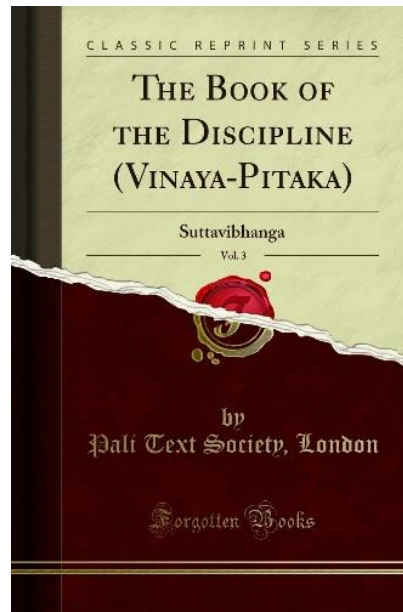


Figure 2: Vinaya Piṭaka: The book of Buddha’s principles

2) Sutta Piṭaka

Sutta Piṭaka is a collection of sermons of the Buddha and his immediate disciples and contains practical advice on ethical conduct, meditation and development of wisdom.

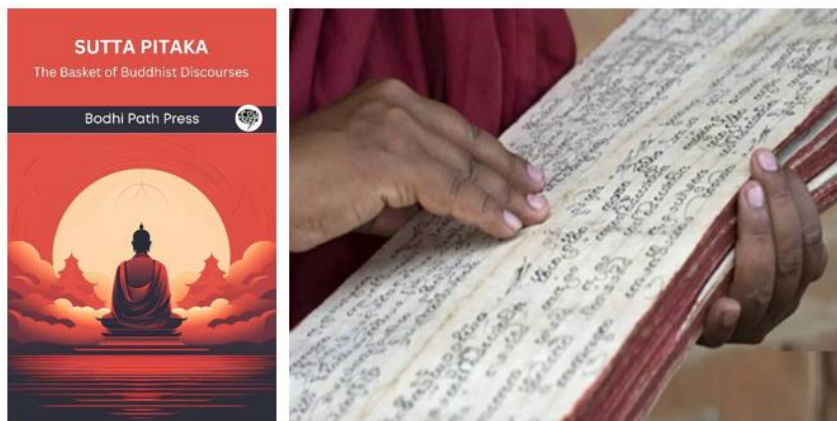


Figure 3: Sutta Pitaka: The Basket of Buddhist Discourses

It is divided into five Nikayas, each with a unique emphasis and style of teaching:



- **Dīgha Nikāya (Long Discourses):** This collection has long sermons that discuss philosophical, ethical, and doctrinal problems, frequently preached to a ruler, to monks or to a large assembly. The texts are rich in their exposition of central teachings like dependent origination, impermanence, and nibbana, and they show how the Buddha used his doctrine in social and political life.
- **Majjhima Nikāya (Middle-Length Discourses):** Includes mid-length teachings, which monks and laypeople could apply in practice. These sermons have a combination of ethical teaching, meditative advice, and doctrinal exposition with a focus on practical application in daily life.
- **Samyutta Nikāya (Connected Discourses):** Thematic teachings that emphasize doctrinal interrelations and conceptual interdependencies in different settings. This group helps in the systematic study and comparative knowledge of the recurring themes including the aggregates (khandhas), sense bases (ayatanas), and dependent origination.
- **Aṅguttara Nikāya (Numerical Discourses):** This is ordered in sets numbered, which helps memorization and teaching, and enables practitioners to memorize important doctrinal points rapidly. The number form also helps in oral transmission of information and the practicality of learning and strengthening the ethical and meditative values.
- **Khuddaka Nikāya (minor collection):** Includes works of shorter length, such as poetry, stories, parables and advice, like the Dhammapada. These are compilations of teachings that are made in brief and catchy forms that can be remembered by the lay and monastic people.

In general, the Sutta Pitaka is a link between theory and practice, offering specific instructions in how to develop morally, in the practice of contemplation and philosophical reflection as well as giving an account of the practice of the teachings.

3) Abhidhamma Piṭaka

The Abhidhamma Piṭaka is the analytical, systematic part of the Pāli Canon, and is a complete philosophy and psychology. The Abhidhamma differs with the narrative style of the Suttas, because it involves conceptual analysis and classifies mental states, ethical factors, and the causal

processes that occur in human experience. It looks at things (dhammas) on a microscopic level, investigates the interdependence of consciousness, matter and ethical behavior, and offers sophisticated methods of meditative understanding (vipassanā). This Piṭaka not only strengthens doctrinal consistency, but also assists scholastic study so that monastics can know the theoretical bases of the teachings and use them in meditation and ethical action. The Abhidhamma provides a systematic collection of the teachings of the Buddha by abstracting principles on the basis of narrative examples, between practical teaching and philosophical depth.

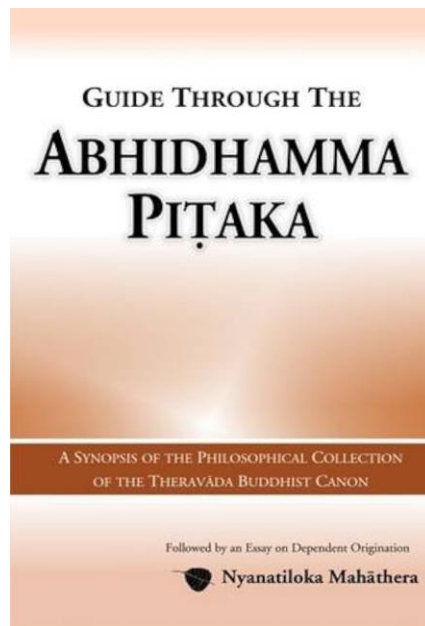


Figure 4: Abhidhamma Piṭaka

6. INTERNAL DEVELOPMENT AND STRATIFICATION

Pāli Tipitaka shows an obvious pattern of internal growth and text-stratification, indicating the retention of early doctrine and later doctrinal elaborations. The earliest texts in the canon are mostly short, aphoristic, compendia, like the Dhammapada, which contain the basic moral and philosophical teachings of the Buddha. These writings have short verses, plain language, and formulaic phrases that are easy to memorize and recited. They give us an idea about the early days of the canon when the teachings were mainly stored in the community and passed on orally. These

early writings focus on fundamental ethical teachings, practical advice on meditation, and fundamental principles like impermanence, non-self, and the end of suffering.

The canon was subsequently expanded with other layers of texts, as historical narrative, doctrinal development and the increasing sophistication of the monastic and lay Buddhist world took place over time. Such later additions include the Buddhavaṃsa and Cariyāpiṭaka, which provide biographies of earlier Buddhas, tales that demonstrate how perfections (paramitas) are developed, and tales of moral behavior. These writings do not only enhance the doctrinal material, but also give it a historical background, tying doctrines to socio-political conditions and demonstrating the versatility of the canon to serve the spiritual and educational demands of various readers.

The Pāli Tipiṭaka can be classified in the following table:

Table 1: Stratification and Internal Development of the Pāli Tipiṭaka

Textual Layer	Examples	Characteristics	Function
Early Texts	Dhammapada, Udāna	Short, aphoristic, orally transmitted, mnemonic-friendly	Convey foundational doctrines, ethical guidance
Later Additions	Buddhavaṃsa, Cariyāpiṭaka	Narrative, historical, doctrinal elaboration, biographical accounts of past Buddhas	Expand doctrinal depth, contextualize teachings, illustrate moral examples

This internal growth brings to the fore the fluidity of the Pāli Canon. The canon was able to evolve, over time, to contain narrative expansions, and interpretive systems that enhanced its educational and soteriological significance whilst continuing to exhibit doctrinal continuity. The stratified nature shows that Early Theravada Buddhism is not fixed, but it has developed by preserving the fundamentals of the doctrines and incorporating some new contents to meet the new demands of the monastic and lay practitioners.



7. CONCLUSION

The history of the development of Early Theravada Buddhism, as we have it in the Pāli Tipitika, presents a remarkable balance between continuity and adaptive change. The canon preserved the integrity of the Buddha teachings through rigorous oral transmission, systematic monastic councils, and eventual written compilation that answered the demands of socio-political and cultural conditions that changed over time. The organization of the stratification of the texts, including the early aphoristic texts, such as the Dhammapada, and later narrative elaborations, such as the Buddhavaṃsa, shows the dynamic nature of the canon, capable of inclusion of both an ethical guidance and a historical narrative. The Theravada Buddhism was further spread and institutionalized through patronage by rulers such as Emperor Aśoka, which further helped in survival of the religion over time and space. In totality, the Pāli Tipitaka is a spiritual guide and a historical record, which depicts the strength, flexibility, and the timelessness of Early Theravada Buddhism in shaping Buddhist thought, practice, and the community organization.

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