

# Crescendo Repetitions: From the *Madhyama-āgama* to the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā*

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## Abstract:

The present article surveys selected examples from the *Madhyama-āgama* extant in Chinese translation of a particular feature of repetition, which takes the form of a statement or quality being increased or augmented with each instance of being repeated, thereby creating a crescendo effect. Similar occurrences of such “crescendo repetitions” have been identified by Harrison (2022) in some Mahāyāna *sūtras*, in particular in the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā*. Closer examination shows that instances of this pattern are not examples of the play of formulas proposed by Shulman (2021b).

## Keywords:

*Ākaṅkheyya-sutta*, *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā*, Debate with Jains, *Jñānālokālamkāra*, Oral Transmission, Play of Formulas, Repetition, *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*

## Introduction

In what follows, I explore a particular feature of the pervasive use of repetition in *Āgama* literature, namely a tendency of making the same basic point with increasing intensity or vividness, to which I refer as “crescendo repetitions.” The present preliminary foray into this field takes the *Madhyama-āgama* extant in Chinese as its main source material for its first two parts, followed by a third part that turns to similar patterns in Mahāyāna *sūtras* and to the play of formulas.

## I. Inspiration for Practicing the Path

In this first part (I) of my exploration, I survey passages in which the use of crescendo repetitions appears to be related to the arousal of inspiration, followed by taking up passages where the same functions in a debate setting in the second part (II). The providing of inspiration is an important function of much of early Buddhist literature, and oral performance of a text reporting the success of the Buddha or his disciples in a debate will of course also serve the purpose of arousing inspiration. Drawing a distinction between these two themes is therefore merely for the purpose of organizing the material to be discussed and does not intend to posit a substantial difference in this respect.

### I.1 Fulfillment of All Wishes

My first example of the employment of repetition with a crescendo effect occurs in the “Discourse on Wishes” (願經) in the *Madhyama-āgama*, which has several parallels, among others a similarly titled *Majjhima-nikāya* discourse, the *Ākaṅkheyya-sutta*. Leaving aside the

introductory narration and standard conclusion, the main body of the discourse is based on the type of repetition under discussion and therefore furnishes a convenient way of starting my exploration. The first paragraph of the actual teaching in the *Madhyama-āgama* discourse proceeds as follows:<sup>1</sup>

Should you wish: *‘May the Blessed One comfort me and speak with me, teaching the Dharma to me,’* [then] be fully endowed with moral discipline and, not discarding meditation/absorption, be accomplished in insight, abide in empty and quiet places.

In the translation above, I have placed the part to which the crescendo effect applies in italics, a procedure I will also use below in relation to other such passages. In other words, the introductory phrase “should you wish” and the listing of requirements for the fulfillment of one’s wish, from “be fully endowed” to abiding in “quiet places,” remain the same throughout the rest of the exposition and are not subject to the crescendo effect. What changes is the part placed in italics, which is the first instance of the actual wishes. Their presentation follows an ascending order and thereby creates the “crescendo” effect. In the *Madhyama-āgama* version, the wishes that follow the one in the paragraph translated above are:

- *good rebirth of one’s relatives*
- *accrual of merit by one’s supporters*
- *endure various vicissitudes (hunger, being sick, etc.)*
- *endure discontent*
- *endure fear*
- *overcome unwholesome thoughts*
- *attain the four absorptions*
- *become a stream-enterer*
- *become a once-returner*
- *become a non-returner*
- *attain the immaterial spheres*
- *acquire supernormal powers, the divine ear, telepathy, recollection of past lives, the divine eye, and become an arhat*

The above listing of wishes can be seen to combine different but related themes. The first two wishes in the list—which actually are the second and third wishes in the discourse, after the first wish translated fully above on being comforted and taught by the Buddha—concern others, in particular one’s relatives and supporters. Then come three wishes related to the vicissitudes of living a monastic life in ancient India. The next two wishes are concerned with cultivating tranquility of the mind, where overcoming unwholesome thoughts leads on to the attainment of the four absorptions. With the topic of attainments broached in this way, the listing proceeds from tranquility to insight in the form of the three lower levels of awakening. Then it takes up advanced levels of tranquility in the form of the four immaterial spheres. This is somewhat unexpected, since in early Buddhist thought these are generally not considered superior to levels of awakening. It would have been more in keeping with the crescendo pattern that seems to inform the list overall if the immaterial spheres had been

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<sup>1</sup>. MĀ 105 at T I 595c18: 汝等當願: 世尊慰勞共我語言, 為我說法, 得具足戒, 而不廢禪, 成就觀, 行於空靜處.

listed after the four absorptions and before the three lower levels of awakening.<sup>2</sup> The list concludes with the six supernormal knowledges (*abhiññā/abhijñā*), which by dint of including the highest level of awakening indeed deserve to be at the top of the list.

Overall, there is a tendency to proceed to ever more desirable outcomes, even though this is not evident for every single wish, as evident in the positioning of the four immaterial spheres. In addition, it could be noted that merit by supporters need not be superior to good rebirth of relatives,<sup>3</sup> or enduring fear be more important than enduring discontent. That is, in these two instances a hierarchical ordering could proceed either way. Nevertheless, the overall trajectory is clearly one of listing wishes that would have been viewed as increasingly attractive by a monastic audience, and it is this increasing feature which makes for the “crescendo” effect.

From a comparative perspective, the first wish in the *Madhyama-āgama* discourse being comforted and taught by the Buddha, translated in full above, does not feature in the *Majjhima-nikāya* version at all; the same holds for enduring various vicissitudes and overcoming unwholesome thoughts. Conversely, additional wishes in the *Ākañkheyya-sutta* that are not taken up in the *Madhyama-āgama* discourse are to be dear to other monastics and to receive the monastic requisites, which feature as the first two wishes in the *Majjhima-nikāya* discourse.

The *Ākañkheyya-sutta* also has the immaterial spheres more conveniently right after the four absorptions, before taking up the three lower levels of awakening. As mentioned above, this mode of presentation would conform better to the evaluation of these attainments in early Buddhist thought in general. Nevertheless, the subsequent progression in the *Majjhima-nikāya* version is also not without difficulties, as instead of combining the six supernormal knowledges into a single wish, it presents the same attainments as individual wishes.<sup>4</sup> In itself, this is certainly a reasonable presentation, as some practitioners may well aspire to one or the other of these six, rather than invariably wishing to achieve the whole set. Nevertheless, as a result of this presentation the first five supernormal knowledges feature in a position in the list that makes them appear superior to the three lower levels of awakening, a form of presentation that also does not concord too well with the evaluation of these supernormal knowledges in early Buddhist thought. In this respect, the *Madhyama-āgama* discourse has been able to avoid such a problem by listing these six supernormal knowledges together as a single wish.

The two middle-length discourses agree on the basic requirements needed for their respective listing of wishes to be fulfilled. In addition to those mentioned in the extract translated above, the *Majjhima-nikāya* version indicates that one should also be dedicated to tranquility of the mind (*cetosamatha*).

A parallel extant in the *Ekottarika-āgama* agrees with the *Madhyama-āgama* discourse on beginning with the wish to receive personal teachings from the Buddha, although its subsequent list of wishes varies from both middle-length versions.<sup>5</sup> The basic requirements

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<sup>2</sup> The same pattern of listing the immaterial spheres after the three lower levels of awakening recurs in MĀ 81 at T I 557c2 and MĀ 147 at T I 659a19. A difference compared to MĀ 105 is that these two cases combine the attainment of the immaterial spheres with the destruction of the influxes; see also Anālayo 2011: 678n173.

<sup>3</sup> In fact, the parallel MN 6 at MN I 33,16 lists these two in the opposite order.

<sup>4</sup> MN 6 at MN I 34,10,

<sup>5</sup> EĀ 37.5 at T II 712a13; for a survey of the different listings see Anālayo 2011: 47f.

leading to the fulfilment of wishes are here as well moral discipline, cultivation of tranquility and insight, and delight in quiet places.

Yet another parallel is extant among the Tens in the *Āṅguttara-nikāya*.<sup>6</sup> In keeping with its placing, this version lists ten wishes, thereby differing from the seventeen wishes listed in the *Majjhima-nikāya* version. In fact, the *Āṅguttara-nikāya* version has only eight of the wishes listed in the *Majjhima-nikāya* discourse, as its presentation contains two wishes that are not found in the *Majjhima-nikāya* version. The *Āṅguttara-nikāya* listing thereby incorporates only 47% of the *Majjhima-nikāya* version's listing.<sup>7</sup> This rather substantially different listing of wishes combines with the same stipulation regarding the basic requirements needed for the fulfilment of such wishes.

It is noteworthy that the two Pāli versions, members of the same reciter tradition and only distinguished according to their allocation to different *Nikāyas*, should exhibit such substantial differences. The need to accommodate the exposition to a placement among the Tens of the *Āṅguttara-nikāya* would not have required reducing a list of seventeen wishes to ten, as the same could more conveniently have been achieved by grouping some wishes together, similar to the case of the last wish in the *Madhyama-āgama* version. Conversely, placement in the *Majjhima-nikāya* would not have required expanding a listing of ten wishes to seventeen. Even in its tenfold form such inclusion would have been in principle possible, evident from the case of another two discourses among the Elevens of the *Āṅguttara-nikāya* that recur in the *Majjhima-nikāya* without their respective teachings being augmented in some form to merit inclusion among middle-length discourses.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, any perceived need to have an at least slightly longer discourse for inclusion in the *Majjhima-nikāya* could have been accomplished by treating the four absorptions, mentioned in both versions as one wish, individually rather than as a set, that is, as four wishes related to attaining each of them rather than as a single wish to attain all four. This step has not been taken, and the two Pāli versions agree in presenting the attainment of the four absorptions as a single wish, even though practitioners need not invariably wish for mastery of all four absorptions. A practitioner starting to cultivate concentration may at that time just wish to attain the first, and if this should have been reached successfully, may then aspire for progress to the second absorption and perhaps rest satisfied with that much. That is, from a practical perspective a division of this single wish into four distinct wishes would have been meaningful.

In sum, the above considerations render unlikely the possibility of an intentional expansion or reduction of the list to accommodate the discourse to its allocation in either the *Majjhima-nikāya* or else the *Āṅguttara-nikāya*. Instead, a more compelling explanation

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<sup>6</sup> AN 10.71 at AN V 131,10.

<sup>7</sup> MN 6 lists the following wishes 1) to be dear to other monks, 2) to receive requisites, 3) to be a source of merit for supporters, 4) to be a source of merit for relatives, 5) to bear discontent, 6) to bear fear, 7) the four absorptions, 8) the immaterial attainments, 9) stream-entry, 10) once-return, 11) non-return, 12) supernormal powers, 13) divine ear, 14) telepathy, 15) recollection of past lives, 16) divine eye, and 17) arhat-ship. Out of these, AN 10.71 has wishes 1 to 7 and 17, to which it adds contentment with requisites and enduring various vicissitudes.

<sup>8</sup> AN 11.17 at AN V 342,14 recurs in MN 52 at MN I 349,7; AN 11.18 at AN V 347,14 recurs in MN 33 at MN I 220,5, with the minor difference that in this case the latter version has the standard introduction and conclusion of a discourse, which is absent from AN 11.18, in keeping with the general style of the *Āṅguttara-nikāya* not to provide these explicitly (the case of AN 11.17 differs in this respect, as the introduction and conclusion sections are not standard and contain some significant indications related to the actual teaching event, for which reason they are given in full even in the *Āṅguttara-nikāya* version).

would appear to be that these two different presentations are simply reflections of variations in oral transmission and performance, as a result of which the same basic teaching came to be associated with two different ways of executing crescendo repetitions.

The situation that emerges on comparing the two Pāli discourses in turn conveniently illustrates the working of crescendo repetitions. After all, from the viewpoint of actual teaching it hardly makes a substantial difference how many wishes are mentioned, as long as these proceed in an ascending order from more mundane wishes to meditative attainments and eventually to liberation. This appears to be the central message that is to be conveyed and this much is indeed evident in all versions. In other words, the key teaching is not to be found in the individual wishes, but much rather in the recommendation that the members of the audience hearing this teaching should endeavor to be endowed with moral discipline, cultivate tranquility and insight, and delight in seclusion, in the knowledge that these qualities will lead to the fulfilment of all their wishes.

The crescendo repetitions in turn serve to enhance this main message. Rather than bluntly stating that all wishes will be fulfilled, its employment results in the considerably more efficient approach in an oral setting of listing individual wishes one by one, in order of increasing importance. Alongside the rousing of interest and even perhaps a sense of suspense in the audience—members of which might be wondering what the next wish will be as they keep listening—the same procedure provides an opportunity to repeat the main qualities time and again, making sure that these are well remembered.

Although the present instance falls within the category of repetition in early Buddhist orality, it does not rely on the employment of pericopes or formulas found in the same way in other contexts. In the *Madhyama-āgama*, this particular list of wishes does not recur elsewhere, and the same holds for its stipulation of the practices or qualities required to gain the fulfilment of these wishes. Although some of the individual wishes are made up of standard expressions and central doctrinal categories, others are not standard, and even just the first wish translated above does not recur in this form elsewhere in the collection.

The Pāli version of the list of wishes is also not standard for Pāli discourses, something to some extent already evident from the fact that the two Pāli discourses discussed above diverge in this respect. The same holds for the set of required qualities, which in this exact form seems to be specific to these two Pāli discourse parallels.<sup>9</sup> This holds even for individual wishes, as not all of those shared by the two versions recur elsewhere.<sup>10</sup>

In sum, to the degree to which still extant textual collections allow an evaluation, and leaving aside standard categories like the four absorptions, etc., the present instance of crescendo repetitions relies mainly on textual material from within the respective discourse, rather than material found outside of it, be it in the same discourse collection or in other discourse collections belonging to the same reciter tradition. Needless to say, the last is a condition that, due to lack of access to the other *Āgamas* transmitted by the same reciter

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<sup>9</sup> A comparable listing of qualities occurs in It 2.2.8 at It 39,9, differing insofar as it does not set out with the need to purify one's moral conduct, mentioned in MN 6 and AN 10.71, instead of which it begins with *paṭisallānārāmā ... viharatha paṭisallānaratā*. The context is also not about various wishes reaching fulfilment but about attainment of non-return or full awakening. The same pattern recurs in relation to another relevant instance, MN 32 at MN I 213,16, which agrees with It 2.2.8 on the first quality. In this case, the context is a description of what would enable a monastic to illuminate a moon-lit forest.

<sup>10</sup> This holds for the wish that being recollected by one's deceased relatives will be fruitful for them; see MN 6 at MN I 33,20 and AN 10.71 at AN V 132,1.

tradition responsible for the *Madhyama-āgama* extant in Chinese,<sup>11</sup> can only be fully ascertained in the case of Pāli discourses, as it is only with these that a full set of the four collections are presently available.

The distinction drawn in this way could be framed in terms of contrasting “internal” to “external,” a distinction I have elsewhere employed to classify types of abbreviations.<sup>12</sup> In this usage, an abbreviation can be reckoned “internal” if it relies on text found within the same discourse, such that, even if this discourse were to occur in isolation from the rest of the collection, it would be clear in what way abbreviated parts should be supplemented. In contrast, the text required to supplement an “external” abbreviation is not found in the same discourse but rather occurs elsewhere, without access to which it would remain uncertain how to complete the abbreviated part.

The same distinction could be used provisionally to study the feature under discussion here, in the sense of attempting to discern if the qualification of being “internal” applies to the two textual components required for the manifestation of crescendo repetitions: the textual parts that progressively increase (in the present context: the type of wishes) and the textual parts that are repeated without change (in the present context: the qualities and practices leading to the fulfilments of wishes). The qualification “internal” would be applicable if these textual parts are specific to the discourse in question, rather than occurring in the same way elsewhere.

Admittedly, a distinction between “internal” and “external” is more straightforward for abbreviations. Nevertheless, a way of facilitating its application to the case of repetitions could be to imagine that the text in question has been only preserved fragmentarily. How much of the text would need to be preserved in order to enable a complete reconstruction? In the present case, one full version of the treatment of a wish would be necessary, corresponding to the passage translated above. This need not be the first wish, and it also need not be complete for a single wish, but there would need to be sufficient text preserved to enable the full reconstruction of the formula to be applied to all wishes. In addition, the list of wishes would need to be sufficiently well preserved to enable reconstruction, somewhat comparable to the survey of the different wishes I gave above. In both cases, the formulation of each wish and the listing of different wishes, it would not be possible to rely on any other text to guide reconstruction, as neither the formula for a particular wish nor the list of wishes exists in this form elsewhere in the *Madhyama-āgama*. This would provide the criterion for considering the present case to involve an “internal” type of repetition.

By way of providing a contrast to this notion of an internal repetition, examples for repetitions of an “external” type (which in the present case are not related to crescendo repetitions) would be the standard introduction “Thus have I heard ...” and the standard conclusion of the discourse.<sup>13</sup> These are not specific to the present context but rather rely on readily available formulaic texts that can provide the actual teaching with its introductory and concluding parts. Even if only a few, damaged letters had been preserved of the relevant parts, it would be easy to reconstruct the rest. In contrast to such examples for “external”

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<sup>11.</sup> On the school affiliation of the reciter tradition of the *Madhyama-āgama* extant as T 26 see Anālayo 2017 and 2020a.

<sup>12.</sup> Anālayo 2020b; on the same topic see also Anālayo 2021a and 2022a.

<sup>13.</sup> On the relationship of the phrase “Thus have I heard” to the ensuing “at one time” in *Āgama* literature see Anālayo 2014a: 41–45 and 2022c: 239n395.

repetition in the introductory and concluding part of the discourse, the crescendo type of repetition found in the main body of the present discourse is of the “internal” type.

## I.2 The Potential of Mindfulness

A passage that illustrates a crescendo repetition even though its actual presentation operates in the descending mode can be found at the end of the “Discourse on the Establishments of Mindfulness” (念處經) of the *Madhyama-āgama*, a parallel to the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*. As above, to facilitate reading I have placed the parts that constitute crescendo repetitions in italics. In addition, I have divided the passage into four subunits, which reflect the pattern adopted for the crescendo repetitions.<sup>14</sup>

If monks or nuns with settled mind properly dwell in the four establishments of mindfulness *for seven years*, they will certainly attain [one of] two fruits: they will either attain final knowledge here and now, or, if there is a remainder [of clinging], they will attain non-returning.

*Let alone seven years, six, five, four, three, two, one year.* If monks or nuns with settled mind properly dwell in the four establishments of mindfulness *for seven months*, they will certainly attain [one of] two fruits: they will either attain final knowledge here and now, or, if there is a remainder [of clinging], they will attain non-returning.

*Let alone seven months, six, five, four, three, two, one month.* If monks or nuns with settled mind properly dwell in the four establishments of mindfulness *for seven days and seven nights*, they will certainly attain [one of] two fruits: they will either attain final knowledge here and now, or, if there is a remainder [of clinging], they will attain non-returning.

*Let alone seven days and seven nights, six, five, four, three, two, let alone one day and one night.* If monks or nuns with settled mind properly dwell in the four establishments of mindfulness *just for a few moments*, practicing in this way in the morning, they will certainly have made progress by the evening; practicing in this way in the evening, they will certainly have made progress by the [next] morning.

As already mentioned above, strictly speaking the repetition in the above excerpt would have to be qualified as “diminuendo,” as it shortens the time periods rather than lengthen them. Nevertheless, the effect of this presentation is still of the “crescendo” type, as the potential of the four establishments of mindfulness to lead to the higher two levels of awakening becomes increasingly evident, as this can be reached within increasingly shorter periods of time. This much is similarly evident in the Pāli parallel, which proceeds in basically the same manner except for lacking a counterpart to the last paragraph about mindfulness practice undertaken for less than seven days.<sup>15</sup>

The repeated counting down from seven to one in the above passage appears to be a case of unmarked (or “silent”) abbreviation. In other words, the full treatment given for the cases

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<sup>14</sup> MĀ 98 at T I 584b16: 若有比丘, 比丘尼七年立心正住四念處者, 彼必得二果: 或現法得究竟智, 或有餘得阿那含。置七年, 六, 五, 四, 三, 二, 一年。若有比丘, 比丘尼七月立心正住四念處者, 彼必得二果: 或現法得究竟智, 或有餘得阿那含。置七月, 六, 五, 四, 三, 二, 一月。若有比丘, 比丘尼七日七夜立心正住四念處者, 彼必得二果: 或現法得究竟智, 或有餘得阿那含。置七日七夜, 六, 五, 四, 三, 二, 置一日一夜。若有比丘, 比丘尼少少須臾頃立心正住四念處者, 彼朝行如是, 暮必得昇進; 暮行如是, 朝必得昇進。

<sup>15</sup> MN 10 at MN I 62,34 (= DN 22 at DN II 314,11), which also differs in referring to half a month before coming to seven days.

of “seven” should be similarly executed in relation to “six,” “five,” and so on. The division into years, months, and days relies on the symbolic sense of the number seven as indicative of a totality,<sup>16</sup> wherefore this would have served as the number chosen to start the next countdown. If one were to execute fully what appear to be abbreviations, the basic relationship between the cultivation of the four establishments of mindfulness and its potential outcome should be recited twenty-one times. Even for an audience accustomed to repetition, this would seem to be quite a lot.

The present case differs in this respect from the fulfillment of wishes in the previous example, as there the crescendo repetitions involved a new piece of information each time, in the form of another wish to be fulfilled. In other words, alongside the repetition part on the central qualities that should be cultivated, each instance of the crescendo repetitions presents something novel. As already mentioned, it seems fair to imagine the audience following the oral recitation with perhaps some degree of suspense, or at least interested expectation, wondering what the next wish may be.

Such a scenario would not hold similarly for the present case, as all that changes is the period of time. Perhaps there may be some sense of suspense in regard to how far this counting down will go. That is, how short will be the minimum period required for realizing the higher two stages of awakening in this way? Still, to perform the actual countdown in full does seem to be a bit out of proportion. This raises the possibility that perhaps the passage may have at times been recited in the same abbreviated manner as found in the translation above: reciting the treatment once in full for the case of “seven” and then just mentioning the remaining numbers. The possibility that abbreviations were employed even in recitation and not only in writing finds confirmation in the last discourse in the *Madhyama-āgama* collection, which employs abbreviation to such an extent that it seems improbable the discourse was ever recited in full.<sup>17</sup> Since in this case it can safely be assumed that its oral performance must have relied on its abbreviated form, it does not seem too far a stretch to propose that perhaps such a way of recitation could also have been used at times for other discourses in the same collection. In the present case, an abbreviated recitation would still suffice to convey the crescendo effect and thereby fulfil the main purpose of this section of the discourse.

Be that as it may, another difference evident in the present case (I.2), compared to the previous example (I.1), is that here crescendo repetitions only manifest in the final part of the discourse. In other words, rather than constituting the heart of the exposition, it only features in what could perhaps be called a promotional section found after the actual teaching. This placement acquires further significance in view of the fact that another parallel extant in the *Ekottarika-āgama* does not have such a passage at all. Instead, it simply repeats its opening statement, which in agreement with the opening statements in the *Madhyama-āgama* and *Majjhima-nikāya/Dīgha-nikāya* versions indicates that a cultivation of the four establishments of mindfulness (here combined with overcoming the five hindrances) constitutes the ‘direct’ path to the realization of Nirvana.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16.</sup> See Anālayo 2011: 471n158.

<sup>17.</sup> MĀ 222 at T I 805c10; see the discussion in Anālayo 2014b: 44–47.

<sup>18.</sup> EĀ 12.1 at T II 569b9; for a comparative survey of different versions of this direct path statement see Anālayo 2022b: 199–207.

Now, the *Ekottarika-āgama* extant in Chinese translation has a somewhat checkered history, and there is clear evidence for a substantial reworking of the collection in China.<sup>19</sup> For this reason, in general it seems wise to be circumspect when drawing conclusions based on the textual evidence of this collection. Nevertheless, in the present case, as far as I can see, the text appears to be overall genuine, which in turn would imply that the passage from the *Madhyama-āgama* translated above, just as its Pāli counterpart, could reflect a later addition.

Such a suggestion does not imply any doctrinal innovation, since the potential of the four establishments of mindfulness as the direct path for inner purification is shared by the three versions and stated explicitly in their opening sections. The point at stake is only the highlight placed on this potential through the crescendo effect of listing descending time spans within which the attainment of non-return or full awakening can occur.

This highlight could then have come into existence at some stage during oral transmission, early enough to affect the *Madhyama-āgama* version and its Pāli parallel but too late to be incorporated into the *Ekottarika-āgama* discourse. Such effects of oral transmission are a natural occurrence in what is best viewed as an ongoing process of change at work in relation to this type of text. Memory is by nature creative and for this reason easily tends to result in introducing various changes even in the context of an overall attempt to remember texts as they have been received.<sup>20</sup>

In this way, the present two cases show that the felt need to employ crescendo repetitions for emphasis may be part of the composition of a text from the outset, as appears to be the case for the listings of wishes (I.1), or else be added at some later stage in order to improve its oral performance, as seems to have happened for the results of mindfulness practice (I.2).

The pattern of counting down from seven to one recurs in another of my examples from the *Madhyama-āgama*, to be discussed below (II.1). The present instance, however, where this pattern applies at first to years, then to months, and then to days, is unique in the *Madhyama-āgama* and thus specific to the passage translated above. The situation differs for the Pāli parallel(s), the (*Mahā-*)*Satipaṭṭhāna-suttas*, as another Pāli discourse does apply the same pattern to years, months, and days. It differs from the (*Mahā-*)*Satipaṭṭhāna-suttas* by proceeding up to the period of time between evening and morning or else between morning and evening.<sup>21</sup> The context also differs, as it concerns arrival at full awakening on being endowed with the five factors of striving, together with receiving personal coaching from the Buddha. Comparable to the case of the *Ekottarika-āgama* parallel to the (*Mahā-*)*Satipaṭṭhāna-suttas*, a Sanskrit parallel to this Pāli discourse does not have any counting down of time periods, as it just indicates that by being endowed with the five factors of

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<sup>19.</sup> Through a detailed study of EĀ 37.2, Kuan 2019 conclusively shows that parts of this discourse must have been added by Zhu Fonian (竺佛念) during a revision of the collection apparently carried out by him after the original translation, based on incorporating and rewriting material from other texts that had already been translated by then. Together with my own research on the phenomenon of “discourse merger” in T 125, Anālayo 2014/2015 and 2015, and the finding in Anālayo 2013b that EĀ 50.4 differs so substantially from the translation terminology of the remainder of the collection to make it safe to conclude that this discourse was added in its translated form to T 125, it seems to me that, with the evidence that has come to light by now, it is safe to draw the conclusion: T 125 is another Zhu Fonian ‘translation’ containing passages characterized by Nattier 2010a: 241, in the context of a study of T 309, as being “not a translation at all, but a creative composition by Zhu Fonian himself.” The assumption by Palumbo 2013: 84 that such evaluations reflect “a character assassination of sorts” needs to be revised in view of the evidence that has emerged by now.

<sup>20.</sup> See in more detail Anālayo 2022c.

<sup>21.</sup> MN 85 at MN II 96,19.

striving the final goal can be reached “quickly.”<sup>22</sup>

The part to be repeated invariably before mentioning each of these time periods is unique to the above *Madhyama-āgama* discourse, as only the final part on the two higher levels of awakening has a counterpart in another discourse in the same collection.<sup>23</sup> The same holds for its Pāli counterpart(s), where again the first part of the material to be repeated invariably does not seem to recur in this form elsewhere among other Pāli discourses, whereas its final part on the attainments to be expected is a stock phrase found regularly elsewhere. Thus, in the case of both versions a fragmentary version of the full statement could not be fully reconstructed by reliance on material found elsewhere. Although the present instance is not as straightforward as the previous one (I.1), it does seem fair to consider it to belong to the category of “internal” repetition.

## II. Debate and Conversion

With the present part of my exploration, I turn to instances of the same phenomenon of crescendo effects in repetitions that occur in a debate setting. My exploration takes up three examples of this type of usage from the *Madhyama-āgama*, all of which involve debates with Jains.

### II.1 Happiness Superior to a King

The first case to be explored in relation to the theme of debate occurs towards the end of the “Discourse on the Mass of *Duḥkha*” (苦陰經), which has a similarly titled Pāli parallel (with the difference that it additionally qualifies the discourse to be the “lesser” one of two discourses on this topic), the *Cūladuḥkhakkhandha-sutta*, and two parallels extant as individual translations into Chinese (individual in the sense of apparently not forming part of a translation of an *Āgama* collection).

According to the narrative that precedes the passage in question, the Buddha had challenged a group of Jains, referred to as “Nirgranthas/Nigaṅthas” (尼犍), regarding the rationale for their undertaking of self-mortification. This has motivated the Jains to assert the need to undergo the experience of pain so as to be able to gain happiness, the latter obviously being of a spiritual type related to the gaining of liberation. In order to buttress this point, the Jains mention the example of King Bimbisāra, presumably as an exemplification of a type of lifestyle that involves indulgence in sensual pleasures and therefore could hardly be the path required for spiritual liberation. From their viewpoint, the king was obviously living in greater happiness than the Buddha. It is at this point that crescendo repetitions find employment, in order to question this assumption of the Jains. The *Madhyama-āgama* reports the Buddha’s reply as follows:<sup>24</sup>

I said to them again: “Nirgranthas, I will now ask you, and you may reply according to your understanding: Nirgranthas, what do you think, can King Bimbisāra obtain, as he wishes, to be

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<sup>22</sup> Silverlock 2009: 80 (folio 343V8): *kṣipram*.

<sup>23</sup> MĀ 195 at T I 752a11: 於二果中必得一也: 或於現法得究竟智, 若有餘者得阿那含, which shows only minor variations compared to the corresponding part in MĀ 98 (see above note 14).

<sup>24</sup> MĀ 100 at T I 587c10: 我復語曰: 尼犍, 我今問汝, 隨所解答: 諸尼犍等, 於意云何, 頻鞞娑羅王可得如意靜默無言, 因是七日七夜得歡喜快樂耶? 尼犍答曰: 不也, 瞿曇. 六, 五, 四, 三, 二, 一日一夜得歡喜快樂耶? 尼犍答曰: 不也, 瞿曇. 復問曰: 尼犍, 我可得如意靜默無言, 因是一日一夜得歡喜快樂耶? 尼犍答曰: 如是, 瞿曇. 二, 三, 四, 五, 六, 七日七夜得歡喜快樂耶? 尼犍答曰: 如是, 瞿曇.

still, silent, without speaking, and because of that obtain happiness and joy *for seven days and seven nights?*” The Nirgranthas replied: “No, Gautama.” “[Can he] obtain happiness and joy [in this way] *for six, five, four, three, two, one day and one night?*” The Nirgranthas replied: “No, Gautama.”

I asked them again: “Nirgranthas, can I obtain, as I wish, to be still, silent, without speaking, and because of that obtain happiness and joy *for one day and one night?*” The Nirgranthas replied: “It is like this, Gautama.” “[Can I] obtain happiness and joy [in this way] *for two, three, four, five, six, seven days and seven nights?*” The Nirgranthas replied: “It is like this, Gautama.”

The Pāli version differs insofar as it presents the Buddha’s ability to remain motionless and silent for up to seven days as a statement rather than an inquiry.<sup>25</sup> Another parallel preserved as an individual translation, however, agrees with the presentation in the *Madhyama-āgama*.<sup>26</sup> In this respect, the Pāli version appears to offer a more straightforward presentation. It could hardly be expected of the Nirgranthas that they are familiar with the Buddha’s ability to sit in meditation and experience happiness and joy without interruption. It makes sense to ask them if the king can do that, as anyone would know this to be impossible. But for the case of the Buddha, it makes more sense for him to disclose his abilities in this respect. During oral transmission, the circumstance that the earlier part of the exchange employs the question-and-answer format could easily have led to the same being also applied to the later part. During subsequent oral performances in front of a Buddhist audience, such a form of presentation may even turn out to be more effective, as the questioning format draws the audience in—a skilled reciter may even pause briefly, as if the question had been asked to the audience and a reply from them is expected—which would increase their mental participation in the dramatic enhancement created by the crescendo repetitions.

The counting down from seven to one day and night, employed in the first part of the above implementation of crescendo repetitions, recurs in the *Madhyama-āgama* parallel to the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*, discussed above, where it is preceded by a similar countdown of years and months from seven to one. A counting up from one to seven days (without mentioning the corresponding nights) can be found in three other *Madhyama-āgama* discourses. The context is a description of an ascetic observance related to partaking of a meal, which proceeds from one to seven days but then continues further to half a month and a full month.<sup>27</sup>

Turning to the Pāli counterpart, a counting up from one to seven days and nights recurs in another Pāli discourse, with the difference that this version starts by first just mentioning a single day, then a single night, and only after that has the single day and night that forms the starting point for the present instance of counting up to seven days and nights.<sup>28</sup> The context is a claim to be able to reply to questions for the described periods of time.

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<sup>25.</sup> MN 14 at MN I 94,29.

<sup>26.</sup> T 55 at T I 851a3. Yet another parallel, T 54 at T I 849a28, does not employ the crescendo effect at all; on this translation see also Nattier 2008: 128f. In principle, this leaves open the possibility that the employment of the crescendo effect could be a later development in the other versions. On the other hand, it is also possible that its absence in T 54 is an idiosyncrasy of the translation. In fact, a partial parallel to the present episode, found in EĀ 41.1 at T II 744b14, does employ the crescendo effect when describing the case of King Bimbisāra, counting down from seven days and nights to a single day.

<sup>27.</sup> MĀ 18 at T I 441c27, MĀ 104 at T I 592b17, and MĀ 174 at T I 712b7.

<sup>28.</sup> SN 12.32 at SN II 54,16.

In terms of the terminology suggested above for classifying instances of such employment of crescendo repetitions, the part repeated invariably concerning the ability to remain unmoving and experience happiness is an “internal” type of repetition. A count from one to seven is of such regular occurrence in the early discourses that various descriptions based on this count are unsurprising, so that this part would be of the “external” type.

## II.2 Conversion Magic

Another two examples related to debate can be found in the Discourse to Upāli of the *Madhyama-āgama* (優婆離經), which has a similarly titled Pāli parallel. The first passage in question occurs in a setting characterized by an increase in dramatic elements: Upāli, a wealthy and influential lay disciple of the Jains, has been converted by the Buddha during a debate between the two and has attained stream-entry. The leader of the Jains had earlier thought it impossible that the Buddha would convert Upāli, even when warned that the Buddha possesses a conversion magic to win over the disciples of others. Instead of taking this warning seriously, the leader of the Jains reportedly rather envisaged the opposite, namely that Upāli may convert the Buddha.

At the present juncture, unable to believe what has happened, the leader of the Jains now pays a visit to Upāli, who treats him with a lack of respect that stands in stark contrast to Upāli’s earlier reverential behavior. The leader of the Jains delivers some similes to illustrate how Upāli had failed in his plan to defeat the Buddha in debate, to which Upāli replies with a simile that disparagingly compares the teachings of the Jains to a monkey. At this juncture in the *Madhyama-āgama* version, the leader of the Jains finally comes to the conclusion that Upāli has indeed been converted through a magical spell of the Buddha. Here is Upāli’s reply:<sup>29</sup>

Reverend, it is an auspicious magical spell, a highly auspicious magical spell! Reverend, that magical spell would make *my parents* gain profits, benefits, peace, and happiness for a long time. It would also make *my wife and children, my servants, my workers, the king of the country of Nālandā, and the whole world—with its gods, Māras, and Brahmās, its recluses and brahmins, from humans to celestials*—gain profits, benefits, peace, and happiness for a long time.

The corresponding passage in the Pāli version occurs already before the delivery of the monkey simile. After similarly praising the Buddha’s conversion magic as good,<sup>30</sup> the list of those who would benefit from being converted mentions just Upāli’s relatives, thereby not distinguishing between parents, wife, and children, and without mentioning servants and workers. Although in this respect the presentation in the Pāli parallel is shorter, in place of the *Madhyama-āgama* version’s reference to the local king the Pāli discourse lists the four classes of ancient Indian society, namely all warriors, all brahmins, all merchants, and all workers, before arriving at the same final item of the whole world with its gods, etc. In a Sanskrit fragment that has preserved parts of the above statement, the crescendo repetitions

<sup>29</sup> MĀ 133 at T I 632a26: 尊人, 善幻化呪, 極善幻化呪. 尊人, 彼幻化呪令我父母長夜得利, 饒益, 安隱, 快樂, 及其妻子, 奴婢, 作使, 那難陀國王, 及一切世間, 天及魔, 梵, 沙門, 梵志, 從人至天, 令彼長夜得利, 饒益, 安隱, 快樂. A reference to the Buddha’s converting magic can be found in SHT IV 421 (20) V5, Sander and Waldschmidt 1980: 42: [ā]vartanī māyā.

<sup>30</sup> MN 56 at MN I 383,32.

are also applied to members of Upāli's household,<sup>31</sup> comparable in this respect to the case of the *Madhyama-āgama* discourse.

The execution of these crescendo repetitions in the *Madhyama-āgama* version is unique to this collection, in the sense that this particular progression of beneficiaries of the magical spell does not occur elsewhere in the collection. In the case of its Pāli counterpart, the main part of the progression does recur in another two Pāli discourses.<sup>32</sup> One of these two Pāli discourses even takes up the same topic of conversion magic, as a result of which a part of its presentation matches part of Upāli's reply.<sup>33</sup> From the viewpoint of the terminology proposed for categorizing instances of crescendo repetitions, the present case would be "external" as far as the Pāli version is concerned. In terms of the imagined scenario of reconstructing a fragmentary version, the passage on conversion magic in the other Pāli discourses would provide sufficient material to reconstruct the present case even if it should have been preserved only in a very incomplete condition.

Turning to the content of the crescendo repetitions, the parallels agree in showing Upāli adopting a strategy of reinterpretation, by turning the allegation of having become a victim of magic into something positive.<sup>34</sup> He then follows this up by wishing for others to experience the same, starting from his relatives and working in stages up to the whole world. Note that the reference to the "whole world ... with its recluses" would include the leader of the Jains together with his renunciant disciples. In other words, by implication Upāli considers it auspicious if his former teacher were to fall prey to the same converting magic, together with his whole following.

The two versions continue by reporting that Upāli delivered a long series of impromptu verses praising the Buddha. In this way, the employment of crescendo repetitions in the passage translated above, based on a dexterous reinterpretation, comes in the company of Upāli proving his worth by quickly devising a simile as well as composing poetry on the spot. This thereby depicts him as being in complete mastery of a situation where he is facing his former teacher, who has come together with a large congregation of followers. In fact, the two versions agree in reporting that the impact of witnessing Upāli's conversion caused the leader of the Jains to vomit blood, which according to the *Madhyama-āgama* version eventually led to him passing away, a dire outcome also reported in the Pāli commentary.<sup>35</sup>

Keeping in mind that by the time of the advent of the Buddha the Jain tradition was already well established and that its ascetic ideology was more in line with common notions

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<sup>31.</sup> SHT IV 412 (20) V5-6, Sander and Waldschmidt 1980: 42; see also SHT VI 1291 V2-4, Bechert and Wille 1989: 67.

<sup>32.</sup> The progression from one's relatives to the four classes of ancient Indian society recurs in relation to the same topic of converting magic in AN 4.193 at AN II 194,1 and in relation to observing the *uposatha* in AN 8.44 at AN IV 259,1. Both instances lack a counterpart to the final item in MN 56 at MN I 384,3, which in agreement with its parallel MĀ 133 refers to the whole world with its gods, Māras, and Brahmās, its recluses and brahmins, etc. However, such a reference is found in a repetition of the above statement by the Buddha in AN 4.193 at AN II 194,9 and AN 8.44 at AN IV 259,9, which in this case lacks the reference to the relatives, as it starts off right away with the four classes. Both versions also differ insofar as they continue further by mentioning great Sal trees.

<sup>33.</sup> The textual portion found in MN 56 from MN I 383,32 to MN I 384,3 corresponds to AN 4.193 from AN II 194,1 to AN II 194,8.

<sup>34.</sup> Freiburger 2000: 110 in fact qualifies Upāli's reply as "hintersinnig."

<sup>35.</sup> MĀ 133 at T I 632c18 and Ps III 100,2. Although Basham 1951: 75 conjectured that Pāli references to his death at Pāvā may instead intend Gosāla, Balbir 2000: 3 reports that Śvetāmbara sources also relate his death to Pāvā.

in the ancient Indian setting than the Buddhist middle path, an oral performance of the Discourse to Upāli can safely be expected to have had considerable impact on a Buddhist audience. This helps appreciate the dramatic denouement of events and the rather unrealistic depiction of the foolish behavior of the leader of the Jains.

This undercurrent sets the context for the employment of crescendo repetitions when depicting Upāli's response to the allegation that he has been overpowered by a conversion magic. Rather than just dryly stating that this was not the case, he is shown to turn the allegation on its head by changing its evaluation. To make the point that this substantially different evaluation holds not only for himself but also for others, the crescendo effect comes into play, by way of building up until coming to the climax of the whole world. As already mentioned above, in the narrative setting this includes all of the Jains, together with their teacher. In addition to that, in the setting of an oral performance of the discourse it also includes the audience listening to the discourse, who by being or becoming Buddhists can be sure to "gain profits, benefits, peace, and happiness for a long time."

A crescendo repetition occurs also at an earlier junction of the same discourse, in the context of the actual debate between Upāli and the Buddha that led to the conversion of the former. Exploring its function in this context requires a brief look at the preceding parts of the discourse. The actual debate is preceded by an exchange between a Jain ascetic and the Buddha, in the course of which the latter affirms that mental action is more serious than bodily action in relation to performing ethically unwholesome deeds. Having heard of this exchange, Upāli approaches the Buddha to debate this statement, in the anticipation that he will defeat the Buddha. This expectation seems reasonable, since on the face of it the Buddha's position appears counterintuitive: merely thinking of doing something unwholesome could hardly be worse than actually doing it physically.

In the course of the ensuing debate, the Buddha is on record for presenting four arguments, two of which concern ethical conduct of Jain ascetics, whereas the other two are based on the presumably common belief in the ancient setting that those accomplished in supernormal powers can burn others to ashes through their mental willpower. These four arguments can best be appreciated in the light of patterns of debate in ancient India,<sup>36</sup> where the key is to expose the other for an inconsistency, forcing one's opponent to admit defeat due to no longer being able to uphold the position voiced earlier. In this context, it is natural for the Buddha to take up notions and beliefs from his opponent's world view, as it is based on these that an incoherence can most easily be established.

The *Madhyama-āgama* discourse begins with an argument that in its Pāli parallel is the second such argument. Accounts of the present exchange preserved in Sanskrit fragments and Tibetan translation agree with the *Madhyama-āgama* discourse that the first argument concerns killing sentient beings, which Upāli agrees is more reprehensible if done intentionally.

The position reportedly taken by him in this respect appears to be in keeping with Jain philosophy.<sup>37</sup> From this perspective, this argument does not seem fully conclusive, and the

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<sup>36.</sup> For a case study see Anālayo 2013a.

<sup>37.</sup> In a comment on the present passage, Jain 1966: 169 clarifies that when the "Upāli Sutta of the Majjhima Nikāya ... gives the impression that the Nigaṇṭhas do not realise the importance of the mind ... It is really not so and it needs further clarification. Nigaṇṭha Nātaputta did not, at any stage, envisage bodily action which is devoid of intention and volition" (also in Jain 1972: 74). According to Chaudhary 1994: 133, "[f]rom the *Upāli*

same may hold for the second argument in the *Madhyama-āgama* discourse (= the first in the Pāli version), according to which the presence of attachment at the time of death has an impact on the type of one's rebirth. Both establish the importance of intention or one's mental attitude and for this reason already to some extent contradict Upāli's claim that mental action is of little account. However, they do not yet establish the main point under debate, namely that mental action is more blameworthy than bodily action. This would require contrasting unintentional killing of sentient beings to just intending to kill them without taking any bodily action. Contrasting unintentional killing to intentional killing is not directly relevant to the point to be made, as the latter combines mental and bodily activities.

The impression of a gradual building up of the line of argumentation conflicts with the Pāli version's report that, after all four arguments had been discussed, Upāli declared that he had already been convinced by the first argument and only kept debating to witness the Buddha's debating skills.<sup>38</sup> According to the *Madhyama-āgama* account as well as the partial parallels extant in Sanskrit and Tibetan, however, it took all four arguments to convince him.<sup>39</sup> This way of presentation seems to offer a more plausible depiction of the denouement of the debate.

If this much is granted, then the third and fourth arguments could be considered the key to the conversion of Upāli. The third argument contrasts the ability of a normal person to kill all sentient beings in Nālandā in a single day to the ability of someone endowed with supernormal abilities to burn up all of Nālandā with a single thought of anger. Apparently in support of the basic point made in this hypothetical argument, the fourth argument then brings in 'evidence' to confirm this possibility. This takes the form of referring to some forests which according to popular lore had come into being as the result of the destruction caused supernormally by a mental act of anger.<sup>40</sup> These two arguments can be seen as two aspects of the same basic assertion, namely that, in the case of those endowed with

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*Sutta (Majjhima Nikāya)* it is clear that Niga[n]tha Nātaputta's view has not been presented correctly" as regards the role of intention in relation to bodily acts. In a discussion of the same passage, Balbir 2000: 28f quotes the translation of a sixth-century Jain text (from Dundas 1992/2002: 140) making the following point: "It is intention that ultimately matters ... it is the intention which is the deciding factor, not the external act, which is inconclusive. From the real point of view, it is the evil intention which is violence." On the role of *manas* in Jain thought see also, e.g., Soni 2020. It thus seems as if the commentarial gloss on the present discourse at Ps III 52,17, according to which the Jains thought bodily (and verbal) actions are performed without the mind (*acittaka*), as well as the criticism raised in Abhidh-k IV 73, Pradhan 1967: 243,23 (already noted by von Glasenapp 1951: 76) of the supposed ignoring of intentionality in Jain thought may be a bit beside the point; see also the comment on the latter by Caillat 1965: 126: "On ne saurait donc prendre à la lettre les allégations de bouddhistes quand il accusent les *nirgrantha* de n'accorder aucune valeur aux intentions qui animent l'individu." Nevertheless, as noted in reply to her assessment by Johnson 1995: 19: "according to the early texts, intention is significant in so far as it may lead to or away from physical *himsā*, but in terms of the mechanism of bondage it is action or restraint from action that counts ... In other words, the emphasis in the earliest texts is not on intention or lack of it as such, but on the degree of direct involvement with *himsā*. Actions are judged, in the first place, according to their result, not according to the intention of the actor." Although there is thus some complexity to the position taken in early Jain thought, it goes without saying that the present passage is best read from the viewpoint of its polemic function. In fact, throughout, my discussion is certainly not meant to imply that the discourses taken up here provide historically reliable information about what actually happened on the ground in ancient India.

<sup>38</sup> MN 56 at MN I 378,27.

<sup>39</sup> MĀ 133 at T I 630a10, Lévi 1925: 30, and Up 4096 at D 4094 *ju* 248a5 or P 5595 *tu* 283a4; see also Anālayo 2011: 326.

<sup>40</sup> An employment of this tale in a debate setting can also be seen in Mil 130,4; on the Jain versions of this tale, surveyed together with its Buddhist and Brahminical counterparts, see Lüders 1940: 629.

supernormal abilities, an act of the mind can have repercussions that go far beyond what could possibly be done through the body. In this way, the present pair of arguments does establish the main point at stake.

In sum, then, the key turn in the debate appears to come with the third argument, involving a hypothetical case whose validity the fourth argument confirms by referring to something believed to have actually happened. In fact, in the *Madhyama-āgama* version, as well as in the Sanskrit fragment and the Tibetan version, Upāli does not immediately reply to this confirmatory case and remains silent for a while, as if by now he has realized the persuasiveness of the Buddha's position.<sup>41</sup>

The employment of crescendo repetitions occurs in relation to what thus appears to be the key argument. Having clarified that a single person would be unable to kill all the sentient beings of Nālandā, the Buddha now reformulates his question in terms of a recluse or brahmin endowed with supernormal power: Would such a person be able to burn up the whole of Nālandā (with all its sentient beings)? Upāli's reply in the *Madhyama-āgama* version takes the following form:<sup>42</sup>

Gautama, what about just *one Nālandā*, what about just *two, three, or four [Nālandās]*? Gautama, that recluse or brahmin, who has great bases of supernormal power, great might, great merit, great power, and has attained mastery of the mind, if he emits one thought of anger, he would be able to burn *the entire country with its entire population* to ashes, what to say of one Nālandā?

According to the corresponding part in the Pāli version, such a person could burn up ten, twenty, thirty, forty, and fifty Nālandās, what to say of a single Nālandā?<sup>43</sup> In both versions this implementation of crescendo repetitions is unique to the respective discourse collection(s), as neither a number of Nālandās nor the idea of burning to ashes recurs elsewhere, making this an “internal” type of repetition.

The Pāli discourse also differs in having crescendo repetitions already in relation to the preceding part of the same topic, as it indicates that even ten, twenty, thirty, forty, or fifty men would be unable to kill all sentient beings in Nālandā in a single day. The parallels extant in Sanskrit fragments and Tibetan translation also employ crescendo repetitions based on the case of a single person trying to kill all sentient beings in Nālandā, although they do so along a different vector. Instead of increasing the number of persons, they opt for increasing the periods of time, by way of proceeding from one to seven days.<sup>44</sup>

This employment of crescendo repetitions does not fit the narrative context particularly well, as in this way Upāli adds weight to an argument that contradicts his position. In other words, as a report of an actual debate between Upāli and the Buddha—the former of which features in the remainder of the discourse as a person endowed with considerable rhetorical skills—this employment of crescendo repetitions is unexpected. In contrast, when viewed from the perspective of an oral performance of the discourse in front of a Buddhist audience,

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<sup>41</sup> A discourse quotation of the present passage in T 212 at T IV 660c17 does not report any hesitation, however, as here the householder immediately confirms having heard of these forests.

<sup>42</sup> MĀ 133 at T I 629c26: 瞿曇, 何但一那難陀, 何但二, 三, 四? 瞿曇, 彼沙門, 梵志有大如意足, 有大威德, 有大福祐, 有大威神, 心得自在, 若發一瞋念, 能令一切國一切人民燒使成灰, 況一那難陀耶?

<sup>43</sup> MN 56 at MN I 378,1.

<sup>44</sup> Lévi 1925: 28 and Up 4096 at D 4094 *ju* 247b3 or P 5595 *tu* 282b2; see also SHT X 4193V3, Wille 2008: 309.

crescendo repetitions would enhance the reception of the main point by the listeners. In such a setting, the approach taken in the Pāli, Sanskrit, and Tibetan versions would be quite effective, by having crescendo repetitions in relation to both cases, the normal person and the seer endowed with supernormal powers. In this way, the inability of the single person contrasts even more strongly to the ability of a single seer.

Although it is of course no longer possible to determine with certitude at what precise point in the course of oral transmission crescendo repetitions came to be applied to the text, it is noteworthy that elsewhere the Pāli version shows signs of adaptation to the oral performance situation. It depicts Upāli before his conversion as already acting toward the Buddha in a very respectful manner, more appropriate for the behavior of disciple toward his teacher.<sup>45</sup> In line with this pattern, it seems fair to assume that some improvement of the discourse through an application of crescendo repetitions to the key argument in the debate would have come into existence during successive oral performances of the Discourse on Upāli.

By way of summing up the impressions that can be gathered based on the selected examples from the *Madhyama-āgama* surveyed in Parts I and II of the present article, crescendo repetitions emerge as an oral composition technique relevant to the construction of a discourse as a whole or alternatively just to a promotional appendix apparently added to an already existing discourse. Besides the general purpose of arousing inspiration, the same technique can also serve to strengthen an argument in a debate. Here, too, crescendo repetitions could in principle be employed already in the actual setting of the debate, but they could also be relied on to enhance the report of a previous debate during subsequent oral recitations and teachings.

### III. Proceeding Beyond the *Madhyama-āgama*

The examples surveyed above constitute merely a preliminary foray into the phenomenon of crescendo repetitions, and even just in relation to the *Madhyama-āgama* collection the present study is far from comprehensive. Further exploration of this topic would require ascertaining if patterns in other *Āgama* collections are similar, before turning to texts found outside of the *Āgamas*. Nevertheless, thanks to a stimulating contribution offered by Harrison (2022), it is possible to broaden perspective and relate the above preliminary survey to instances of what appears to be a similar phenomenon manifesting in some Mahāyāna *sūtras*.

In the introduction to his study, Harrison (2022: 651) explains that his purposes are to survey examples for “a pervasive self-referentiality” in this type of text as well as for “the use of formulas and lists, not singly, but in combination, in a way which expands a theme along one, two or more axes or vectors concurrently. The result of the latter feature is a seductive effect ... almost mathematical in its precision and musical in its expression.” For this latter feature, he provides three examples taken from the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā*, the *Saddharma-puṇḍarīka*, and the *Śraddhābalādhānāvātāra-sūtra* respectively.

#### III.1 In Praise of the Perfection of Wisdom

The relevant part of the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā*, studied in Harrison (2022: 656–662), takes the form a dialogue between the Buddha and Śakra, the ruler in the Heaven of the

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<sup>45</sup> See in more detail Anālayo 2011: 323.

Thirty-three. The dialogue concerns the merit generated through engaging with the Perfection of Wisdom in various ways, where those who devote themselves to it and also share this teaching with others gain more merit than those who only devote themselves to it. The superior merit accrued in this way then becomes the starting point for a series of comparisons.<sup>46</sup>

Less meritorious in comparison is the formidable deed of establishing all sentient beings in Jambudvīpa in the ten pathways of good action (*kuśalakarmapatha*), and the same holds in relation to sentient beings in increasingly larger territorial areas, up to as many world systems as there are grains of sand in the Ganges. Moreover, rather than establishing sentient beings in Jambudvīpa in the ten pathways of good action, they could also be established in superior ways, namely in attaining the four absorptions, the four *brahmavihāras*, the four immaterial spheres, the five supernormal knowledges, the four levels of awakening, becoming a Pratyekabuddha, or aspiring for Buddhahood. The crescendo effect achieved in this way can in turn be combined with the pattern of territorial expansion, leading from all sentient beings in Jambudvīpa to those in as many world systems as there are grains of sand in the Ganges. As if this were not enough, a crescendo effect can also be applied in relation to different levels of intensity with which one shares the Perfection of Wisdom as well as in relation to the spiritual status of the recipients, who could be just ordinary beings or else bodhisattvas at various levels of progress.

Harrison (2022: 660) notes that already in the earliest known version of the text, preserved in a Gāndhārī manuscript,<sup>47</sup> “the basic multi-vector structure is there ... and it is certainly intact in Lokakṣema’s Chinese version (179 CE), which is presumably based on an Indic exemplar of similar antiquity.”<sup>48</sup> With later versions, the same basic structure acquires increasing complexity by being further elaborated.

Now, a combination of different vectors can also be seen in the last discourse in the *Madhyama-āgama* collection, already mentioned above,<sup>49</sup> although this does not involve crescendo repetitions. In contrast, the examples for crescendo repetitions from the same discourse collection surveyed above tend to proceed along a single vector. However, the possibility of employing different vectors to create crescendo repetitions can be seen in the different versions of the debate with Upāli, discussed above (II.2), where the Pāli version takes the form of envisaging that increasing numbers of men would be unable to kill all sentient beings in Nālandā in a single day, whereas parallels extant in Sanskrit and Tibetan rather increase the period of time available to achieve the same. In principle, it would not take much to combine these two vectors—increase of persons and increase of time periods—in a single presentation, especially in view of the fact that the basic procedure of combining different vectors is attested in the *Madhyama-āgama* collection. Although such a combination is not found among the selected examples I have surveyed above, it remains to be seen if further research on crescendo repetitions can unearth a specimen in *Āgama* literature that

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<sup>46.</sup> The text under discussion begins with what in the Sanskrit and Gāndhārī versions is the fifth chapter, whereas in Lokakṣema’s translation the same still forms part of what is the third chapter; see Wogihara 1932/1935: 285,1, Falk and Karashima 2013: 104, and Karashima 2011: 110,7 (= T 224 at T VIII 436b21).

<sup>47.</sup> On the dating of the manuscript see Falk 2011: 20.

<sup>48.</sup> For the relevant part of the Gāndhārī fragment see Falk and Karashima 2013 (with a correction in Harrison 2022: 657n20), and for a critical edition of the relevant part in Lokakṣema’s translation see Karashima 2011: 110–128.

<sup>49.</sup> See above note 17.

involves more than one vector. For the time being, however, what can already be said is that the procedure in the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā* combines processes of textual formation already attested in *Āgama* literature.

Regarding the relevant passages from the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka* and from the *Śraddhā-balādhānāvātāra-sūtra*, surveyed by Harrison (2022: 662–665), the former also combines different vectors, employed to convey the utter impossibility of the knowledge of a Buddha being fathomed by practitioners of increasingly high levels of spiritual accomplishment, increasing numbers of world-systems filled with such practitioners, and increasing time periods (eons) during which they attempt to fathom it. The main presentation in the *Śraddhābalādhānāvātāra-sūtra*, however, involves only a single vector of relating the generation of merit to recipients of increasingly high spiritual accomplishment. What the three examples have in common thus appears to be the crescendo effect that is also evident in the cases from the *Madhyama-āgama* surveyed above.

Another instance of crescendo repetitions, also in relation to the topic of merit, occurs in the *Jñānālokālamkāra* (full title: *Sarvabuddhaviṣayāvātārajñānālokālamkāra-sūtra*).<sup>50</sup> The entire relevant section would in principle merit a close examination. However, in the present context of an anyway fairly long article, I have to forgo this option and will instead focus just on the final part of the treatment on merit, which is most directly relevant to my exploration due to being a clear case of crescendo repetition.<sup>51</sup> This final part works its way through different levels of spiritual maturation, each time indicating that establishing all sentient beings in all the world-systems of the ten directions in a lower stage of maturation is no match to establishing just a single person in the next higher stage. Such establishing others in increasingly higher spiritual attainments has its culmination point in the superior merit to be gained through engaging in various ways with the teachings of the *Jñānālokālamkāra*. The execution of crescendo repetitions in this way results in a remarkable hyperbole, as a single bodhisattva engaging with the *Jñānālokālamkāra* becomes superior in matters of merit to establishing pretty much everyone in the condition of being an irreversible bodhisattva (which in turn is superior to establishing everyone in the condition of being a Pratyekabuddha, etc.).

The procedure that leads up to this culmination point begins with a series of three successive stages, which are establishing someone in the state of a *śraddhānusārin*, an *arthānusārin*, or a *dharmānusārin*. Two of these three feature in the early discourses as practitioners on the path to stream-entry, namely the *śraddhānusārin* and the *dharmānusārin*, being those who “pursue” the path to awakening by dint of giving prominence to “confidence” or “dharma” (i.e., wisdom). The third category does not seem to occur among the early discourses or in Pāli commentarial texts.<sup>52</sup> An occurrence in the *Abhidharmakośavyākhyā* forms part of a gloss on the *śraddhānusārin*, who sets out “pursuing” the “truth” in reliance on others.<sup>53</sup> This does not fit the present context, however, as the *arthānusārin*

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<sup>50</sup> I am indebted to Paul Harrison for drawing my attention to this work, the relevant part of which begins in Study Group on Buddhist Sanskrit Literature 2004: 168; on the Sanskrit text see also Harrison 2023.

<sup>51</sup> The relevant part starts at Study Group on Buddhist Sanskrit Literature 2004, 186.

<sup>52</sup> The only reference to the notion under discussion that I have been able to locate in digital Pāli texts occurs in *Vism* 521,29 in the form *arthānusāravohāarakusalena*, which describes the Buddha’s skill in language in conformity to its meaning.

<sup>53</sup> Wogihara 1936, 548,9: *pūrvam parapratyayena paroditena arthānusaraṇād duḥkhādisatyapratipatter*.

(Chinese: 置義行 or 隨義行; Tibetan: *don gyi rjes su 'brang ba*) in the *Jñānālokālaṃkāra* is not identical with the *śraddhānusārin*. Instead, the *arthānusārin* must be more advanced, given that establishing even one sentient being in the condition of an *arthānusārin* is more meritorious than establishing many in the condition of a *śraddhānusārin*. The same ratio holds in turn for the superiority of the *dharmānusārin* over the *arthānusārin*.

This hierarchical presentation is not without difficulties, however, since at least in the early discourses the *śraddhānusārin* and the *dharmānusārin* stand for two alternative modalities of progress to stream-entry by dint of relying prominently either on confidence or else on wisdom. A Pāli discourse indicates that practitioners belonging to each of these two types will gain stream-entry in this same life, at the latest by the time of death.<sup>54</sup> Alongside sharing this type of irreversibility, however, individual practitioners of each type could be close to or else far from the actual attainment of stream-entry. This can perhaps be illustrated with the hypothetical example of a *śraddhānusārin* and a *dharmānusārin* who are of the same age and endowed with the same life span. In principle, it is possible that this particular *dharmānusārin* will only become a stream-enterer at death, whereas the individual *śraddhānusārin* may already be on the brink of stream-entry and, after having realized that, will continue to live as a stream-enterer for a long time before passing away (or even proceed further to higher levels of awakening within that same life). In other words, the different modalities of relying on either confidence or else wisdom—despite some degree of inherent advantage in relying on wisdom rather than on confidence—do not imply an invariable, substantial difference in spiritual maturity. Each of these two types could be of various levels of such maturity. It follows that it would be difficult to establish a straightforward reason for presenting one of these two types as being in principle vastly superior to the other in the way this is done in the *Jñānālokālaṃkāra*. Given the uncertainty that emerges in this way, the contextual setting does not help in ascertaining the nature of an *arthānusārin*.

Whatever may be the last word on the *arthānusārin*, the *Jñānālokālaṃkāra* continues with the four fruits, that is, the fruit of becoming a *śrota-āpanna*, a *sakṛdāgāmin*, an *anāgāmin*, or an *arhat*. Predictably, the listing then continues with the still superior alternatives of becoming a *pratyekabuddha*, a *bodhisattva* by dint of arousal of the *bodhicitta* (this is the term used in the listing), and an *avaivartika*, a *bodhisattva* who has become “irreversible” and will certainly become a Buddha in due time.

Each of the four levels of awakened beings—from stream-entrant via once-returner and non-returner to arhat—features in the *Jñānālokālaṃkāra*’s list of increasing merits as vastly superior to the corresponding previous stage. Such a strong emphasis on their difference does not seem to have a counterpart in early Buddhist thought, in that it is not necessarily clear that a single attainment of once-return, for example, is more meritorious than the attainment of stream-entry by all sentient beings in all the world-systems of the ten directions. The same would hold perhaps even more if these two alternatives were to be evaluated from the viewpoint of compassion, given the amount of suffering undergone by sentient beings in lower realms that would come to a complete end if they could all be established in the fruit of stream-entry. But perhaps such considerations are based on reading these descriptions too literally, given that a tendency to exaggeration is not entirely uncommon in ancient Indian texts. In other words, perhaps the indications given in the *Jñānālokālaṃkāra* should be seen

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<sup>54</sup> SN 25.1 at SN III 225,14+21.

as an expression of what Deleanu (2000: 73) has aptly called a “poetic frenzy” manifesting in some Mahāyāna *sūtras*, particularly evident when numbers “acquire hyperbolic digits.” On this reading, the repeated reference to all sentient beings in all the world-systems of the ten directions could maybe just be read as a somewhat extravagant way of saying “quite a few.”

Be that as it may, the reference as such to the four levels of awakening can be related to the first case I took up in my exploration of crescendo repetitions. The Discourse on Wishes from the *Madhyama-āgama* and its parallel in the *Majjhima-nikāya*, the *Ākaṅkheyya-sutta*, also cover these four in their lists of possible wishes a monastic may have. The same set of four also features as part of crescendo repetitions in the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā* and in the *Śraddhābalādhānāvātāra-sūtra*. This thematic overlap exemplifies a similarity of procedure adopted in early Buddhist and Mahāyāna literature, thereby offering a convenient way of concluding the present preliminary survey of selected instances of crescendo repetitions.

In the remainder of this article, I turn to the question of the dynamics of oral composition operating in the background of crescendo repetitions, in particular in relation to the theory of a play of formulas proposed by Shulman (2021b).

### III.2 The Play of Formulas

Based on his study of the relevant passages from the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā*, the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka*, and the *Śraddhābalādhānāvātāra-sūtra*, Harrison (2022: 665) offers the following assessment of the underlying dynamics of textual production:

Although the points being made in these three examples may be different, the vector or multi-vector structure used to make them is similar, and its deployment in these and many other texts indicates a definite passion among Buddhist composers for what Eviatar Shulman (2021[b]) calls “the play of formulas.” Already a feature of Mainstream Buddhist texts—the suttas/sūtras of the Nikāyas and Āgamas which furnish the objects of Shulman’s analysis—and by no means absent from non-Buddhist literature in India, in Mahāyāna sūtras this play of formulas reaches new heights of development in a kind of baroque extravagance.

Perhaps the above is just meant to refer to a general tendency of Buddhist texts to employ formulaic passages and combine these in different ways. In fact, this much is what occurrences of crescendo repetitions in the *Madhyama-āgama* and early Mahāyāna texts suggest. However, the phrase “play of formulas” is a specific coinage created by Eviatar Shulman, wherefore its usage can easily give the impression of endorsing his theory as a whole. Without intending to convey that this must be the intended meaning of the above assessment, but rather by way of addressing the possibility that it may be read along such lines, in what follows I relate the above survey of instances of crescendo repetitions to how Shulman (2021b: 227) defines the play of formulas:

The point here is that the formula, rather than the full discourse, is the main level of textual utterance ... this theory suggests that the main texts of early Buddhism were the formulaic encapsulations of both narrative and doctrinal materials, and that full suttas are primarily legitimate combinations of such formulas. This notion allows us to understand how discourses were created from formulas bottom-up.

It is difficult to see how this could hold for the passage with crescendo repetitions in the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā*, which Harrison (2022: 656) introduces as “[t]he best example of this technique I know of.” Given its foundational role for *Prajñāpāramitā* literature and the fact that the pattern under discussion is already evident in the earliest known versions, the Gāndhārī manuscript and Lokakṣema’s translation, the idea of textual composition by combining already existing formulaic textual units would be more straightforward for later *Prajñāpāramitā* texts taking inspiration from the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā*.<sup>55</sup> But for the case of the two earliest extant versions there is simply no evidence for different, still earlier texts, which could have served as the source for the formulas—such as those describing different ways of engaging with the Perfection of Wisdom—supposedly employed to compose the section under discussion bottom-up. Instead, a considerably more reasonable scenario would be to envision that these formulaic descriptions came into existence as part of a gradual process of composition, that these are “internal” rather than “external,” to use the distinction proposed above for repetitions of the crescendo type.

As far as “the suttas/sūtras of the Nikāyas and Āgamas” are concerned, the evidence for what I have called “internal” repetition confirms the same conclusion, and several cases in my sample fall into this category. For example, the main textual body of the *Madhyama-āgama* Discourse on Wishes and its Pāli parallel, the *Ākaṅkheyya-sutta*, could hardly result from a play of formulas, because there is no evidence for the needed formulas being found elsewhere among the respective discourse collections. Here, too, a considerably more reasonable scenario would be to envision that the formulas employed for crescendo repetitions emerged from within the same discourse. In other words, be it the early versions of the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā* textual family or several examples in my sample from the *Madhyama-āgama*, the textual composition resulting in crescendo repetitions shows no sign of invariably combining formulas already in existence elsewhere, instead of which the most straightforward explanation appears to be that these passages originated from within the process of composition of the same discourse or text.

As I have shown in a detailed critical reply to Shulman (2021b), the examples he presents in support of the theory of the play of formulas fail to confirm his hypothesis (Anālayo 2021d). The problem here is that his line of argumentation is based on merely identifying the existence of formulaic passages. The use of formulas and pericopes is of course a well-known feature of early Buddhist oral texts that has been recognized for a long time.<sup>56</sup> But the phrase “play of formulas” does not refer just to this well-known pattern. The distinct, novel contribution promoted in the name of this particular phrase is a denial of the established criterion of parallelism between discourses from various transmission lineages in the assumption that their composition can be accounted for solely by means of already existing formulas being combined. What would be required to support the theory of the play of formulas, in the way this has been presented by Shulman (2021b), is clear evidence that the

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<sup>55</sup> This can be exemplified with the help of the apt characterization of the relationship between the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā* and the *Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā* offered by Nattier 2003: 62n19, in that the latter “consist of the *Aṣṭa* ‘sliced’ like a loaf of bread and then layered with ‘fillings’ introduced from other sources. Very little of the text of the *Aṣṭa* has been altered in the process, and only rarely does a crumb of the ‘bread’ seem to have dropped out. The *Pañca* is thus not simply related to the *Aṣṭa*; it is the *Aṣṭa*, with the addition of a number of layers of new material.”

<sup>56</sup> For a survey of various dimensions of the employment of formulaic repetitions see Anālayo 2022c.

texts were indeed created by combining already existent formulaic passages, that these formulas are actually the primary material in textual composition.

Shulman (2021b: 7) explains that his proposal “combats the common philological approach that assumes that ‘parallel’ texts, i.e., different versions of a text preserved in distinct canons and languages, can be compared to each other in order ... to mark processes of change and development.” An example for what this entails are the *Bhayabherava-sutta* (MN 4) and the *Dvedhāvitakka-sutta* (MN 19), which Shulman (2021b: 206) considers to be “versions of each other” since they share a formulaic description of the Buddha’s awakening, even though the rest of their respective texts differ. Due to the supposed primacy of formulas in textual composition, the connection between these two should overrule their relationship to Chinese parallels (MN 4 paralleling EĀ 31.1; MN 19 paralleling MĀ 102), which has been the generally recognized foundation for Buddhist scholarship since the time of Anesaki (1908: 61f) and Akanuma (1929/1990: 163f). In reply to an earlier instance of the same basic argument in Shulman (2019), I have shown that it is unconvincing to consider the *Bhayabherava-sutta* and the *Dvedhāvitakka-sutta* as versions of each other and that the established approach of comparing these to their Chinese *Āgama* parallels is clearly preferable (Anālayo 2021c).

In the case of the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā*, a colophon to the Gāndhārī manuscript by the person who commissioned its copying refers to the text just as the “Perfection of Wisdom.”<sup>57</sup> The translation by Lokakṣema also has a title without any reference to eight thousand (道行般若經).<sup>58</sup> In fact, according to Zacchetti (2015: 180) the application of the term *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* results from a “comparatively late categorization.” This raises the question of what entitles us to relate these two versions to the Sanskrit text of the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā* (as well as to other versions extant in Chinese and Tibetan translation). This could hardly be the sharing of some formulas. In fact, the use of formulas, however widespread, is just a modality of expressing content and clearly not identical with the latter. This is precisely why, without employing any formulas, Harrison (2022: 662) is able to summarize the main message of the exposition on merit as follows: “engaging with the Prajñāpāramitā—both as text and as training—brings much merit, and sharing it with others brings even more.” It is this message, in whatever way formulated, that is central to the identification of textual parallelism. Expressed from the perspective emic to the text, it is the circumstance of ostensibly reporting the same teaching event that allows us to relate the different versions of the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā* textual family to each other, and then use that as a basis for comparing them in order “to mark processes of change and development.”

In another publication, in a comment explicitly related to the position taken in the first chapter of his (at that time still forthcoming) monograph (2021b), Shulman (2021a: 4n14) takes a step further in articulating his stance in contrast to the common philological approach of comparing parallels. This takes the form of arguing that *Āgama* discourses extant in Chinese should not be considered as potential aids in reconstructing Indian Buddhism, instead of which they should be read as testimonies to Chinese Buddhism.<sup>59</sup> Although

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<sup>57.</sup> Falk and Karashima 2012: 25.

<sup>58.</sup> Karashima 2011: 1n1 assumes that this title could be the result of a later development, replacing an earlier title referring just to the *Prajñāpāramitā* or the *Mahāprajñāpāramitā*.

<sup>59.</sup> In the context of a study of descriptions of the Buddha’s body in Pāli discourses, Shulman 2021a: 4n14

Chinese translation activities can indeed be revealing if studied from the perspective of their historical and cultural setting, the contents of the texts tend to reflect developments in Indian (and Central Asian) Buddhism(s) and can be used for their reconstruction. A good case in point, although not an *Āgama* discourse, is the Yuèzhī Lokakṣema’s *Prajñāpāramitā* translation, based on an original recited by an Indian monk,<sup>60</sup> the original presumably being in Gāndhārī.<sup>61</sup> Alongside the choice of translation terminology as a source of information on the Chinese setting,<sup>62</sup> the content clearly reflects developments that up to that point had taken place outside of China.

Problems are not confined to an accurate assessment of the situation in China, but also extend to the ancient Indian setting. The latter relates to a recurrent tendency by Eviatar Shulman to dismiss memorization, such as when he rejects an understanding of formulas as reflecting the needs to memorize. The resultant contrast between either memorization or else literary dimensions of the text is puzzling, since without some memorization during centuries of oral transmission we would hardly be able to access the text nowadays and appreciate their literary dimensions. A background to this contrast emerges with an article by Shulman (2023b) in which he proposes that prose sections of the *Sagātha-vagga* reflect free storytelling.<sup>63</sup> In support of the composition of prose parts of the *Sagātha-vagga* through free storytelling, he argues against the alternative that the texts were memorized on the grounds that, according to his understanding, the latter would involve recitation in Pāli and thus in a language that people for the most part did not understand.<sup>64</sup>

This helps to understand his repeated rejection of memorization, since if this is perceived as involving a language people do not understand then memorized texts would indeed be of limited use in actual preaching. Yet, the proposed assessment conflates the composition and oral recitation of prose narrations in ancient India with the historically later situation in Theravāda societies in Southeast Asia where recitation in Pāli is indeed often not understood. This historically later situation has no bearing on the formation of the discourses collected in the *Sagātha-vagga*. Any storytelling done in Southeast Asia in order to cater for audiences that do not understand Pāli could no longer have impacted a collection of discourses that by then had long been committed to writing. Such conflation of historically and culturally distinct settings reveals that his discussion of early Buddhist orality appears to have lost

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reasons: “Issues of comparison with other extant versions of the early discourses may reveal interesting insights, but should not be thought to bring us closer to the historical realities of early Buddhism. Each textual tradition offers its own version(s) of discourses, which conform to local tastes and standards. Thus, we could read Chinese versions of Suttas in order to understand ideals of masculinity in early Chinese Buddhism, not in order to return to the days in which the texts were composed, supposedly before the schisms,” followed by referring to the first chapter of his forthcoming book for further discussion. For a critical reply see Anālayo 2021b: 2390.

<sup>60.</sup> T 2145 at T LV 47c6.

<sup>61.</sup> Karashima 2013b.

<sup>62.</sup> Karashima 2013a: 273 comments that “Lokakṣema used many vernacular words and expressions in his translations of Buddhist scriptures.” Comparing these with subsequent translations of the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā* textual family, attributed to Zhi Qian (on which see Nattier 2010b) and Zhu Fonian, “we are able to trace the changes and developments of the Chinese language from the Eastern Han to the Jin Dynasty.”

<sup>63.</sup> In his conclusion, Shulman 2023b: 18 affirms that “[t]he Sagāthāvagga calls us to open our eyes to the practices of storytelling that were behind the shaping of important parts of the early Buddhist discourses.”

<sup>64.</sup> For example, in the context of discussing “the ingenuity in the literary construction of the stories and the construction of each *Vagga*” of the *Sagātha-vagga*, Shulman 2023b: 6 argues that “[i]n the case of the SGV [= *Sagātha-vagga*], such prose was surely not recited to lay audiences in Pāli, a language they did not understand”; for related statements see also Shulman 2023b: 3 and 10.

touch with the reality of its ancient Indian setting.<sup>65</sup>

Now, there certainly needs to be sufficient room left for innovative ideas, offering us an opportunity to reconsider long-established procedures and assess whether some adjustment is needed. At the same time, however, there also needs to be room for dismissing what fails to make sense in light of the actual textual evidence we have. I believe this holds for the “play of formulas” and its associated ideas, at least in the way articulated by Shulman (2021b), as the proposed theory fails to provide a convincing perspective on crescendo repetitions in particular and on early Buddhist orality in general.<sup>66</sup>

Instead of invariably requiring a pre-existing pool of ready-made formulas to be combined with each other, crescendo repetitions can involve both novel material and established textual units; they can be an integral part of the composition of a whole discourse or else come to be applied to a section of it at subsequent stages in textual transmission. Such manifestations can be seen to emerge naturally in an oral performance setting as a way of communicating an emphasis on a particular point or teaching. The examples surveyed above show that this can involve the generation of inspiration in relation to the path of practice, it can strengthen an argument in a setting of debate and conversion, or it can serve to promote a particular text or teaching through an emphasis on its meritorious potential.

## Conclusion

A form of repetition evident in *Āgama* literature creates a crescendo effect by gradually increasing a particular list or set of items. This feature appears to have a prominent function in arousing inspiration as well as in strengthening an argument in a debate setting. The manifestation of such crescendo repetitions appears to be a feature of early Buddhist orality from its outset, evident in the case of the *Madhyama-āgama* “Discourse on Wishes” and its parallels, whose main body is entirely made up of this procedure. Other examples, however, such as the “Discourse on the Establishments of Mindfulness” and its parallels, give the impression that the application of crescendo repetitions was part of an expansion of the discourse at some stage in its oral transmission. With the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā* a further degree of complexity in this procedure can be observed, by way of combining different vectors under the overarching goal of creating inspiration, in this case in particular in relation to the meritoriousness of engaging with the Perfection of Wisdom.

## Acknowledgement

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## Abbreviations

Abhidh-k	<i>Abhidharmakośabhāṣya</i>
AN	<i>Aṅguttara-nikāya</i>
CBETA	Chinese Buddhist Electronic Text Association
D	Derge
DN	<i>Dīgha-nikāya</i>
EĀ	<i>Ekottarika-āgama</i> (T 125)
It	<i>Itivuttaka</i>

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<sup>65.</sup> A more detailed critical examination of Shulman 2023b can be found in Anālayo 2023b: 299–329.

<sup>66.</sup> For the latest contributions to the ongoing discussion see Shulman 2023a and the reply in Anālayo 2023a.

MĀ	<i>Madhyama-āgama</i> (T 26)
Mil	<i>Milindapañha</i>
MN	<i>Majjhima-nikāya</i>
P	Peking
Ps	<i>Papañcasūdanī</i>
SHT	Sanskrithandschriften aus den Turfanfunden
SN	<i>Saṃyutta-nikāya</i>
T	Taishō (CBETA)
Up	<i>Abhidharmakośopāyikā-ṭīkā</i>
Vism	<i>Visuddhimagga</i>

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