

VĀCĀ, "speech" or the "spoken word", is inevitably invested with a rather central importance in a predominantly oral society such as ancient India at the time of the rise of Buddhism. In order to reflect this importance, the present article will focus on the role and influence of orality in early Buddhism, while the ethical dimension of verbal activity will be dealt with in a separate entry under VACĪKAMMA, and the early Buddhist attitude towards linguistic conventions will be discussed under VOHĀRA.

According to the *Ariyapariyesana Sutta*, the recently awakened Buddha was at first hesitant to teach, and it was only after an intervention by Brahmā Sahampati that the Buddha decided to proclaim the *Dhamma* to those who were able and willing to listen to his words (*M. I*, 169). Once this decision was taken, the oral delivery of the *Dhamma* began with the proclamation of the *Dhammacakkapavattana Sutta* (*S. V*, 421). Already with this first 'setting in motion of the wheel of *Dhamma*', which constitutes the starting point of the early Buddhist oral teachings, one of the five auditors by the name of Koṇḍañña attained stream-entry (*S. V*, 423).

This is, in fact, the central purpose of the early Buddhist oral teachings, namely to lead to liberating insight. In order to be able to fulfil this purpose, oral instructions need to be clearly comprehensible at the time of delivery, and they also should be easy to memorize. These two requirements have had a considerable impact on the actual shape of the early discourses, whose oral characteristics and features manifest in various ways.¹

Such oral characteristics can be seen already with the standard opening of a discourse: "thus have I heard, at one time", *evaṃ me sutaṃ, ekaṃ samayaṃ*.² According to the commentarial explanation, these words were spoken by Ānanda (*MA. I*, 7), thanks to whose efforts at retaining the words spoken by the Buddha, the teachings were preserved for posterity. When examined from a formal perspective, one finds that the two parts of this standard opening, *evaṃ me sutaṃ* and *ekaṃ samayaṃ*, each consist of five syllables and are thus well balanced metrically. The first word in each part is closely similar, *evaṃ* and *ekaṃ*, differing only in respect to their second consonant. The words *evaṃ*, *sutaṃ*, *ekaṃ*, and *samayaṃ* share the *-aṃ* ending, while the words *sutaṃ* and *samayaṃ* also share

the same initial consonant. Thus, even though these few words are merely a prose introduction to a discourse, a closer inspection reveals sound similarities that occur with considerable frequency in other prose sections of the early discourses, especially in listings of similar words or in formulaic expressions. These sound similarities involve 'alliteration', repetition of an initial sound, 'assonance', repetition of a sound found in the middle of a word, and 'homoioteleuton', repetition of the final sound. Such sound similarities considerably facilitate memorization and recitation.

Another oral feature of the early discourses is the frequent use of strings of synonyms. Such a string of synonyms serves to safeguard against loss of text, since a whole set of similar words stands much greater chance of being remembered than a single word. Moreover, such a string of terms will also better impress itself on the audience. The members of such strings or clusters of words tend to occur in a metrical sequence that follows the principle of 'waxing syllables'. According to this principle, words with fewer syllables in a series of terms are followed by words with an equal or greater number of syllables. This principle occurs also in listings and enumerations whose members do not share the same meaning.

An example for a string of synonyms arranged according to the principle of 'waxing syllables' is the treatment of the theme "fear", *bhīto saṃviggo lomahaṭṭhajāto* (*M. I*, 231), where the three terms used to express the same basic meaning of "fear" follow each other with a syllable count of 2+3+6. Other examples are the theme "poor", *daliddo assako anālhiyo* (*M. I*, 450), where the syllable count is 3+3+4; and its counterpart "wealthy", *aḍḍho mahaddhano mahābhogo* (*M. I*, 451), with a syllable count of 2+4+4. The crescendo effect that results from the application of this principle is a typical feature of the early discourses, further enhanced when word sequences arranged according to the waxing syllable principle also share sound similarities.

The oral nature of the early discourses also manifests in the frequent occurrence of repetition. When treating a particular topic in its positive and negative manifestations, for example, it is a standard procedure in the discourses that the same passage will be repeated with precisely the same words and formulations as used for the positive case, making

only the most minimal changes required in order to adjust these to the negative case. The same procedure becomes even more prominent when a series of different perspectives on a particular topic are described.

In addition to the frequent occurrence of repetition within a single discourse, the early discourses also make recurrent use of 'pericopes', formulaic expressions or phrases that depict a recurrent situation or event. Whether it is a description of how someone approaches the Buddha or of how someone attains liberation, pericopes will be employed with a fixed set of phrases and expressions, and only the most minimal changes will be introduced in order to adapt these pericopes to the individual occasion. These two features, the repetition of passages within a discourse and the use of pericopes throughout the discourse collections, are responsible for the highly repetitive nature of the early discourses.

The above-described oral characteristics of the early discourses testify to the importance of facilitating the precise memorization of the words spoken by the Buddha in order to ensure the correctness of their oral transmission. This oral transmission seems to have started soon after the delivery of the first teachings. When the Buddha sent out his first monk disciples to teach others (*Vin.* I, 21), these disciples would have taken teachings along with them in order to spread the *Dhamma*, teachings that would obviously have been in an oral form. Though the discourses that by that time had been delivered were few, it seems quite probable that already at that time some degree of formalization of these discourses had taken place in order to facilitate their oral transmission. That is, in order to satisfy the requirements of the expanding early Buddhist community, a formalized body of oral material must have already come into existence during the Buddha's lifetime.

According to the account given in the Vinaya, soon after the Buddha had attained final *Nibbāna* the oral transmission was formalized into a canonical body at the so-called first council (*Vin.* II, 287). Whatever be the final word on the historical accuracy of this account, at some relatively early point in the history of Buddhism a formalization of the canonical texts must have taken place. Notably, this formalization was undertaken in a relatively flexible manner, as even discourses not spoken by the Buddha himself were

included under what tradition regards as the word of the Buddha (see also BUDDHAVACANA). Discourses spoken in their entirety by disciples, with and without explicit approval given by the Buddha, became part of the canonical collection of discourses systematized in the *Nikāyas* or *Āgamas*.

A particular intriguing case is a discourse in the *Āṅguttara Nikāya*, according to which a monk, on being asked by Sakka if what he had just taught originated from the Buddha, replied with the dictum that "whatever is well said is the Buddha's word", *yaṃ kiñ ci subhāsitaṃ, sabbam taṃ tassa bhagavato vacanaṃ* (*A.* IV, 164). This statement was to play a considerable role in relation to the concept of scriptural authenticity in later Buddhist traditions, as can be seen for example in the *Śikṣā-samuccaya*, which employs this statement in order to defend the authenticity of later scriptures (*Śiks.* 15). The original implications of this passage, however, were only that the monk considered the Buddha to be the real source of whatever he was expounding.

This relatively open attitude towards the category of *Buddhavacana* has led to the inclusion of historically later material under this heading in all Buddhist traditions. This is the case not only for the considerable range of material that the developing Mahāyāna traditions considered to originate from the Buddha himself. The same attitude can also be found in the Theravāda tradition, where the *Atthasālinī* extends the category of *Buddhavacana* even to the *Kathāvatthu*, arguing that the Buddha had already laid down the contents of this work in the foresight that two-hundred-and-eighteen years after his demise the monk Moggaliputta Tissa would give a full exposition of it (*DhsA.* 4).

This type of attitude appears to have, however, only developed at a relatively later point of time, as the above-described characteristics of the early Buddhist oral material document an emphasis on correct and verbatim transmission during the early stages of the development of Buddhism. The task of this transmission was carried out by generations of reciters who transmitted the canonical texts for several centuries purely by way of memory (See also BHĀṆAKA).

References

1. The oral nature and characteristics of early Buddhism have been studied by Allon: *Style and Function*, Tokyo 1997; Collins: "Notes on some Oral Aspects of Pali Literature", *Indo-Iranian Journal*, vol. 35, 1992: 121-135; Cousins: "Pali Oral Literature", *Buddhist Studies: Ancient and Modern*, London 1983: 1-11; Coward: "Oral and Written Text in Buddhism", *The Adyar Library Bulletin*, vol. 50, 1986: 299-313; Davidson: "An Introduction to the Standards of Scriptural Authenticity in Indian Buddhism", *Chinese Buddhist Apocrypha*, Delhi 1992: 291-325; Gethin: "The Mātikās: Memorization, Mindfulness, and the List", *In the Mirror of Memory*, Albany 1992: 149-172; Gombrich: "Recovering the Buddha's message" and "How the Mahāyāna Began", *The Buddhist Forum*, 1990: 5-20 and 21-30; Hoffman: "Evam me sutam, Oral Tradition in Nikāya Buddhism", *Texts in Context: Traditional Hermeneutics in South Asia*, New York 1992: 195-219; von Hinüber: *Der Beginn der Schrift und Frühe Schriftlichkeit in Indien*, Wiesbaden 1989; von Hinüber: *Untersuchungen zur Mündlichkeit früher mittelindischer Texte der Buddhisten*, Stuttgart 1994; von Simson: *Zur Diktion einiger Lehrtexte des Buddhistischen Sanskritkanons*, München 1965; and Wynne: "The Oral Transmission of Early Buddhist Literature", *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies*, vol. 27 no. 1, 2004: 97-127.
2. This formulaic opening of a discourse has been examined by Brough: "Thus Have I Heard", *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, vol. 13, 1950: 412-426; Galloway: "Thus Have I Heard: At One Time", *Indo-Iranian Journal*, vol. 34, 1991: 87-104; Samtani: "The Opening of the Buddhist Sūtras", *Bhāratī, Bulletin of the College of Indology*, vol. 8 no. 2, 1964: 47-63; Tola: "Ekaṃ Samayaṃ", *Indo-Iranian Journal*, vol. 42, 1999: 53-55; and von Hinüber: *Studien zur Kasusyntax des Pāli*, München 1968: 85-86.

VACĪKAMMA, "verbal action", is one of the three main doors of action recognized in early Buddhism. This threefold analysis of deeds is significant in so far as it indicates that early Buddhism does not treat action from the perspective of a body/mind duality,

but instead considers body and mind as two components of a triad of channels for activity.

Verbal action is preceded by volitional formations related to speech, the *vacīsaṅkhāras*, which the *Cūḷavedalla Sutta* defines to be initial and sustained application of the mind, *vitakka-vicāra*. As the same discourse explains, after having applied and directed the mind one will break out into speech, *pubbe vitakketvā vicāretvā pacchā vācaṃ bhindati* (M. I, 301). A discourse in the *Saṃyutta Nikāya* clarifies that volitional formations related to speech could be generated on one's own initiative or prompted by others. Moreover, such volitions could be formed with clear deliberation or without clear deliberation, *asampajāna* (S. II, 40). The point made by this passage is that when breaking out into speech, at times such verbal activity might be instigated by others and the speaker may be reacting verbally in a way that is not in accord with his or her original intentions. Only too easily one gets carried away by one's own words and in the end says something that one later regrets. In particular one who speaks much, *bahubhāṇin*, more easily engages in wrong types of speech and will later have to suffer their evil karmic consequences (A. III, 254). For this reason the issue of the mental intentions that motivate verbal activity has received considerable attention in early Buddhism. In an analysis of deeds from altogether ten perspectives, the ten "courses of action" (see also KAMMAPATHA), verbal deeds are distinguished into altogether four types. From the perspective of unwholesome verbal conduct, *vacīduccarita* (A. II, 141), these four cover:

- (1) falsehood, *musā-vāda*
- (2) slander, *pisuṇā-vācā*
- (3) rude speech, *pharusa-vācā*
- (4) frivolous gossip, *samphappalāpa*

(1) According to the detailed exposition of these four types of unwholesome verbal conduct in the *Sāleyyaka Sutta*, the speaking of falsehood occurs in such situations as when someone is summoned to court or to a meeting and is questioned as a witness, in reply to which this person might say 'I do not know' when in reality he or she knows, or else claim to know or to have seen something that he or she does not know and has not seen (M. I, 286). Acting in this way, this person speaks falsehood in full awareness of its untruth, *sampajānamusā bhāsītā*, motivated by some ulterior purpose, be this for his or her own benefit, or for the benefit of another (see also FALSE SPEECH).

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