

Literary Readings of Ancient Buddhist Texts: Mind the Hermeneutical Gap

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Introduction

The main concern of the present article is to draw attention to a potential problem when we as Western scholars living in the 21st century engage in literary readings of Buddhist texts that stem from a substantially different culture situated in the distant past. My exploration of this problem covers both Mahāyāna *sūtras* and Pāli *suttas*.

I begin by explaining what I intend with “literary reading” and in what way a hermeneutical gap can manifest. In the next part concerned with Mahāyāna *sūtras*, I examine the suggestion that some instances in this type of text correspond to a breaking of the fourth wall, an image taken from the world of theater, followed by taking up a reading of forms of self-references in the same literature as involving an infinite regress or infinite loop. I then complement this with a survey of passages in Pāli discourses relevant to the same topic. With the ensuing part of the present article, I turn in particular to the *Dīgha-nikāya*. Based on surveying the perspectives of late 19th and early 20th century scholars on discourses in this collection, I examine an instance of literary readings of discourses in the same collection in 21st century scholarship that exemplifies a widening of the gap that is the main concern of my exploration.

Literary Readings and the Hermeneutical Gap

Perhaps the best way for me to introduce what has become a rather lengthy exploration is to try to define what I intend with a “literary reading.” The entry on “literature” in the *Encyclopædia Britannica* explains that “the name has traditionally been applied to those imaginative works of poetry and prose distinguished by the intentions of their authors and the perceived aesthetic excellence of their execution,” adding that “[t]hose writings that are primarily informative—technical, scholarly, journalistic—would be excluded from the rank of literature by most, though not all, critics.”¹ Applying the more stringent definition of literature as excluding what is technical, etc., to the present case, this

would lead to defining a literary reading as one that is sensitive to the aesthetic and narrative dimensions of the text—rather than focusing just on its doctrinal teachings—seeking to understand what the text is trying to achieve and what means it employs for that purpose. In an oral setting, a study of such means needs to cover various dimensions related to ensuring the transmission of the text(s) and their recitation, from strategies of textual promotion and winning of adherents to various mnemonic techniques.

The same *Encyclopædia Britannica* entry on literature explains that “[l]iterature, like all other human activities, necessarily reflects current social and economic conditions.” This provides a convenient pointer in the direction of my main concern, which is precisely the need to keep in mind the often substantial differences between our own cultural situatedness as Western scholars in the field of Buddhist studies and the cultural situatedness of those who composed and engaged with the texts we study. As expressed by Harrison (2003: 116) in the context of articulating an objective of his own approach in a particular research project, a literary reading of Mahāyāna *sūtras* (and the same applies to Pāli *suttas*) will

understand them not just as texts—although the usual philological operations are an essential preliminary—but to see past them to the lives of the people who produced them, to ask what impact those lives had on the texts, and *vice versa*. That may sound straightforward, but is far from being so, for danger lies on two sides, when studying literature like this, of either imposing one’s own framework upon the material or of being sucked helplessly into its discourse.

My concern in what follows is particularly with the first of these two dangers, the problem of unwittingly “imposing one’s own framework upon the material.” Perhaps what I have in mind can best be illustrated with the help of an example. A Pāli discourse reports a king receiving, in the presence of the Buddha, the message that the queen has just given birth to a daughter, rather than a son. Seeing the king’s disappointment, the Buddha speaks a set of verses stating that a woman may turn out better than a man, being wise and virtuous, becoming a devoted wife, and giving birth to a heroic son who may even rule the whole realm.²

Now, it is indeed the case that, from a contemporary Western viewpoint, this verse can appear to have sexist undertones. In comparison, however, to state flatly that it has such sexist undertones appears to go just a bit too far,³ as it implies that this much holds for the ancient Indian setting

as well. The problem I see is that such an assessment implicitly assumes the universal validity of the contemporary Western viewpoint, such that it can be used as an arbiter to evaluate and pronounce judgment on the significance of an episode situated in a substantially different culture in the distant past.⁴ My concern here is not so much political in nature but much rather that such a judgment risks preventing a full appreciation of the significance of this episode in its cultural home.

In a historical context where women found themselves severely disadvantaged,⁵ with giving birth to a son often being the only way of improving their hierarchical position,⁶ the Buddha's reported reply can be read as a reflection of the cultural setting. Rather than directly challenging the existing social hierarchy—keeping in mind also that the concept of sexism does not have an equivalent in Pāli or Sanskrit—the reported reply first of all directs importance to mental qualities like wisdom and virtue, in line with a general tendency in early Buddhist thought to give prominence to the qualities of the mind over bodily endowments gained with birth. Then it addresses the king's concern about a son by shifting that to the next generation. This is noteworthy, since the wish for an heir to the throne could have been more easily accommodated by suggesting that the queen may still give birth to a son on a later occasion. Such a suggestion, however, would have implicitly confirmed the negative evaluation of her having just given birth to a daughter. Shifting instead to the next generation avoids granting such a confirmation.

The proposal of reading this episode as involving a shift away from a prevalent negative evaluation would be in line with a general assessment provided by Horner (1930/1990: 1–3), not explicitly related to the present episode, according to which in “pre-Buddhist days ... [a] daughter was nothing but a source of anxiety to her parents,” but “during the Buddhist epoch there was a change ... [t]he birth of girl-children was no longer met with open-eyed and loud-voiced despair, for girls had ceased to be despised and looked upon as encumbrances.”

According to the Pāli commentary, which is of course later than the discourse but still closer in time and culture to it than a reader in the 21st century, the king had hoped that giving birth to a son would have substantially improved the position of the queen, whom he had elevated to this rank from a lowly background.⁷ This concords with the impression that the specific connotations that giving birth to a daughter instead of a son carried in the ancient setting need to be taken into consideration when reading this episode.

The basic problem that hopefully emerges from this example has already been expressed in a discussion of orientalism by Said (1977: 180) in the following manner:

It is perfectly natural for the human mind to resist the assault on it of untreated strangeness, so that cultures have always been inclined to impose complete transformations on other cultures, receiving them not as they are but as, for the benefit of the receiver, they ought to be. To the Westerner, however, the Oriental was always *like* some aspect of the West ... this process of conversion is a disciplined one—it is taught, it has its own societies, periodicals, traditions, vocabulary, rhetoric, all in basic ways connected to and supplied by the prevailing cultural and political norms of the West.

In other words, there is a need to beware of going along with what at first sight may well seem an obvious and straightforward interpretation, in the understanding that this impression may just be a reflection of the “perfectly natural” tendency described above of imposing the perspective of one’s own cultural conditioning. That is, a genuine interest in appreciating the literary dimensions of ancient Buddhist texts on their own terms, in the way these would have been relevant to the ancient audiences of these texts, needs to avoid projecting “the prevailing cultural ... norms of the West.” With this much said by way of introduction, the time has now come to turn to my first case study.

The Fourth Wall in Mahāyāna sūtras

The idea to be studied in this first part of my exploration is that some aspects of Mahāyāna sūtras can be understood to be breaking the fourth wall.⁸ The *Encyclopædia Britannica* provides the following information on the key term:⁹ “Fourth wall, in theatre, television, film, and other works of fiction, a convention that imagines a wall existing between actors and their audience ... The imaginary wall is part of the ‘suspension of disbelief’ by the audience deemed critical to an appreciation and enjoyment of works of fiction.” In other words, the role of the fourth wall is to separate fiction from the real world. The *Encyclopædia Britannica* continues by reporting that in more recent times “actors began to acknowledge the audience, which led to the term *breaking the fourth wall*. Oftentimes, performers spoke directly to viewers to provide commentary, to narrate their thoughts, or to acknowledge the very artifice of their production.”

An application of this notion to Mahāyāna sūtra literature emerges in the following explanation provided by Wedemeyer (2021: 221):

In essence, the discourses of the sūtras perform what in the dramatic arts is called “breaking the fourth wall.” In the theater, this refers to the “wall” that is tacitly presumed to exist at the proscenium of the stage. In actuality, of course, the proscenium is an opening that allows the viewer visual and auditory access to the events in the world of the characters. But, in the world of the “willing suspension of disbelief” shared between actors and audience, there is a wall there, as there would be in the “real world.” “Breaking” this wall, then, refers to those moments when the actors violate this compact, recognizing the existence of (and sometimes directly addressing) the audience ... It may occur more commonly in the modern period than in the past, perhaps, but some Mahāyāna sūtras clearly do something of the sort.

The first of three sūtras taken up to illustrate this idea is the *Suvarṇabhāsottama-sūtra* (or *Suvarṇaprabhāsottama-sūtra*), which reports a former life of Śākyamuni as King Susāmbhava (I will take up this episode again later). Wedemeyer (2021: 223) explains that “[t]he reader is subsequently told, breaking the fourth wall, ‘hundreds of thousands of former buddhas were worshipped by them and, due to this root of virtue, they hear this sūtra.’ That is, ... those who read or hear the sūtra outside the text are identified with characters in the story.” In this way, “[t]he credulous reader is thus invited to entertain the flattering notion that the Buddha was talking about them” in the *Suvarṇabhāsottama-sūtra*.

In the course of identifying relevant examples in the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka*, Wedemeyer (2021: 227) notes that the same pattern is also evident in the basic message of this sūtra, where “the Buddha elevates the arhats, the culture heroes of the Śrāvakayāna, by elaborating tales of their crypto-bodhisattvahood, consecrating them with prophecies of buddhahood, and seducing them through such flattery into allegiance with the Mahāyāna.” This also “points off the page at the reader, implying ‘you, too’ are granted ‘prophecy’ and will attain unexcelled enlightenment.” In relation to the same sūtra, Wedemeyer (2021: 229) reports the following:

Toward the end of the *Lotus*, there is a further passage, where the “fourth wall” is broken and the readers are “read into” the very audience of Buddha Śākyamuni himself. The bodhisattva Samantabhadra makes a promise to preserve and propagate the *Lotus* after the demise of Śākyamuni. The Buddha praises him for this and says: “whosoever, of respectable birth, [in the future] upholds the name of the great being, the bodhisattva Samantabhadra, should know that they have seen the Lord Śākyamuni; and, further, they have heard this teaching of the *Lotus of the Real Dharma* in the presence of the Lord Śākyamuni;

and they have worshipped the Lord Śākyamuni.” Note that the referent of the Buddha’s speech is people living long after his demise (the verb is in the future tense), who are thereby read both into the life story of the Buddha and the founding moment of the tradition (the teaching of the *Lotus* by Śākyamuni).

The *Pratyutpannabuddhasaṃmukhāvasthitasamādhi-sūtra* also comes up as illustrating this pattern. In my discussion here and below, when discussing the earliest extant Chinese translation of the text, the 般舟三昧經 (T 418), I will refer to it just as the **Pratyutpannasamādhi-sūtra*, based on its title in Chinese. The passage in question is found in a versified part of this Chinese translation, which Harrison (1990: 248f) has shown to be part of a reworking of Lokakṣema’s translation by someone else.¹⁰ The verses repeat the report given in the preceding prose section that Bhadrāpāla and several named lay bodhisattvas pledge to preserve and uphold the *sūtra*, followed by five hundred unnamed people, monastic and lay, male and female, who also promise that they will preserve it. According to Wedemeyer (2021: 226),

verse 33 of chapter 13 reads (in Harrison’s translation of the Chinese): “if anyone cherishes ... this sutra, accepts it, recites it, keeps it, and expounds it, you should know that he is one of the five hundred people whose hearts cherish it, and never doubt it.” I think the implication is abundantly clear. The strong suggestion is that anyone involved in this tradition is not a “newbie,” but one of the five hundred heroes prophesied by the Buddha.

Wedemeyer (2021: 229) sums up that such passages show “a consistent rhetoric calculated to seduce followers of the *śrāvaka* way to the emergent bodhisattva way, by, in a sense, writing these contemporaries into the scriptures themselves.”

Now, in order to seduce followers of the *śrāvaka* way, a key requirement would be to convince them first of all that the *sūtra* in question partakes of the much-contested category of being the word of the Buddha. Until that has been achieved, any promises or identifications found in the *Suvarṇabhāsottama-sūtra*, the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka*, or the **Pratyutpannasamādhi-sūtra* will hardly have an effect. In terms of the passage mentioned last, an identification with those five hundred heroes works only when these are perceived as real rather than fictional, a distinction to which I will be coming back repeatedly in my examination of the fourth wall. Since the members of the audience would for the most part be unable to find out by themselves about these five hundred, they need to rely on the prophesy given by the Buddha, that is, on this prophesy

being authenticated through partaking of the status of being the word of the Buddha. This is the key requirement for ‘seducing’ followers of the *śrāvaka* way.

In relation to the last example from the **Pratyutpannasamādhi-sūtra*, I prefer to follow Harrison (1990: 97n2) in considering the relevant indication to serve just the purpose of authentication.¹¹ The overall theme of this episode seems quite clearly to be to establish the **Pratyutpannasamādhi-sūtra* as a teaching given by the historical Buddha and to explain why the text only became publicly known at a considerable temporal distance from his final Nirvana. In the context of this strategy, in the prose text the five hundred promise that they will keep the *sūtra*—literally “this *samādhi*”—after the Buddha’s final Nirvana,¹² and the verse under discussion can in my view be read as a poetic reconfirmation of the same.

A world of a willing suspension of disbelief, in contrast to a real world, does not seem relevant in a setting where the power of the *samādhi* is grounded in the reality of the Buddha himself teaching it to Bhadrāpāla. For the audience this is hardly comparable to watching a theater play, as the contents of the *sūtra* need to be perceived as real rather than fictitious for the *sūtra* to perform its function. In other words, the comparison with a theater play appears to be somewhat inadequate.

This is not meant to put into question the identification of the above *sūtras* as evincing a strategy of drawing the audiences into the reported story and thereby winning them over. Wedemeyer (2021: 222) states that his “primary thesis” is that “one prominent rhetorical strategy of certain Mahāyāna sūtras is to reach out beyond the frame story, to the larger ‘frame’ of reference: the world in which the reader reads the scripture (or auditor hears it, or otherwise interacts with an enactment of its contents).” The examples surveyed above clearly support this primary thesis. What remains open to question, however, is the identification of such strategies as instances of breaking the fourth wall, such as when Wedemeyer (2021: 222) continues right after the above quote by stating that such “sūtras invite, even suggest, that the reader self-identify with the characters in the sūtra (on the other side of the fourth wall).” The point I intend to make is simply that it is far from self-evident that from an emic perspective the characters in the *sūtra* are “on the other side of the fourth wall.”

As stated in the definition of the fourth wall in the entry from the *Encyclopædia Britannica* quoted above, the fourth wall “is part of the ‘suspension of disbelief’ by the audience deemed critical to an appreciation and enjoyment of works of *fiction*” (emphasis added). Wedemeyer (2021: 221) also speaks of the “willing suspension of disbelief,” which confirms the relevance of this aspect of the comparison. In fact, this element is crucial in the proposed application of the metaphor of the fourth wall to the above passages, given that these passages already do not conform to the typical act of breaking the fourth wall in theater through directly addressing the audience. As duly noted by Wedemeyer (2021: 222), “the characters in the sūtras never ‘break character’ and directly address the audience/auditors in the ‘real world’.”¹³ Lacking a fully-fledged act of “breaking,” this leaves the existence of the “fourth wall” dividing fiction from reality as the main plank on which to rely for applying the metaphor.

Perhaps a contrastive example may be of use. Suppose that at the beginning, during, or at the end of a panel discussion one of the participants addresses the audience. This will not be considered breaking the fourth wall. The reason is that the members of the audience and those who are on stage share the same level of reality. This holds despite these two groups being clearly separated into those who are participants in the discussion and those who are mere spectators. The example of the panel discussion is meant to illustrate that, if there is no fourth wall to partition off a fictional realm, then this obviates any need to break it.

The same pattern can be applied to the ancient setting with the example of an inscriptional reference to Amitābha on an image pedestal from Govindnagar,¹⁴ a second-century testimony to the relevant type of Mahāyāna practice(s) in India. For those performing devotional activities in front of the statue that must have been on this pedestal, Amitābha partakes of their reality rather than being perceived as a fiction. The same must hold for the quite probably closely related perspective of devotees of the **Pratyutpannasamādhi-sūtra*. From the viewpoint of these ancient audiences, Amitābha exists, even if he may not be readily visible right now, just as other members of the audience exist, even if they are seated out of sight. All of this is about the reality of the recipients of these teachings, their actual lives, rather than about willingly entering an imaginary world populated by fictive characters, comparable to going to the theater.¹⁵

In other words, Amitābha's status must have been perceived by his followers in the ancient setting as substantially different from the way a contemporary reader will perceive the protagonists in an example of breaking the fourth wall given by Wedemeyer (2021: 221), which is "the famous moment in *Peter Pan*, when Pan calls upon the audience to applaud to bring the poisoned Tinkerbell back to life." Another example provided by Wedemeyer (2021: 231) reflects the same contrast: "Just as a modern youth might see *Star Wars* or read *The Lord of the Rings* and identify strongly with Luke Skywalker or Frodo Baggins, so Mahāyāna sūtras are spiritual adventure tales that encourage identification with their heroes, the bodhisattvas." My point is that the analogy does not work so well, as the fictional nature of Luke Skywalker and Frodo Baggins is worlds apart from what can safely be assumed to have been the ancient Buddhist devotee's perception of the reality of bodhisattva heroes in Mahāyāna sūtras.

The above is not meant to deny that to contemporary Western scholars the episodes surveyed above may well appear to be comparable to breaking the fourth wall. In such a context, this image can be quite helpful to illustrate a contemporary reception of these passages from the *Suvarṇabhāṣottama-sūtra*, the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka*, and the **Pratyutpannasamādhi-sūtra*. But the image of breaking the fourth wall does not automatically transfer to devotees of these sacred scriptures in their ancient home. In fact, it risks obfuscating the perception of their protagonists as real and the promises made in these sūtras as valid. Such promises would hold little purchase with someone who reads them as fiction.

With this I am not intending to propose that members of the tradition were invariably opting for a literal reading. Numbers, for example, are often used in a symbolic manner, and 84,000 is best understood to mean "a lot" rather than literally as a referent to $83,999 + 1$.¹⁶ The same holds for the hyperbole often found in Mahāyāna sūtras, where a strictly literal reading need not always be the most compelling one.¹⁷ But when it comes to the central protagonists of a Mahāyāna sūtra, I think we can be fairly sure that these were taken to be real and their reported actions as reflecting 'historical' events—this is precisely why their promises and promotional strategies work.

The *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka* provides an instructive example in this respect. Given its success in East Asia, its reception in China would be a good example of how devotees perceived its various narratives, thereby complementing the evidence provided by the Govindnagar

inscription for the ancient Indian setting. An illustrative episode in the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka* depicts the bodhisattva Sarvasattvapriyadarśana swallowing incense and drinking oil over a long period of time and then setting himself on fire,¹⁸ illuminating all directions for a long time until he passes away. According to Benn (2009: 108), since the end of the fourth century in China the reception of this tale took the following form: “The *Lotus Sūtra* provided not only a template for auto-cremation, by showing readers how and why it might be performed, but also the liturgy: self-immolators chanted the chapter on the Medicine King as they enacted it, thus making the scripture into a kind of performative speech.” Emulation taken to such extremes leaves hardly any room for imagining a fourth wall or a willing suspension of disbelief, instead of which the self-immolation of Sarvasattvapriyadarśana needs to be seen as partaking of the same reality as the self-immolation of such Chinese devotees of the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka*. From the viewpoint of the hermeneutical gap that is the main theme of my exploration, the differing perceptions of what is considered to be real—as distinct from what counts as fiction—that emerge in this way would need to be taken into account.

Self-references in Mahāyāna sūtras as an Infinite Loop

The next, related topic in my exploration of literary readings concerns self-references found in Mahāyāna sūtras that can give the impression of involving an infinite regress or infinite loop.¹⁹ This can be illustrated with an episode found in the *Suvarṇabhāṣottama-sūtra*, which reports that Śākyamuni, in one of his former lives as King Susāmbhava, listened to the *Suvarṇabhāṣottama-sūtra* and rejoiced, the karmic fruition of which caused his eventual attainment of Buddhahood.²⁰ Gummer (2012: 149f) offers the following reflection:

Does the Sūtra of Utmost Golden Radiance heard by the king include the story of King Susāmbhava? The sūtra provides no definitive answer to this question, but it certainly provokes its audiences (whether readers or listeners) to ask it. If King Susāmbhava hears the story, then he learns that, through listening to the Sūtra of Utmost Golden Radiance and responding with thankful joy, he will become the Buddha who preaches the Sūtra of Utmost Golden Radiance. In other words, his hearing of the sūtra is foreseen by his future self, from whom he receives what amounts to a prediction of buddhahood—and the origin of that future self is found precisely in King Auspicious Origin’s [= Susāmbhava] own listening and rejoicing. Time collapses ... [and] the story of King Susāmbhava begins to resemble a hall of mirrors.

Gummer (2012: 156) concludes that the powers of the *Suvarṇabhāsottama-sūtra* are such “that even the Buddha himself became a Buddha through hearing the sūtra, but the seemingly impossible relationship between the Buddha and the sūtra seems at least as likely to generate questions and doubts as thankful joy.”

The nature of the type of self-reference evident in the *Suvarṇabhāsottama-sūtra* can be explored further based on a detailed discussion of self-references in Mahāyāna sūtras, in the course of which Harrison (2022: 652) explains:

The *Pratyutpannabuddhasaṃmukhāvasthitasamādhi-sūtra* (hereafter PraS) provides ... [illustrations of] a particular form self-reference takes in numerous Mahāyāna sūtras, which we might call “ambiguous” or “fuzzy.” Fuzzy self-reference, in which the text refers indeterminately to itself and to whatever it is—the *samādhi*, the *dhāraṇī*, the quality, etc.—that it teaches, sometimes serves to blur or obscure the phenomenon, so that we are not quite sure what we are looking at. In the case of the PraS the referent could be the meditative practice called the *pratyutpannabuddhasaṃmukhāvasthitasamādhi*, or it could be the sūtra of that title which propounds it, or it could be both; sometimes it is clear which one is intended, sometimes it is not.

The notion of a fuzzy self-reference could in principle also be relevant to instances of self-references in this text that appear to involve an “infinite loop.” One such case, identified by Harrison (2022: 655), occurs when

in Chapter 15 we are told how the bodhisattva Sudatta heard “this *samādhi*” from a succession of Buddhas before being awakened himself as the Buddha Dīpaṃkara (see also the statements following this revelation in §§15G, 15I, 15K), and then in Chapter 17 we learn how Śākyamuni “obtained this *samādhi*” from Dīpaṃkara. Later in the text, in §§23H–N, the PraS recounts the story of King Viśeṣagāmin and his multiple encounters with “this *samādhi*”, culminating again in Buddhahood. Again, this raises the question whether the PraS that Sudatta (the future Buddha Dīpaṃkara) and Viśeṣagāmin (the future Buddha Dṛdhavīrya) heard repeatedly is the same text that reminisces about the careers of Sudatta and Viśeṣagāmin. Once more we appear to be trapped in an impossible loop.

Such an impression can indeed arise on reading the text. Nevertheless, once it is characteristic for this text to employ fuzzy self-references, the reports of the bodhisattva Sudatta, Śākyamuni, and Viśeṣagāmin encountering “this *samādhi*” may not invariably have been interpreted as

referents to the entire *sūtra*, comprising the narrative that depicts these encounters. In other words, even though the infinite loop is a viable way of reading the text, perhaps there may be room for a different reading.

In the course of identifying three instances of the infinite loop in the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka*, Harrison (2022: 654) reports on the first of these instances, found in the first chapter of the *sūtra*,²¹ that

in the distant past the Buddha Candrasūryapradīpa expounded the formulation of the teaching called the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka* (*saddharmapuṇḍarīkaṃ nāma dharmaparyāyaṃ*) for 60 intermediate kalpas ... if we take this literally, at face value, it means that the past preaching of the SP [= *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka*] included the chapter we are currently reading, with its claim that it had been preached in the past, and we are trapped in an infinite loop. Nor can this problem be resolved by finding somewhere later in the text a core teaching that the words *saddharmapuṇḍarīka* might refer to, which could reasonably be described as delivered from age to age without landing us in conceptual difficulties, since we will find no such thing.

In an attempt at exploring the reference to the teaching expounded by the Buddha Candrasūryapradīpa, a starting point could be a discussion of the term *dharmaparyāya* by Skilling (2021: 37), who explains: “*Dharmaparyāya* is used for any teaching, from a short verse exposition like *ye dharma hetuprabhavā* to a long *sutta*.”²² An illustrative usage can be found in a Pāli discourse that confirms the range of possible meanings of the corresponding Pāli term, in particular its potential to refer just to a short exposition (be it in verse or in prose).

The usage has as its narrative setting an inquiry by Prince Abhaya, who wants to know the Buddha’s take on the assertion by Purāṇa Kassapa that a lack of knowledge and vision occurs without a cause, and that the same holds for their presence. Unsurprisingly in view of the pervasive concern of early and later Buddhist teachings with causality, the Buddha disagrees, pointing to the presence of the five hindrances as what causes a lack of knowledge and vision and highlighting the presence of the seven awakening factors as what causes knowledge and vision.

Now, once the Buddha has expounded what causes a lack of knowledge and vision by listing each of the five hindrances individually, Abhaya asks: “Venerable sir, what is the name of this *dharmapariyāya*?”²³ In other Pāli discourses, the same question leads to the revelation of the title of the whole discourse,²⁴ but in the present case the Buddha replies:

“Prince, these are named the ‘hindrances’.”²⁵ The same exchange recurs in relation to the awakening factors. Once the Buddha has listed each individually, Abhaya again asks: “Venerable sir, what is the name of this *dhammapariyāya*?” In this case, the Buddha replies: “Prince, these are named the ‘awakening factors’.”²⁶

In this way, the term *dhammapariyāya* can come with some degree of fuzziness, as it can refer to the whole of the discourse, which it does elsewhere, or else, as in the present case, it can refer to two central teachings found in a single discourse. This element of fuzziness becomes even more apparent with the Chinese parallel, which has such a type of exchange only for what in both versions is the second topic. Here, the query by Abhaya leads to the Buddha revealing the name of what he had taught to be “the discourse on the awakening factors.”²⁷ This can be taken as the title of the whole discourse or else, in keeping with the Pāli version, as a referent only to the part with the exposition on the awakening factors.

The possibility of reading a reference to a *dharmaparyāya* in different ways can in turn be applied to the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka* with the help of an argument presented by Li (2023: 19f), drawing attention to

Seishi Karashima’s point proposed in 2001 that the core instructions of the *Lotus Sūtra* did in fact exist and that they had been preserved in the Central Asian manuscript (Lü B-1 1.Recto) and in Chinese translations, whereas the core teaching section was missing in later Sanskrit manuscripts from Nepal and Gilgit, as well as in the Kern-Nanjio edition (Karashima 2001a, pp. 216–17; 2001b, note 115). This core instruction found in the Central Asian manuscript and in Chinese translations refers to “an elucidation of equality of the great knowledge (*Mahājñāna-samatā-nirdeśa*)”—that is to say, “Everyone can equally acquire buddhist wisdom, and therefore aim to acquire it”. If Karashima’s viewpoint is correct, then the Lotus sūtra would have contained core instructions in its early versions, i.e., the equality of the great knowledge, which is the *dharmaparyāya* named *Saddharmapundrikā* [sic].

In view of this suggestion, it would perhaps be possible to envisage that such a *dharmaparyāya* could reasonably be described as delivered from age to age without landing us in conceptual difficulties. This is not to deny that the passage under discussion from the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka* can be read as involving an infinite loop. But it seems as if this may not be the only possible way of reading it, and in ancient times those engaging in one way or another with this passage could perhaps have understood it to

refer just to Buddha Candrasūryapradīpa expounding the core teachings rather than delivering an exact replica of the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka* as known to them.

Offering such a suggestion is certainly not meant to deny the existence of complex narratives in Indian literature in general,²⁸ or the existence in Mahāyāna thought of conceptually challenging motifs like Indra's Net, for example, which involves a perhaps comparable element of infinity, but on the spatial rather than the temporal level. Yet, whereas Indra's Net presumably serves to exemplify interdependence,²⁹ the same does not necessarily hold for the infinite loop. This can be explored further based on the indication offered by Harrison (2022: 655) that "the Mahāyāna sūtras we are reading resemble the impossible pictures created by Maurits Cornelis Escher. Like his well-known hands drawing each other, *they encompass their own creation*, thematizing themselves in loops which defy rational disentanglement" (emphasis added).

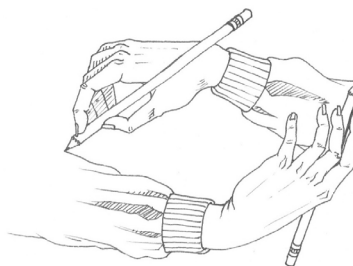


Figure 1: Hands drawing each other³⁰

Comparable to two hands drawing each other, with the different instances of the infinite loop mentioned thus far the protagonist interacts with a text that already contains the story of this interaction. In this way, the protagonist (= one hand) creates the story just as the story (= other hand) creates the protagonist. Read in this way, the situation indeed corresponds to Escher's drawing hands.

Now, Escher's drawing can be enjoyed in the knowledge that it is fictional, and that in reality both hands were drawn by Maurits Cornelis Escher. For the average Buddhist devotee, however, the story is real; the protagonist(s) existed and did what the story reports. In other words, for the devotee there is no reassuring presence of a creative artist standing in the background to the infinite loop, and the resultant situation amounts to two actually existing hands creating each other. Such a situation does not sit easily with the Buddhist conception of causality, as it would place the episode outside of the network of causes and conditions; it would stand in contrast to the doctrine of dependent arising (*pratītya samutpāda*) and be the very opposite of interdependence.

What emerges in this way could perhaps provide a perspective on the above-quoted reasoning by Gummer (2012: 149): “Does the Sūtra of Utmost Golden Radiance heard by the king include the story of King Susaṃbhava? The sūtra provides no definitive answer to this question, but it certainly provokes its audiences (whether readers or listeners) to ask it.” Would members of an audience steeped in a Buddhist worldview naturally envisage a scenario that implies removing the key action taken by King Susaṃbhava from the ordinary realm of conditionality by placing it into an infinite loop? The adoption of such a perspective would run counter to the whole thrust of the episode, which is precisely about a specific instance of causality: King Susaṃbhava’s rejoicing in the *Suvarṇabhāsottama-sūtra* formed the decisive karmic cause for his eventual attainment of Buddhahood in his future life as Śākyamuni.

In terms of another illustration provided by Harrison (2022: 656),³¹ if the infinite loop turns Susaṃbhava’s interaction with the *Suvarṇabhāsottama-sūtra* into a Klein bottle—a bottle whose neck disappears into itself such that its contents are sealed off from the outside world, wherefore nothing can be poured into it or out of it—then how can this interaction still proceed beyond its self-containment in this bottle and function as the specific cause of Susaṃbhava’s future Buddhahood?



Figure 2: Klein bottle³²

Moreover, just as there is no way of getting anything into an existing Klein bottle, similarly the members of the audience are not able to get into the already existing infinite loop. Instead of the straightforward indication that a single act of rejoicing in the *Suvarṇabhāsottama-sūtra* ensures their future Buddhahood, achieving the same with the infinite loop requires having already rejoiced in it an infinite number of times in the past. This would undermine a central function of the episode, which according to Gummer (2012: 149f) has “astonishing implications for other auditors of the sūtra: if they hear and respond joyfully, then surely they, too, will become golden-bodied buddhas.” In other words, “[a]s listeners learn of King Susaṃbhava’s joyful sūtra-hearing and its extraordinary results, they find themselves undergoing much the same experience, and thus receiving what amounts to a prediction to Buddhahood—as long as they respond as he did.” This appears to be indeed central to the episode, but it implies that the basic principle of causality functions as an indispensable ingredient in promoting the

Suvarṇabhāsottama-sūtra and testifying to its efficacy. Given this role of the causal relationship between rejoicing and future Buddhahood, it seems to me doubtful that the story would have been meant or expected to be read or heard in a way that contradicts causality.

Needless to say, the average Buddhist devotee could hardly be expected to have the degree of doctrinal sophistication required to be able to verbalize clearly the problem that emerges in this way from the viewpoint of the doctrine of causality, although a higher level of sophistication could be expected in this respect of those involved in the formation of the text. Nevertheless, to the degree to which even an average devotee inhabits a Buddhist worldview governed by the causal principle of karma and its fruit—a basic, central component informing daily ethical conduct, merit making, and devotional practices in the various Buddhist traditions—to that degree the conflict between the element of self-creation inherent in the infinite loop and the basic principle of conditionality could be expected to cause a sense of unease, a feeling of something not being quite right here.

In the words of Gummer (2012: 156), the resultant “seemingly impossible relationship between the Buddha and the *sūtra* seems at least as likely to generate questions and doubts as thankful joy.” This is indeed the case. If the episode of King Susaṃbhava is read as an infinite loop, then it indeed stands a good chance of generating questions and doubts. Harrison (2022: 656) in turn sees the effects of the infinite loop as a “powerful combination of reassurance and disorientation.” An element of reassurance is indeed present in this and other episodes, and this appears to be independent of the infinite loop. The disorientation, however, results from reading such episodes as involving an infinite loop. This raises the question of how meaningful it is for episodes, whose overall purpose is clearly self-promotion, to incorporate an element prone to generate doubts or disorientation. In other words, would those responsible for composing the relevant descriptions have good reasons to cast it as an infinite loop in order to achieve their overall purposes?

When the *Suvarṇabhāsottama-sūtra* reports that Śākyamuni listened to the *sūtra* in one of his former lives and eventually attained Buddhahood due to rejoicing in it, then this is clearly meant to rouse inspiration and faith in the power of this text. Given the importance of such assurance for the different and competing formulations of the path of a bodhisattva, an average listener or reader may well wonder if just rejoicing in the *Suvarṇabhāsottama-sūtra* was really sufficient to ensure

that Susaṃbhava will reach Buddhahood (and if one's own rejoicing will have the same effect). In such a setting, to formulate the actual episode in a way that potentially triggers additional questions or doubts would be playing into the hands of the devil, directly counteracting the arousing of inspiration and faith that is so central to the overarching concern with self-promotion.³³

An illustrative example in this respect can be found in the earliest extant Chinese version of the **Pratyutpannasamādhi-sūtra*. The relevant passage reinterprets the well-known meeting between the Buddha Dīpaṃkara and the future Śākyamuni: Rather than receiving the prediction of his Buddhahood from Dīpaṃkara, the future Śākyamuni has a vision of the Buddhas of the ten directions, and these then proclaim his eventual Buddhahood. The vision of the Buddhas of the ten directions was preceded by the future Śākyamuni having “heard this *samādhi*” (聞是三昧).³⁴ Due to being combined with hearing, the reference to “this *samādhi*” must be intending some form of a text or teaching.³⁵ This could easily have been avoided by speaking of a different activity in relation to this *samādhi*, such as cultivating it, etc., rather than hearing it.³⁶

In view of the promotional function of this reinterpretation of the Dīpaṃkara episode, it seems improbable that its composers would intentionally employ something known to have a propensity to generate questions and doubts or else to lead to a sense of disorientation, as this would run counter to the very purpose of this reinterpretation. Here, too, the episode as such is already prone to cause some uncertainty among those acquainted with the traditional account of the Dīpaṃkara prediction. It would be counterproductive to increase the already existing propensity toward questioning or doubt with a formulation that will stimulate additional uncertainty. In other words, it seems to me as if those responsible for this wording may not have been anticipating a perception of the episode as involving an infinite loop. They would presumably have expected their audiences to understand the reference to hearing this *samādhi* to intend hearing about this *samādhi*, rather than to intend hearing about infinite instances of hearing.

Self-references in Pāli Discourses

By way of complementing my above exploration, in what follows I examine self-references in Pāli discourses (and their parallels from other reciter lineages) from the perspective of potential modes of reading such self-references as involving some form of an infinite regress. A

convenient starting point would be a survey of relevant instances offered by O'Neill (2020: 53f) in the context of a study of self-references in Mahāyāna *sūtra* literature.

A very interesting example noted by O'Neill (2020: 54) is “that of the monk Piṅgiya proclaiming in the *Pārāyanavagga* of the *Suttanipāta* that ‘I shall recite the “*pārāyana*.”’ Here, by *pārāyana*, it seems clear that he is referring to the *vagga* within which he is depicted.”³⁷ This reference could be read as involving an infinite regress, with Piṅgiya’s recitation including his announcement of his recitation of the *Pārāyana-vagga* that includes his announcement of his recitation of the *Pārāyana-vagga*, and so on.

The Pāli commentary, however, reads Piṅgiya’s reference in a straightforward manner that leaves no scope for it being perceived as involving an infinite loop.³⁸ At least from the perspective of the commentators, exemplifying how later tradition would perceive such a passage, the idea is clearly that Piṅgiya announces his recitation of what the Buddha had taught in the *Pārāyana-vagga*, rather than announcing a recitation of the *Pārāyana-vagga* in its full form that includes the very announcement by Piṅgiya. The commentarial attitude concords with the impression derived from the above survey of some of the relevant cases in Mahāyāna *sūtras*, in that a literal reading of such self-references is not necessarily the only possible one that must have been adopted by members of the respective traditions.

Now, the present case differs from the instances of an infinite loop mentioned above. Although I am not aware of a formal definition of the infinite loop as a literary device, the examples surveyed above give the impression that this should involve a tale from the past that is embedded in a story situated in the narrative present, with the former tale referencing the text in which the latter story occurs. The above instance from the *Pārāyana-vagga* clearly falls short of conforming to this model. Nevertheless, on adopting a literal reading, Piṅgiya’s announcement could still be read in a way that would fit the illustrations of Escher’s hands and the Klein bottle.

In fact, the type of reading that results in a situation comparable to Escher’s hand has already been applied to Mahāyāna *sūtras* that do not conform to the above parameters of the infinite loop or even involve an obvious instance of infinite regress. Cole (2005: 54) relates Escher’s

hands to an episode in the first chapter of the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka*, in which the Buddha precedes his act of preaching with the performance of a light miracle, with Mañjuśrī revealing that such a light display is a standard occurrence on such occasions.³⁹ Due to being part of a standard pattern, the episode seems to him “timeless and always-already achieved,” which for him then results in “an impossible kind of Escher hand-drawing-hand situation,” in the sense that “the narrative wants to be timeless and uncreated.”

Perhaps this episode could alternatively be read as a particular application of the notion of *dharmatā* in relation to Buddhas, a topic to which I will return later, in the sense that certain actions are the norm or tradition for Buddhas. Such a reading would not result in an impossibility comparable to Escher’s hands drawing each other. In fact, from the viewpoint of a cyclic perspective on time that is relevant to the ancient Indian setting, the proposal of a norm or tradition repeated time and again does not necessarily imply an advocacy of being timeless, let alone uncreated. An example in case would be a narrative that serves to articulate the need to maintain the teaching tradition started by Śākyamuni. This narrative presents a succession of 84,000 glorious kings of the past succeeding each other in governing and living their exceedingly long lives according to exactly the same norm or tradition.⁴⁰ Yet, this norm or tradition was not perceived as uncreated or even as timeless, as it features as something instituted by the first of these kings, unsurprisingly a past life of Śākyamuni, and eventually it comes to an end. The trope under discussion from the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka* may have been perceived similarly in ancient times. Once again, without denying the possibility of reading it as timeless or uncreated from a contemporary Western perspective, this does not automatically transfer to the function of this trope in its ancient setting.

Cole (2005: 165) applies the same comparison with Escher’s hands also to a passage in the *Vajracchedikā Prajñāpāramitā*, according to which all Buddhas emerge from this text,⁴¹ which he understands to convey that “what is coming out of the text is a buddha who explains that buddhas come out of this text, and yet this very explanation *is the text*, which goes on to claim the Buddha as its descendant.” In this way, “authority is in an impossible circle of self-production.” Perhaps a simpler reading of this passage could just take it as an articulation of the well-known motif of *Prajñāpāramitā* as the mother of Buddhas.⁴²

At any rate, what matters for my present exploration is that these two instances taken up by Alan Cole from the *Saddharmapundarīka* and the *Vajracchedikā Prajñāpāramitā* extend the possibility of reading a particular episode as involving a situation comparable to Escher's hands beyond those that fulfill the apparent criteria for being an infinite loop. It follows that the example provided by the *Pārāyana-vagga* is relevant to the general topic of readings that appear to result in a situation similar to two hands drawing each other.

Another example of a similar type, albeit without a name given to the relevant text, has as its narrative setting the Buddha reciting a doctrinal exposition by himself while in seclusion. When he realizes that a monk has been overhearing his recitation, he tells the latter to remember this *dhammapariyāya*.⁴³ The commentary takes this quite straightforwardly,⁴⁴ rather than perceiving it to imply that the monk is being told to remember the report of his own overhearing, in which he is told to remember the report of his own overhearing, in which he is told to remember the report of his own overhearing, etc.

A particularly significant example has already been mentioned by O'Neill (2020: 53), in that "the *Saṅgīti sutta* contains a list of things proclaimed by the Buddha, regarding which the sutta depicts the Buddha as saying, 'it is to be recited by all.'" This discourse, which actually has Sāriputta as its speaker,⁴⁵ takes its title from the notion of "communal recitation" (*saṅgīti*),⁴⁶ in the sense of being meant for group recitation by the assembled monastics as an expression of harmony and concord. The discourse works its way through various items or teachings assembled according to a numerical scaffolding that proceeds from Ones to Tens, similar in this respect to the organizational principle adopted for the *Aṅguttara-nikāya* and *Ekottarika-āgama* collections.⁴⁷

In the Pāli version, Sāriputta introduces the actual exposition by instructing the listening monastics that they should all recite it together, without disagreement.⁴⁸ The positioning of this injunction shows that it is more than just a reference to a subsection to be recited, as it much rather calls for a recitation of the whole discourse. He then repeats this injunction before expounding the actual teachings under each of the categories to be treated in this way, from the Ones to the Tens. In the case of the Ones, the same injunction thus occurs twice in close proximity, once for the whole discourse and then again just for the section on Ones.⁴⁹ The unavoidable result of this procedure is that Sāriputta's injunction becomes an integral part of what should be recited together. This could

be read as a form of infinite regress: Sāriputta calls for a group recitation of what comprises his instruction calling for a group recitation of what comprises his instruction calling for a group recitation ... and so on.

The Pāli commentary takes up individual terms used in this injunction by Sāriputta in a way that implies a straightforward reading, rather than any perception of an infinite regress.⁵⁰ In other words, it seems as if, at least from the perspective of Theravāda commentators, this mode of presentation was not experienced as involving a feature somehow problematic and in need of explanation.

One of the two extant Chinese parallels, found in the *Dīrgha-āgama*, adopts a similar pattern, with the minor difference that the injunction relevant for each individual section comes at its respective end.⁵¹ Here, too, Sāriputta's injunctions could be read as an infinite regress. In the case of Sanskrit fragments of a version of this discourse,⁵² a work of the Sarvāstivāda Abhidharma, the *Saṅgītiparyāya*, has preserved a version of the same discourse embedded in its respective commentary. The *Saṅgītiparyāya* also fails to identify or problematize the possibility of an infinite regress resulting from Sāriputta calling for a group recitation of what includes his call for a group recitation.⁵³ Since it is the task of the commentators to clarify anything experienced as unusual or even problematic, the present instance is suggestive, even though not fully conclusive due to the general limitations of evidence from absence. At least, however, it seems fair to propose that such injunctions may have been read in a less literal way by members of the tradition.

This impression finds further support on consulting the narrative setting of the *Saṅgīti-sutta*. According to this setting, the leader of the Jains had just passed away, and his followers were in discord, disputing with each other about the teachings of their master. In order to forestall something similar happening once the Buddha is no longer with them, Sāriputta presents the *Saṅgīti-sutta* as a means to establish harmony in the present and for the future, so that the holy life inaugurated by the Buddha will remain for a long time and benefit many sentient beings. The injunction by Sāriputta that the teachings in this discourse should be recited together and without disagreement is addressed to the monastics in his audience, but it could hardly be meant to be confined to them. For the *Saṅgīti-sutta* to perform its envisaged function of ensuring that the holy life inaugurated by the Buddha will remain for a long time and benefit many sentient beings, it would not suffice if just those who happen to be present during what features as Sāriputta's original delivery of the

discourse follow his invitation. Instead, his injunction must be meant to initiate an ongoing practice of communal recitation rather than a one-time event taking place in his presence.

The overarching purpose the *Saṅgīti-sutta* is thus meant to fulfill would become jeopardized if the actual exposition were to incorporate a mode of presentation prone to arouse questions and doubts in its audience, be it its present audience or future ones. This is perhaps even more the case with this particular discourse than with other discourses, given its overall orientation toward the establishing and future maintenance of harmony and agreement. In view of this contextual setting, it seems improbable that the discourse would incorporate modes of presentation and formulation known among members of the tradition for their propensity to be perceived as problematic or unsettling.⁵⁴

Of relevance to the same topic is an identification by Weller (1928: 142f) of another aspect of the *Saṅgīti-sutta* that to him appeared incoherent. A statement in the final section of the discourse indicates that “this was said by the venerable Sāriputta,” which occurs after a passage that reports the Buddha endorsing the exposition by stating that Sāriputta had done well in teaching the *saṅgīti-pariyāya*.⁵⁵ On adopting a literal reading, the Buddha’s endorsement becomes part of what Sāriputta had said. This would only make sense if he were to be repeating to a different audience what happened at an earlier occasion when he originally delivered the *saṅgīti-pariyāya*, but such a reading would conflict with the introductory narration, which clearly concerns the occasion believed to have been the original delivery of the discourse.

The apparent incoherence could even be read as an infinite regress—although this is not suggested by Friedrich Weller—where Sāriputta reports the Buddha’s approval of the exposition of the *saṅgīti-pariyāya* by Sāriputta, which includes his report of the Buddha’s approval of his exposition, and so on. A solution emerges once the final part of the discourse is consulted to its full extent. After reporting that “this was said by the venerable Sāriputta,” the text continues by also reporting that the Buddha endorsed it and that the monastics rejoiced in it.⁵⁶ The whole procedure adopted at the closure of the discourse is thus like this:

- 1) Sāriputta concludes with a last exhortation to recite together.
- 2) The Buddha expresses his approval.
- 3) Report that this was said by the venerable Sāriputta.
- 4) Report that the Buddha approved it.

Now, proceeding from the second to the third part can indeed create the impression of some conceptual difficulty or even incoherence. Yet, considered within its wider context, a different way of reading emerges which acknowledges that the indication that “this was said by the venerable Sāriputta” (3) is part of a recapitulation. On this reading, the third part is intended to denote merely the part before the Buddha’s endorsement. Otherwise, there would have been no need to refer explicitly to that endorsement again in this recapitulation (4). The point appears to be that both together—the teaching by Sāriputta and the Buddha’s endorsement—led in combination to the delighted reaction of the audience. This case shows that the type of literal reading that can lead to an infinite regress or the identification of an internal incoherence is not the only one and at times even not necessarily the most compelling one.

Besides indicating that already among Pāli discourses passages can be found that can be read as involving an infinite regress, the same *Saṅgīti-sutta* also appears to be a case of textual self-promotion. In what follows I briefly depart from my main topic of the hermeneutical gap—in particular in relation to adopting readings that result in an infinite regress—by pursuing the topic of self-promotion, so as to contextualize the role taken in this respect by the *Saṅgīti-sutta*.

When instructing the listening monastics that they should all recite together what he is about to expound, Sāriputta explains that this is for the sake of ensuring the longevity of the tradition inaugurated by the Buddha and for the welfare of the world.⁵⁷ This touches on the powerful trope of the decline of the Dharma as a way of motivating the members of his audience to put into practice his injunction and thereby ensure the transmission of the *Saṅgīti-sutta* to future generations. As suggested above, the injunction to recite together must be comprising future generations of disciples.

Reaching out to communicate to audiences of a discourse beyond those present on the occasion of delivery is not an unusual feature as such. The standard formulation to introduce any such discourse as “thus have I heard” clearly has the function of informing future audiences of the authenticity of what is to follow, by claiming to be a faithful reproduction by the respective reciters of the oral transmission of the text in question.⁵⁸ The powerful effect of this authentication device is quite evident in the continued use of the same formula even for Pāli texts that must have come into existence in the written medium.⁵⁹ Elements of interaction with future audiences continue with various indications

regarding narrative denouements and the identity of the speaker(s), all of which are provided by the reciters to facilitate the comprehension of future audiences. The role of the reciters in this respect is not confined to innocent supplementation of information required for contextualization but can occasionally also take the form of conveying an evaluation or even promoting a particular perspective.

A remarkable instance of the latter type can be found in the *Bakkula-sutta* and its *Madhyama-āgama* parallel. The two parallels feature as their main speaker an arahant who, in a series of statements, highlights certain qualities of himself. Several of these qualities involve to some extent a departure from the way arahants are depicted elsewhere in *Āgama* literature, moving more in line with ascetic values ostensibly esteemed in the general ancient Indian setting.⁶⁰ Both versions implicitly place this particular articulation of a more ascetic, and even to some extent asocial, arahant ideal at several decades after the Buddha's death by indicating that, at the time of the discourse's delivery, this arahant had been a Buddhist monk for eighty years, and thus of course much longer than the entire time span of the Buddha's ministry.⁶¹ In other words, even if he ordained soon after the Buddha started to teach, the latter's final Nirvana should still be considered to have occurred long before the time of this discourse.

The feature of the discourse particularly relevant to my present concerns is that the reciters follow their report of each quality by declaring that they reckon (Chinese) or else keep it in mind (Pāli) as a wonderful and marvelous quality of the monk in question.⁶² In this way, based on being invested with the authority of Dharma teachers who have memorized the respective discourse collections, the reciters express a highly positive evaluation of what, on its own, need not necessarily call up inspiration.⁶³ This feature of the *Bakkula-sutta* and its *Madhyama-āgama* parallel reflects a fairly up-front attempt by the reciters to promote the arahant ideal articulated in the discourse in order to facilitate its spread and acceptance among their audiences.

Turning to the threat posed by the decline of the Dharma that forms a central point of reference in the *Saṅgīti-sutta*, this threat comes up as the main topic of two consecutive Pāli discourses that list the conditions conducive to such decline.⁶⁴ One set of five conditions includes not listening to, not learning, and not remembering the teachings carefully.⁶⁵ Another set of five conditions includes, besides again not learning the teachings, the problems of not teaching them in detail, not getting others

to recite them in detail, and not rehearsing them oneself in detail.⁶⁶ These are the activities required to keep an oral transmission alive. Since such causes for decline and the opposite activities that prevent decline make up the whole body of these discourses, it seems fair to propose that promotional concerns are a fairly central element in each.

Although in these cases such promotional concerns are directed toward the whole body of teachings available at that time, the Dharma, another discourse exhibits similar concerns in relation to teachings on emptiness in particular. The Buddha reveals that in future times monastics will not be keen on the profound teachings given by him that are connected to emptiness and will not learn and transmit them. This dire scenario then motivates him to tell the monastics present on this occasion that they should make an effort to learn and transmit such teachings.⁶⁷ The Pāli and Chinese versions of the discourse under discussion agree in quite explicitly warning of the future danger that the discourses related to emptiness will disappear.⁶⁸ A lack of interest in discourses related to emptiness indeed manifests in another discourse, which reports a group of lay disciples visiting the Buddha and requesting a teaching from him. The Buddha encourages them to engage with his profound discourses related to emptiness.⁶⁹ Yet, the leader of the group finds this too challenging a task for them and instead requests a teaching that takes as its starting point the condition of being established in keeping the five precepts, a request that the Buddha of course obliges.⁷⁰

These discourses reflect a concern with the promotion of a particular body of teachings, namely those related to emptiness. In the first case, the attempt to motivate monastics to engage in ensuring the textual transmission of such teachings makes up the whole discourse, so that this instance could be considered as being predominantly dedicated to promotional purposes. In the second case, the attempt is merely to arouse an interest in such teachings, but this attempt does not meet with success.⁷¹

The above instances go to show that promotional attempts are not confined to early Mahāyāna *sūtras*, as these can also be found among Pāli discourses. Although these instances do not employ the hyperbole with which some early Mahāyāna *sūtras* articulate textual promotion, the fact remains that a concern with such textual promotion is found quite clearly in the *Saṅgīti-sutta*, as well as in other Pāli discourses, and the same *Saṅgīti-sutta* could also be read in a way that results in a form of infinite regress, which to a lesser degree also holds for other Pāli discourses.

The overall impression that emerges from surveying self-references in Pāli discourses is that there is some degree of similarity compared to early Mahāyāna *sūtra* literature in these respects, even though the latter of course has its own distinct characteristics and takes matters often much further.⁷² The above instances provide further support for the impression that passages, which when read literally can result in an infinite regress, may have been heard or read in different ways in ancient times. From the perspective of the hermeneutical gap that I am trying to draw attention to, the possibility of different readings needs to be kept in mind. Although a more literal reading that results in a situation comparable to Escher's hands is certainly a valid one from the viewpoint of a reader situated in the 20th or 21st century, this does not necessarily transfer to an attempt to understand what informed the composition, transmission, and engagement with the relevant texts in their ancient setting. In other words, some evidence from emic sources for the relevance of this particular reading mode already in ancient times would be required to bridge the hermeneutical gap.

Readings in the *Dīgha-nikāya*

In the present section of my exploration, I proceed from the above-discussed *Saṅgīti-sutta* to other discourses in the same collection, examined from the viewpoint of literary readings and the hermeneutical gap. A discourse to be taken up here and again in the next section of my exploration is the *Āṭānāṭiya-sutta*, which occurs in the *Dīgha-nikāya* directly before the *Saṅgīti-sutta*. The placing of these two discourses in such close proximity is quite apposite, as both texts offer a protective function to be accessed through their recital, which in the oral setting of course requires memorization and thereby implicitly serves to ensure their transmission. Whereas recital of the *Saṅgīti-sutta* protects against threats by disruptive humans from within the Buddhist community, recital of the *Āṭānāṭiya-sutta* protects against threats by disruptive non-humans from outside of the Buddhist community. In view of the pervasive importance of such protection against non-human threats in the ancient Indian setting and later Asian Buddhist traditions, at least from an emic perspective the latter discourse is probably just as significant as the former.

According to the narrative setting of the *Āṭānāṭiya-sutta*, the heavenly king Vessavaṇa visits the Buddha at night to share a set of protective verses that provide a safeguard to monks, nuns, male lay followers, and female lay followers against fierce *yakkhas/yakṣas*.⁷³ When the night is over,

the Buddha repeats the protective verses to the monks. The procedure of textual transmission depicted in this way features the Buddha seamlessly shifting from being the audience of Vessavaṇa's delivery of the verses to taking on the active role of passing on the same verses to his monks. With the overarching purpose of providing protection against *yakkhas/yakṣas*, the actual teaching in this long discourse is thus entirely given by Vessavaṇa, and the Buddha's role is mainly to act as a mouthpiece of the heavenly king and thereby grant endorsement.⁷⁴ Besides underlining the importance of the actual 'teaching' given in this discourse, this particular cast also provides an illustration of a general assessment provided by Harrison (2003: 126) that

even the Mainstream canons contained teachings believed to have been preached by deities, but nevertheless accepted as *buddhavacana*. This suggests that from the earliest times some practitioners experienced visions in which divinities appeared to them and conferred revelations on them (often in the hours just before dawn), and that these revelations were accepted positively by the tradition. What worked for Mainstream Buddhists could clearly work for Mahāyānists as well, and thus we find it attested in many Mahāyāna sources.

The role taken by the Buddha in the *Āṭānāṭiya-sutta* of repeating the teachings given by Vessavaṇa is clearly to ensure that these verses serve their protective role for any of his monks, nuns, male lay followers, and female lay followers. This aligns with the explicit indication provided in this respect by Vessavaṇa, even though, according to the report given in the discourse, the Buddha shares the verses only with the monks who happen to be in his presence at that moment.⁷⁵ That is, the monks who listen to the Buddha are implicitly expected to act subsequently as speakers in their own right, so as to pass on the protective verses to other disciples. The Pāli commentary provides practical recommendations for the recitation of this text,⁷⁶ clearly reflecting the expectation that the protective verses delivered by Vessavaṇa will continue to be recited by generation after generation of the Buddha's disciples.

The relevance and role of the *Āṭānāṭiya-sutta* that emerges in this way has not always met with the appreciation it deserves, such as, for example, by T. W. Rhys Davids (1843–1922). Exploring his take on this and other discourses in the *Dīgha-nikāya* provides an opportunity for highlighting other dimensions of the need to mind the hermeneutical gap that is my main topic. In the present case, premises held by 19th and early 20th century scholarship on Pāli discourses can differ substantially

from contemporary perspectives in Buddhist studies. This difference facilitates recognizing the problem of subjective assessments being projected onto ancient Buddhist texts.

Commenting on the *Āṭānāṭiya-sutta*, Rhys Davids (1903/1997: 219f) reasons that this discourse presents “a suggestive parallel to the method followed by the brahmins of adopting, one by one, popular faiths.” In this way, according to his assessment, the *Āṭānāṭiya-sutta* exemplifies how, even though “[t]he object was to reconcile the people to different ideas,” the result was rather that “the ideas of the people, thus admitted, as it were, by the back door, filled the whole mansion, and the ideas it was hoped they would accept were turned out into the desert, there ultimately to pass absolutely away.” The underlying assumption that the concerns evident in the *Āṭānāṭiya-sutta* are merely a deplorable, later tendency of accommodating popular faiths fails to do justice to the actual evidence we have. Be it textual or archeological, there is no firm basis for imagining an early and supposedly more genuine period of Buddhist thought and practice where such concerns were not yet present.

Another example along similar lines concerns the *Mahāpadāna-sutta*, which describes in detail the six Buddhas held by tradition to have been predecessors to Śākyamuni. Rhys Davids (1910: 1) offers the following assessment in his introduction to the English translation of this discourse:⁷⁷

We find in this tract the root of that Bīrana-weed which,⁷⁸ growing up along with the rest of Buddhism, went on spreading so luxuriantly that it gradually covered up much that was of value in the earlier teaching, and finally led to the downfall, in its home in India, of the ancient faith. The doctrine of the Bodhisatta ... drove out the doctrine of the Aryan Path. A gorgeous hierarchy of mythological wonder-workers filled men's mind, and the older system of self-training and self-control became forgotten. Even at its first appearance here the weed is not attractive. The craving for edification is more manifest in it than the desire for truth.

The hermeneutical gap in the present case probably does not require further comment, as the biased nature of the assessment is plainly evident. Now, my point in bringing up T. W. Rhys Davids is not to continue on the by now well-worn track of dwelling on his shortcomings. Instead, my aim in the present section is much rather to highlight how minding the hermeneutical gap can also take on a positive, constructive dimension. Once T. W. Rhys Davids is seen as a product of his time and comments like the present one as a token of a failure to distinguish between

subjective preferences and the actual evidence, there can perhaps be less of a felt need to reject him in toto. That is, setting aside comments like the one above, there may still be something worthwhile in some of his other observations, and this could even assist a literary reading of *Dīgha-nikāya* discourses. In fact, his identification of the *Mahāpadāna-sutta* as reflecting a significant stage in the development of the bodhisattva ideal as such appears to be right on the spot.⁷⁹ Moreover, Rhys Davids (1910: 1) continues right after the above extract by noting that this discourse presents

legends of six forerunners of the historical Buddha, each constructed ... in imitation of the then accepted beliefs as to the life of Gotama. So exactly do these six legends follow one pattern that it has been possible, without the omission of any detail, to arrange them in parallel columns. The main motive of this parallelism is revealed in the constantly repeated refrain Ayam ettha dhammatā: “That, in such a case, is the rule,” the Norm, the natural order of things, according to the reign of law in the moral and physical world. Precisely the same idea is emphasized in the doctrine of dependent origination, the *Paṭicca-samuppāda*.

This astute observation helps to explain why a ‘history’ of former Buddhas is not more realistic by way of introducing the kind of variations that can naturally be expected to have occurred with each of these Buddhas. In other words, in the background of the *Mahāpadāna-sutta* stands a different sense of reality, where a recurrence of exactly the same event or circumstance, rather than making the story less plausible, actually enhances its power to throw into relief the *dhammatā*, the natural order of things, a notion already mentioned above in relation to the interpretation by Alan Cole of an episode in the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka*.

Support for the proposed reading of the *Mahāpadāna-sutta* can be garnered from the Sanskrit parallel, which offers a description of Vipasyin’s father Bandhumat and then applies the term *dharmatā* to it. It follows that it is a natural order of things that Buddhas have a father by the name of Bandhumat. Yet, such a conclusion directly conflicts with a listing of the different names of each Buddha given in the same text.⁸⁰ In other words, it seems as if the importance of the notion of *dharmatā* misled the reciters of this version to apply it even where it was not warranted, with the result of creating an internal inconsistency. This supports the impression that T. W. Rhys Davids was again right on the spot with his above comment, even though that comes in close proximity to a dismissive evaluation of the bodhisattva ideal.

What emerges in this way is a significant dimension of my main concern with the hermeneutical gap, wherefore in what follows I provide more examples from various introductions by T. W. Rhys Davids to translations of other *Dīrgha-nikāya* discourses. My first example concerns the *Pāṭika-sutta*, whose narrative has as its basic plot a disciple of the Buddha who has faith in various other ascetics rather than in his own teacher. Rhys Davids (1921: 1) notes that one episode in the discourse describes “how a corpse gets slapped on the back, wakes up just long enough to let the cat out of the bag, and then falls back dead again,” a description he combines with some dismissive remarks on the low quality of the type of humor expressed with such a story.

The narrative context reports that the Buddha’s disciple considered a certain ascetic to be an arahant, yet the Buddha predicted that this ascetic would die within seven days and then be destined for a lowly rebirth. When the death occurs as predicted, the Buddha’s disciple approaches the corpse to receive confirmation about the lowly rebirth destiny. The corpse obliges by providing the required information. The *Dīrgha-āgama* parallel to this discourse agrees with the *Pāṭika-sutta* in presenting a report of a corpse that speaks and acts in a completely matter-of-fact manner.⁸¹

Now, in his introduction to the *Pāṭika-sutta*, Rhys Davids (1921: 1f) also offers the following observation:

The wonders in which the peoples of India, in the sixth century B.C., believed were not very different from those so easily, at the same period, believed in Europe. The mental attitude regarding them was, I venture to think, not at all the same. In the West ... the prevailing belief was that such wonders were the result of the interference of some deity suspending, or changing, the general law, the sequence of things that generally happened. In India ... the prevailing belief was that such wonders (whether worked by humans, gods, or animals) were in accordance with law. In a word, they were not miracles. There is a tendency to make little of this distinction, but it is really of vital importance.

The relevance of this observation to an assessment of the episode under discussion from the *Pāṭika-sutta* can be corroborated on consulting a tale from the Pāli *Vinaya* that also involves a corpse able to speak and act. The relevant case history reports a monk taking a rag cloth from a recently deceased corpse, presumably with the intention to make robes. The corpse protests, which the monk ignores. As he leaves with the cloth, the corpse gets up and follows him. When the monk enters his

hut and closes the door, the corpse falls to the ground there. The monk later reports what has happened to the Buddha, who clarifies that the taking of the cloth was not a case of theft. However, the event motivates the Buddha to pronounce a rule against taking rag cloth from a recently deceased corpse.

For this narrative to lead to the promulgation of a rule that makes such action an offence of wrong-doing (*dukkata*), it must have been perceived as something that not only actually happened but may well happen again, hence a need arises to regulate it. That is, as far as the setting in the *Vinaya* allows us to judge, the story was not experienced as some form of funny entertainment but much rather as an actual event that motivated the Buddha to clarify its legal repercussions and promulgate a rule applicable to this type of incident in the future, presumably so as to avoid the encumbrance caused by corpses lying around near the doors of monastic huts.

The narrative also provides information on what in the ancient Indian setting was understood to explain the abilities of the corpse. It reports that the *peta*, the spirit of the deceased, was still inhabiting the corpse.⁸² The commentary adds that it was precisely out of attachment to the cloth that the *peta* was still present.⁸³ According to the *Vinaya* report, it was the *peta* that made the corpse protest and eventually follow the monk, presumably in a desperate attempt to get the cloth back. The stipulation in the resultant ruling against taking rag cloth from a fresh corpse then ostensibly takes care of this matter, in the sense that the presence of the *peta* is no longer to be expected when the corpse has been dead for a while and has already started to rot.

The basic principle discerned by T. W. Rhys Davids seems to be once again right on the spot, even though he did not follow it through himself, which could have prevented him considering this tale in the *Pāṭika-sutta* to be making fun.⁸⁴ The *Vinaya* report makes it clear that the corpse is considered dead—otherwise the monk’s action of taking the cloth against the explicit wishes of its owner would have amounted to theft—yet, for it to speak and act was not perceived as a miracle but as something that is “in accordance with law.”

The present example shows again that the distinct sense of reality in the ancient Indian setting is of considerable importance and needs to be kept in mind when reading such episodes. Without intending to take the position that the *Pāṭika-sutta* may not also have entertaining

dimensions elsewhere, in its cultural setting the story of the speaking corpse would have been perceived as a report of something that can really happen. Similar to the *Vinaya* case, it may be the *peta* of the corpse that is responsible for the actions reported in the *Pāṭika-sutta*, with the difference that the question of attachment to some cloth is not relevant and, in this case, the *peta* would presumably have come back to this former body in time for the reported conversation to take place.

If, for the sake of simulating the emic perspective even just for a moment, the perception can be allowed that a corpse can talk and walk, it becomes evident right away that this episode in the *Pāṭika-sutta* need not be experienced by its target audiences as funny at all. Rather than being aimed at entertainment, it could have simply been seen to provide a factual confirmation of the correctness of the Buddha's prediction.

In a different context, Gethin (2006: 66) points out that when the Buddha functions as the narrator of a type of episode that conflicts with what seems plausible from a contemporary Western perspective, it needs to be kept in mind that "there would seem to be no a priori reason why we should assume that an ascetic wandering the plains of northern India in the fifth century B.C.E. should share the same common sense and notions of plausibility that modern scholars do." This neatly highlights the aspect of the hermeneutical gap that emerges with the above episode from the *Pāṭika-sutta* and the understandable but nevertheless not justified tendency to interpret it as being intended to make fun. Just to be clear, this is not meant in any way to inhibit the perception of fun of a contemporary reader on coming across this story.⁸⁵ The point is only that this effect does not automatically transfer to the ancient setting, in that what we find funny may have been perceived quite differently by the target audiences of the *Pāṭika-sutta*.

Another pointer to the need for adopting the appropriate reading emerges with the *Pāyāsi-sutta*, which features a Buddhist monk in debate with a materialist king. Rhys Davids (1910: 348) notes that the monk "is lavish in illustration, and tells a number of stories, some of them quite good, and all of them bearing more or less relation (usually less) to the particular point in dispute. They are sufficient, however, to throw dust into the eyes of Pāyāsi," the materialist king. This comment reflects the need to read such a discourse in light of the rules and patterns of ancient Indian debate, where the task is to reduce the other to silence through a quick and witty reply, quite independent of its actual informative value. Awareness of this background could have prevented Evans (2008) from

mistaking the discourse to imply that early Buddhist epistemology rejects empirical methods and the principle of falsifiability.⁸⁶ This exemplifies that neglecting to take into account the cultural and historical context can lead to a reading that fails to do justice to the text and its function in the setting in which it came into existence.

The need to adopt the adequate mode of reading can also be demonstrated in relation to a doctrinal topic. Rhys Davids (1899: xxvf) offers the following comment on the *Brahmajāla-sutta*: “The Suttanta sets out in sixty-two divisions various speculations or theories ... such theories are really derived from the hopes, the feelings, and the sensations arising from evanescent phenomena.”

Closer inspection shows that the *Brahmajāla-sutta* does not use the standard term for “view,” *diṭṭhi*, for its sixty-two divisions but much rather *vatthu*. The first such *vatthu* involves recollection of past lives for up to several hundred thousand births, leading to upholding the idea of eternalism.⁸⁷ The second *vatthu* involves recollection of past lives for up to 10 eons, leading to upholding the same idea of eternalism, and the third *vatthu* involves recollection of past lives for up to 40 eons, leading again to upholding eternalism. Clearly, these three *vatthus* lead to a single view, namely that of eternalism. This exemplifies that the concerns of the *Brahmajāla-sutta* are the respective “grounds”—to use the translation of *vatthu* employed by Rhys Davids (1899: 27)—that are responsible for the formation of a view. The discourse is not a doxographical survey of views but much rather a psychoanalysis of what leads to views. Its concerns are indeed to show how views “are really derived from the hopes, the feelings, and the sensations arising from evanescent phenomena.” This significant perspective has not always been recognized in later scholarship, a topic to which I return below.

Another early *Dīgha-nikāya* translator provides me with an additional example of the positive potential of minding the hermeneutical gap that has already emerged thus far. Franke (1913b) provides a detailed survey of the occurrence of concatenation among the discourses in this collection. Concatenation is one of several techniques employed in the oral transmission of texts for the purpose of facilitating accurate memorization and the performance of group recitation. It takes the form of ensuring the maintenance of a particular sequence of texts by placing in close proximity to each other those that share thematic or terminological similarities.⁸⁸ Since at this early stage in the history of Buddhist studies the dynamics of orality were not yet well understood,

finding such similarities leads Otto Franke to the conclusion that the *Dīgha-nikāya* is not a collection of records of individual teachings but much rather a book compiled by a single author.⁸⁹

Even though the proposed conclusions are incorrect, his actual findings are remarkable testimonies to concatenation.⁹⁰ Moreover, even the mistaken assumption of a single creative author for the collection led to interesting results, as in the course of trying to substantiate this assumption Franke (1913a) arrives at the correct conclusion that a central concern shared by most discourses in the *Dīgha-nikāya* is to place a spotlight on the Buddha in his role as the *tathāgata*.⁹¹ Once again, setting aside mistaken assessments that reflect the historical setting of the author, something of value can be found in the writings of these early scholars studying Pāli discourse literature. In this way, the survey in this part of my exploration will hopefully have brought out a positive aspect of minding the hermeneutical gap, showing that this is relevant not only to conducting research but also to the reception of research by others.

The Gap Widens

The above examples show that at least some degree of sensitivity for literary dimensions of the *Dīgha-nikāya* was already present among late 19th- and early 20th-century scholars. It is thus slightly unexpected to find Shaw (2021: 6) introduce her study of *Dīgha-nikāya* discourses with the assessment that in Buddhist studies “there is little or no examination of the literary content of texts or any appreciation that style may be a reflection of meaning.” A considerably more nuanced assessment has been provided by Gethin (2006: 64) in this way: “The scholarship concerned with the Pāli Nikāyas and early Buddhist thought has paid rather less attention to the mythic and narrative portions of early Buddhist literature than it has to, say, those portions concerned directly and explicitly with the classic teachings.” In other words, alongside an overall emphasis on the doctrinal dimensions there has also been, at least to some extent, a sensitivity for literary dimensions since the late 19th century, so that this much is not just an innovation of the 21st century.

Shaw (2021: 8) explains that her study of *Dīgha-nikāya* discourses reflects “a literary approach, as this is my academic background.” In other words, giving pride of place to such sensitivities can reasonably be expected to form a central concern in her publication, making it a convenient case for assessing how such concerns manifest in 21st-century

scholarship. The same holds for another publication by the same author, Shaw (2024), explicitly introduced as being on the same topic of literary dimensions of *Dīgha-nikāya* discourses.⁹²

In what follows, the purpose of examining these two publications is not merely to identify possible shortcomings but rather to illustrate a tendency toward a widening of the gap that is the main concern of the present article. In order to support this central point of my overall exploration, a close-up on selected errors, however tedious it may be at times, is an indispensable requirement.

A first example to be taken up is the following assessment by Shaw (2021: 228): “The *Āṭānātiya-sutta* is one of several in the *Dīghanikāya* that are explicit visualizations; it suggests that listeners imagine these supernatural beings.” This statement is puzzling, since no explicit or even implicit reference to the practice of visualization or imagination can be found in the *Āṭānātiya-sutta*.⁹³ The discourse begins by describing the Buddha staying at Mount Vulture Peak in Rājagaha,⁹⁴ where he is visited at night by the four heavenly kings together with a large host of *yakkhas* (etc.), following which the heavenly king Vessavaṇa broaches the topic of the potential threat posed by malevolent *yakkhas* and commends that the Buddha memorize protective verses.⁹⁵ These verses first express respect to the six former Buddhas and the present one and then describe the four directions ruled by each of the heavenly kings. The mode of description adopted here is not substantially different from the report of the discourse’s setting. If it were to be read as implying a form of visualization or a call for imagination, then the same would also need to be applied to the introductory narration, and from there to other introductory narrations of Pāli discourses. Such an interpretation would hardly be compelling.

The description completed, Vessavaṇa emphasizes that the verses’ protective powers hold for those who have learned them well, clearly intending oral memorization rather than some form of visualization or imagination, followed by offering a list of names to be invoked for help—names that of course need to be remembered—should some malevolent *yakkha* still be giving trouble. When the night is over, the Buddha repeats what Vessavaṇa had said and concludes by commending that his disciples memorize it.⁹⁶ From beginning to end, the *Āṭānātiya-sutta* is about oral ways of engaging with the text rather than about some form of visualization or imagination.

This is of course not to deny that in later times the same discourse may have been employed for visualization purposes, or to imply that such a form of employment is in some way inappropriate. Instructions on what indeed appears to involve an element of visualization can be found in the context of contemplation of a corpse in different stages of decay as a cultivation of the first *satipaṭṭhāna*,⁹⁷ showing that some form of visualization was part of the repertoire of early Buddhist meditation practice. The relevant instructions for each stage of decay of a corpse begin with the phrase *seyyathā pi passeyya*, “as if one were to see,” where a verb clearly expressing vision and standing in the optative mode does suggest visualization or visual recollection. No such instructions are found in the *Āṭānāṭiya-sutta*. For a proper understanding of cultic practices related to the *Āṭānāṭiya-sutta*, it is necessary to distinguish between their different historical layers. Conflating these will hinder rather than further our understanding of these practices and our appreciation of the significance of the discourse.⁹⁸

The problem in the background of the above case appears to be a less than close reading of the relevant textual evidence. This impression finds corroboration in what is in itself only a very minor error, when Shaw (2021: 51) asserts that “[i]n the *Dīghanikāya* ... only two suttas (D 22, D 30) have no obvious prompt.” This overlooks the cases of the *Cakkavatti-sutta* (DN 26) and the *Dasuttara-sutta* (DN 34),⁹⁹ which also have no obvious prompt. The point of noting this error is that, with only 34 discourses found in the *Dīgha-nikāya*, it takes only a few minutes to glance briefly at the introductory section of each in order to assess how many of these indeed come without prompt.

The same pattern can be also seen at work when Shaw (2021: 164) reports on an episode in the *Mahāparinibbāna-sutta* that “King Ajātasattu ... sends a messenger to the Buddha, saying that he will follow whatever advice the Buddha gives.”¹⁰⁰ The relevant passage has no reference at all to following the Buddha’s advice.¹⁰¹ Again, in a comment on the *Kevaddha-sutta* Shaw (2021: 61) relates that “Kevaddha reports back on his visits to the meditative heavens, where his pressing questions were not answered.” Kevaddha is the name of a householder, *gahapati*, to whom the Buddha narrates the event in question. The one who visits the heavenly realms to receive an answer to a question is rather an unnamed monk. Moreover, this monk does not report back on his visits but simply repeats in the presence of the Buddha the same question he has asked earlier in different heavenly realms.¹⁰² Still another example is when Shaw (2021: 102) comments on the *Pāyāsi-sutta* that it “tells a story of a

lion who surveyed the four quarters and is compared to the Buddha.” No lion features in this discourse, and the reference appears to be due to a conflation with the *Pāṭika-sutta*, although even in the latter case the lion is not compared to the Buddha.¹⁰³

An example of the same pattern in the second of the above-mentioned two publications manifests when Shaw (2024: 173) refers to “the recollection of the Buddha ... taught as a meditation practice to a particular querent. Sāriputta delivers it once in this way (DN 3.228). But in the *Dīghanikāya*, it is given as an instruction for meditation by the Buddha only once, in the *Mahāparinibbāna-Sutta*.” Both instances are not about instructions on recollecting the Buddha—nor is the former instance, found in the *Saṅgīti-sutta*, related to a “particular querent”—as both passages much rather describe the experiential confidence (*aveccappasāda*) of a stream-enterer; this much is fairly evident from the formulation adopted, which differs from instructions on recollection.¹⁰⁴

Shaw (2021: 109) also does not recognize that the concerns of the *Brahmajāla-sutta* are not doxographical, evident in the assessment that in this discourse “the Buddha describes most of the worldviews possible at that time—sixty-two in all.” In one instance, Shaw (2021: 44) then increases the discourse’s comprehensive coverage by augmenting the number of supposed views from sixty-two to sixty-four, referring to the *Brahmajāla-sutta* as a “heavenly net of views, with its sixty-four possibilities.”¹⁰⁵ The same assessment but with the correct number recurs in Shaw (2024: 174), in the form of referring to the *Brahmajāla-sutta* as an exposition that “delineates the sixty-two kinds of wrong views that are possible for one who has become enmeshed in what it effectively describes as a net: the net of views.”

This mistaken premise appears to have led to further unclarities regarding the import of this discourse, evident when Shaw (2024: 175) reasons that “[t]he listener is invited to become intellectually and emotionally convinced by the internal logic of each view”.¹⁰⁶ This would be the exact opposite of what the discourse appears to be trying to achieve, which is rather to become intellectually and emotionally *dissatisfied* with any of the views. An example illustrative of the untenability of the proposed interpretation would be the four grounds related to taking up a position of equivocation. The first three of these grounds depict someone unable to distinguish what is wholesome from what is unwholesome, hardly an inviting qualification for any Buddhist disciple listening to the discourse, and the fourth ground quite explicitly presents the proponent

of equivocation as confused and stupid.¹⁰⁷ There is simply no way of reading this as involving an internal logic aimed at the listener becoming intellectually and emotionally convinced. In other words, the proposed interpretation must have been articulated without attempting to check if it actually fits the discourse.

The same failure to understand the *Brahmajāla-sutta* also affects the contrast reportedly drawn in the discourse by the Buddha between the surveyed standpoints for views and his own realization of dharma being profound, difficult to see and realize, and also “peaceful and sublime.”¹⁰⁸ Shaw (2024: 179) takes this to imply that “there is a place that is ‘peaceful and sublime’ in the midst of the net.” The description rather concerns the type of realization that leads beyond the net of views.¹⁰⁹ The Buddha’s transcendence comes up again at the end of the *Brahmajāla-sutta*, where his condition of having cut the link to becoming (*bhavanetti*) finds illustration in a bunch of mangoes whose stalk has been cut off.¹¹⁰ Shaw (2024: 180) understands this to convey that the Buddha “is like a mango, uprooted from the tree, who will die soon,” followed by giving a reference to “his death, that will transcend the unanswerable questions.” The simile is not about a single mango that will die soon, and the unanswerable questions have already been transcended by the Buddha while still alive.¹¹¹

Evidence for a less than careful reading emerges not just in relation to the discourses in the *Dīgha-nikāya* but also with relevant writings by other scholars. Referencing Allon (1997: 360), Shaw (2024: 170) affirms that “87 percent of Buddhist suttas are repetitions, in some form.” The relevant research conclusions, however, concern just the *Udumbarikasāhanāda-sutta* (DN 25),¹¹² rather than being an assessment of Buddhist *suttas* (plural) in general. In fact, the discourses in general can vary considerably in the degree to which they employ repetition, making it fairly obvious that they could not all feature the same degree of repetition. The above misunderstanding may be the result of a too cursory consultation of Allon (1997), whose research falls into three parts, each of which has its own conclusions.¹¹³ The first two parts are of a more general scope, and it is only the third part that concerns just a single discourse, the *Udumbarikasāhanāda-sutta*. Since the statement regarding 87% repetition occurs in this last of the three conclusions, on a quick glance it could be mistaken to present a conclusion relevant to the entire study and thus to Pāli discourses in general.

A similar issue with scholarly writings manifests with the statement by Shaw (2024:179) that “Anālayo has suggested the *Brahmajāla* could have been recited in phases over several days (2007[b]). Cousins suggested nighttime recitation for *Dīghanikāya* suttas (1983).” The only relevant reference in the latter case appears to be when Cousins (1983: 4) reasons that a distinction based on textual length, such as the one that sets apart the *Dīgha-nikāya* from the *Majjhima-nikāya*, may be informed by practical purposes, in the sense that “[o]ne length would be appropriate for an *uposatha* day or for the occasion of some *saṅgha* meeting. Another length would perhaps be more suitable for an evening event.” Now, the evening is usually considered to be still part of the day, before the onset of nighttime. Moreover, the quoted suggestion does not establish a relationship to the *Dīgha-nikāya*, and it would just as well be possible to interpret it to intend that discourses of the *Majjhima-nikāya* are the suitable choice for an evening event. This seems in fact to be the more probable interpretation, given that an evening event can be expected to be shorter and less ceremonial than an observance day, making a *Dīgha-nikāya* discourse perhaps more appropriate to the latter occasion.¹¹⁴

In the case of the reference to my own writing, Anālayo (2007b) mentions the *Brahmajāla-sutta* only once, and this concerns Citta, the householder, mentioning this discourse in a query he poses to monks.¹¹⁵ The same article also does not cover the idea of recitation in phases over several days. However, it does refer to nighttime recitation, although without relating this to the *Dīgha-nikāya* (or any other collection) in particular.¹¹⁶ This leaves open the possibility that the reference to nighttime recitation in my article may have become confounded with the mention of an evening event in the article by Lance Cousins.

The topic of reciting the *Brahmajāla-sutta* comes up in another publication of mine, in the context of discussing the relationship between the two parts of the standard opening of discourses, “thus have I heard” and “at one time.” In support of seeing the latter as related to ensuing indications regarding the location at which the discourse was believed to have originated, rather than qualifying the previously mentioned act of hearing, I reason that “[i]n the case of a long discourse like the *Brahmajāla*, it seems highly improbable that an average reciter heard the discourse only at *one* time, simply because it requires more than one hearing to be able to learn such a complex discourse in an oral setting.”¹¹⁷ It is possible that this remark has been misunderstood to intend piecemeal recital of the discourse “in phases over several days,” even though the proposal

is rather for the discourse to be heard in its entirety more than once.¹¹⁸ The apparent misunderstanding may then have been misattributed to Anālayo (2007b), leading to the above statement.

Independent of whether my attempts at reconstruction are correct in all their details, the instances surveyed above testify to a willingness to make assertions based on more or less hazy memories that to all appearances are viewed as not requiring an attempt at verification—be it consultation of the relevant discourse passage, such as the mango simile in the *Brahmajāla-sutta*, or the referenced publication—as long as, or perhaps precisely because, the memories feel subjectively true.

What emerges from this situation in terms of my main topic is that the gap I have been trying to draw attention to substantially increases. Whereas with the earlier discussed instances the problem was mainly a matter of interpretation, where subjective evaluation can obfuscate that different modes of reading and perceiving may have been operative in the ancient setting, with the present set of problems the text itself threatens to disappear from sight. Its individual features are no longer fully evident. The in itself praiseworthy aspiration to articulate literary concerns apparently becomes so overwhelming as to lead to a celebration of subjectivity that does not leave enough room for paying attention to the studied texts themselves.

Now, just as in the case of T. W. Rhys Davids, the purpose of highlighting the above problems is not to dwell on shortcomings. In fact, all of us sometimes make errors. Moreover, besides such problems, both Shaw (2021) and (2024) offer several interesting perspectives and insights. The issue is only that any of these requires first performing a fact-check. This situation appears to be the result of an overemphasis on subjective interpretations and impressions, at the expense of a close consultation of the actual texts or relevant publications.

The problems that materialize in this way call for monitoring a concern with the literary in order to avoid that it goes overboard to the extent of obscuring the very text whose literary dimensions are to be explored. In other words, the danger appears to be that a promotion of literary concerns shades into mere carelessness.¹¹⁹ This apparent tendency could be counterbalanced by granting more time and care to reading the texts closely in the first place, which can combine with returning to them again once our study has been completed. The first aspect would be in line with a recommendation reportedly given by the late Luis Gómez—a scholar

known for his appreciation of literary dimensions of Buddhist texts—in that “one ought to linger on the surface of the text before jumping into this or that interpretive paradigm.”¹²⁰

Conclusion

The interesting proposal that at times early Mahāyāna *sūtras* involve what in the context of theatrical performance is called a breaking of the fourth wall could be an instance relevant to minding the hermeneutical gap, in the sense that it is not always self-evident whether such *sūtras* come with a fourth wall in the first place. Although the idea of breaking the fourth wall can function as a valid description of the effect of such passages from the viewpoint of a Western reader in the 20th or 21st century, it seems that ancient Buddhist readers may have approached such episodes as real rather than as fiction. In this case, the basic setting of such teachings would not be readily comparable to the theater. The problem that arises in this way is that the proposed analogy risks concealing the reality with which several such episodes would probably have been invested in the ancient setting.

A related perspective may well hold for instances of self-reference that at times can give the impression of involving an infinite regress. Here, too, although offering a valid description of contemporary readings of such passages, it is not clear how far such an impression concords with how the ancient audiences perceived them. Despite a marked tendency toward literalism evident in the various Buddhist traditions, the possibility needs to be taken into account that such passages were not heard or read in a literal manner that will then result in some form of an infinite regress. The problem of adopting a reading resulting in an infinite loop is that it may prevent a full appreciation of the function of the relevant episode in the ancient setting to inspire and authenticate, rather than to raise doubts and disorient.

The same principle of keeping in mind the cultural and historical situatedness of a particular text can also be employed in relation to the writings of late 19th- and early 20th-century scholarship on Pāli discourses. Setting aside unwarranted projections and biases as a reflection of such situatedness facilitates taking advantage of whatever else such writings may have to offer. In this case, a potential problem would be missing out on relevant indications due to setting aside too easily what in other respects conflicts with contemporary perspectives.

In relation to 21st-century scholarship concerned with Pāli discourses, a clear awareness of the gap that has been the main topic of this article can perhaps help to encourage a return to the actual textual evidence for a fact check, be this of our own interpretations or of those proposed by others. In this way, it would be possible to arrive at solid assessments that indeed further our appreciation of the literary dimensions of ancient Buddhist literature.

In sum, perhaps in these complementary ways minding the hermeneutical gap can contribute to the task delineated by Hallisey (1995: 52f) of needing “to avoid the mistakes of our predecessors in the study of Buddhism, who we can now see were too quick and too arrogant when they vouchsafed to themselves the right to speak *for* Buddhism.”

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Abbreviations

AN	<i>Aṅguttara-nikāya</i>
D	Derge edition
DĀ	<i>Dīrgha-āgama</i> (T 1)
DN	<i>Dīgha-nikāya</i>
EĀ	<i>Ekottarika-āgama</i> (T 125)
Jā	<i>Jātaka</i>
MĀ	<i>Madhyama-āgama</i> (T 26)
MN	<i>Majjhima-nikāya</i>
P	Peking edition
Pj II	<i>Paramatthajotikā</i>
Ps	<i>Papañcasūdanī</i>
PTS	Pali Text Society
SĀ	<i>Samyukta-āgama</i> (T 99)
SĀ ²	<i>Samyukta-āgama</i> (T 100)
SN	<i>Samyutta-nikāya</i>
Sn	<i>Sutta-nipāta</i>
Sp	<i>Samantapāsādikā</i>
Spk	<i>Sāratthappakāsinī</i>
Sv	<i>Sumaṅgalavilāsinī</i>
T	Taishō edition (Chinese Buddhist Electronic Text Association)
Ud	<i>Udāna</i>
Vin	<i>Vinaya</i>

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Notes

- 1 <https://www.britannica.com/art/literature>; July 2024.
- 2 SN 3.16 at SN I 86,13.
- 3 According to Shulman 2023: 5, in this episode the Buddha speaks “a verse with sexist undertones that suggests that good women may give birth to great kings.”
- 4 This is of course not to deny that several passages quite explicitly articulate derogatory evaluations of women and were quite probably understood as such in the ancient setting; for some examples see Anālayo 2016. But in the case of SN 3.16 the situation appears somewhat different.
- 5 Bhattacharji 1987: 55 presents the situation in India since later Vedic times in stark terms: “women had very little initiative or choice about their destiny. They were pawned, lost or gained in battles, given as gifts at sacrifices and weddings, were relegated to the position of slaves and chattel in palaces and rich households, sexually enjoyed whenever their owners so desired and discarded when the desire abated.”
- 6 For another narrative pointing to the same pattern see Anālayo 2022b: 49.
- 7 Spk I 155,¹⁰.
- 8 A critical perspective in this respect has already been articulated by Li 2023: 20, who observes that some “scholars have borrowed the dramatic term ‘breaking the fourth wall’ in the study of Mahāyāna sūtras to explain the phenomenon of jumping out of the story frame and engaging in dialogue with their readers or auditors in the real world,” yet, “is there really a phenomenon of ‘breaking the fourth wall’ in the so-called ‘self-referential’ paragraphs of SSS [= *Śūraṃgamasamādhi-sūtra*]?”
- 9 <https://www.britannica.com/art/fourth-wall> ; July 2024.
- 10 See also Radich 2025 (forthcoming).
- 11 Harrison 1990: 97n2 comments that the described scenario “constitutes an authentication device that both explains the sudden appearance of the *sūtra* in the world and vindicates those who champion it by identifying them with Bhadrāpāla and his 500 followers.” Wedemeyer 2021: 226 considers this reading to be “certainly plausible” but believes that “there is more to see than ‘legitimation’ of the authority of the scripture.” In the same vein, Wedemeyer 2021: 217 comments on a similar position taken by Peter Skilling regarding the concern with authentication in this *sūtra* that, while “this is one function of these literary devices, there is more at play here than mere assent to the validity of new revelations.”
- 12 T 418 at T XIII 911a²²: 時五百人從坐起—比丘, 比丘尼, 優婆塞, 優婆夷—皆叉手於佛前住白佛: 佛般泥洹後亂世時, 聞是三昧悉自持, 護願持, 我五百人囑累是八菩薩。
- 13 Wedemeyer 2021: 222, continues by noting that, nevertheless, “these works and their characters do make numerous references to their future readers/devotees.”
- 14 See Schopen 1987/2005, Fussman 1999: 541–543, and Acharya 2008/2010: 24–26.
- 15 Wedemeyer 2021: 231 acknowledges that “[t]here is no way of knowing, of course, what anyone in the period of the flourishing of the Mahāyāna in India ‘thought’ when they heard these sūtras; but I do believe the structure of the rhetoric is such that the implications I described above are at least plausibly an element in the semiological agenda of the nascent Mahāyāna,” followed by reaffirming that “[t]here is no way that I know of directly to corroborate what an auditor may have thought in first-millennium India, short of a commentary or similar record of historical readings.” Yet, I think evidence like the Govindnagar inscription does provide us with clear indications regarding attitudes held in ancient India, which does undermine the basic assumption of a fourth wall setting apart the protagonists and events in the **Pratyutpannasamādhi-sūtra* as fictional characters from the reality of their ancient Indian devotees.
- 16 See also Anālayo 2024: 35f.
- 17 For examples see Anālayo 2023: 5f.
- 18 Kern and Nanjio 1912: 407,6, D 113 *ja* 151a³ or P 781 *chu* 172b², T 262 at T IX 53b⁷, T 263 at T IX 125b¹⁶, and T 264 at T IX 188a¹⁵.

- 19 A relationship to the topic of the fourth wall can be seen reflected in the comment by O'Neill 2020: 53 that "in employing self-referentiality, Mahāyāna sutras 'break the fourth wall' of the situation they are attempting to represent." Harrison 2022: 656 relates the same more specifically to the infinite loop, whose "powerful combination of reassurance and disorientation arguably serves to break down the fourth wall and involve the audience in the drama, not as spectators of the grand quest for perfect awakening with its potentially infinite repetitions, but as participants in it."
- 20 Skjærvø 2004: 263 (13.32); also in Nobel 1937: 153,15.
- 21 The intended passage must be the one found in Kern and Nanjio 1912: 21,6, although in their edition the *nāma* is lacking. The other two instances mentioned by Harrison 2022: 654f are as follows: "In its extremely long Chapter 7, for example, the preaching of the SP [= *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka*] by the past Buddha Mahābhijñānābhībhū is also recalled, this lasting for 8,000 kalpas without interruption. This preaching was then carried on by 16 novices, each of them revealing the SP, and destined to become in their own turn Buddhas, including Amitāyus, Akṣobhya, and Śākyamuni himself. Indeed, the SP is repeatedly described as *sarvabuddhaparigraha*, the property or possession of all buddhas, implying that it could be taught by each and every awakened being throughout the ages, and by countless bodhisattvas as well. In Chapter 11, for instance, the bodhisattva Mañjuśrī arrives from the Nāgarāja Sāgara's palace, having taught the SP under the sea, after which Sāgara's eight-year-old daughter appears to rapidly achieve awakening, having had her spiritual progress accelerated by hearing the sūtra, confounding the conventional expectations of the assembly about the spiritual potential of women. This celebrated episode presents the same conceptual conundrum: what exactly was the SP which Mañjuśrī taught under the sea, if not the text which contained an eleventh chapter relating that teaching by Mañjuśrī and its consequences for the Nāga princess? And if the Nāga princess is propelled towards liberation by hearing a text which describes the Nāga princess being propelled towards liberation, then where does the recursion stop?"
- 22 Skilling 2024: 374 mentions an illustrative instance of the usage of the term, identified by Allon and Silverlock 2017: 37, where SN 55.8 at SN V 357,17+26 refers to itself as a *dharmapariyāya*, yet the same text recurs as part of DN 16 at DN II 93,11, with the identification as a *dharmapariyāya* similarly found at DN II 93,15 and 94,9. In this way, whereas the *dharmapariyāya* of SN 55.8 corresponds to the full teaching given by the Buddha in this discourse (except for the introductory narrative), in DN 16 the same *dharmapariyāya* is a very minor part of the whole discourse.
- 23 SN 46.56 at SN V 127,21: *ko nāmāyaṃ, bhante, dharmapariyāyo ti?*
- 24 Examples are DN 1 at DN I 46,20, DN 29 at DN III 141,20, MN 12 at MN I 83,23, MN 18 at MN I 114,14, MN 115 at MN III 67,26, and AN 5.50 at AN III 62,21 (with note 8).
- 25 SN 46.56 at SN V 127,22: *nīvaraṇā nāmete, rājakumārā ti.*
- 26 SN 46.56 at SN V 128,13: *ko nāmāyaṃ, bhante, dharmapariyāyo ti? bojjhaṅgā nāmete, rājakumārā ti.*
- 27 SĀ 711 at T II 190c27: 無畏白佛: 瞿曇, 當何名此經? 云何奉持? 佛告無畏王子: 當名此為覺支經。Here, 經 could in principle be a rendering of a reference in the original to *dharmapariyāya*; see Hirakawa 1997: 932 and for an example from the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka* Kern and Nanjio 1912: 297,10: *imaṃ dharmapariyāyaṃ*, in which case two of the three Chinese parallels refer to 此經; see T 262 at T IX 39c28 and T 264 at T IX 174a28.
- 28 Harrison 2022: 655 mentions "*Yogavāsiṣṭha*'s explorations of dreams within dreams" and "nested narratives, as in the Kṣāntivādin cycle in the form it is given in the *Kathāsaritsāgara*."
- 29 Poceski 2004: 346f explains: "A popular metaphor that exemplifies Huayan's notion of mutual interpenetration of all phenomena is that of Indra's net," thereby reflecting "an ingenious reworking of the central Buddhist doctrine of *pratītyasamutpāda* (dependent origination) ... each phenomenon is determining every other phenomenon, while it is also in turn being determined by each and every other phenomenon. All phenomena are thus interdependent" (the order of the quoted passages has been rearranged to fit the context better, which does not affect their respective implications).

- 30 Artwork by Valen Burke to illustrate the basic idea of two hands drawing each other, inspired by the original drawing by Maurits Cornelis Escher that, due to copyright restriction, is not available for reprint.
- 31 Harrison 2022: 656 explains that, with the infinite loop, “the text is not only a singular and bounded performance of a fixed quantity of words with a specific and self-contained message, but it is also everywhere and at all times, its each and every repetition pouring itself back into itself like a Klein bottle.”
- 32 Picture by Clifford Stoll, available on https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Acme_klein_bottle.jpg with the background changed to white.
- 33 In an assessment of literary strategies evident in some Mahāyāna *sūtras*, Cole 2005: 32 reasons that “the reader’s response is to be univocal: pure desire and devotion. Nothing less will do,” wherefore “there is never any dangerous language in the explanation of the text’s origins or its ability to deliver those origins to the reader.” This appears to be a central trajectory relevant also for the present episode in the *Suvarṇabhāsottama-sūtra*, confirming the impression that the introduction of an element prone to rouse doubts concerning the crucial event of King Susāmbhava’s hearing of the *sūtra* would run counter to what to all appearances the *sūtra* is trying to achieve.
- 34 T 418 at T XIII 915c11: 聞是三昧, 即受持是三昧, 見十方無央數佛, 悉從聞經, 悉受持。爾時, 諸佛悉語我言: 却後無央數劫, 汝當作佛名釋迦文。T 416 at T XIII 890c15 also refers to hearing this *samādhi*, 聞此三昧。
- 35 This would be in line with references to hearing this *samādhi* that then lead to either not writing it down, studying it, reciting it, and keeping it or else to undertaking these activities; see T 418 at T XIII 907a11: 是菩薩聞是三昧已, 不書, 不學, 不誦, 不持 and T XIII 908a5: 菩薩聞是三昧已, 書, 學, 誦, 持。For a discussion of the significance of *samādhi* in this type of context, based mainly on suggestions offered by Skilton 2002 and Harrison 2022, see Anālayo 2025b: 110–114.
- 36 The Tibetan version, Harrison 1978, 151,4 (17A), does not mention a hearing of this *samādhi* and instead describes obtaining it, *ting nge ’dzin ’di ’thob bo*. This confirms that the main message can be expressed just as well without a reference to hearing.
- 37 The reference is to Sn 1131.
- 38 Pj II 605,8: *anugāyissan ti bhagavatā gūṭaṃ anugāyissam*.
- 39 See also Leighton 2006: 23, who uses the same image of Escher’s hands to illustrate the self-referentiality of the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka*.
- 40 MN 83 at MN II 78,8, MĀ 67 at T I 514b5, and EĀ 50,4 at T II 809a22; see also D 1 *kha* 54b2 or P 1030 *ge* 50a6. In reference to the same episode in the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka*, Cole 2021: 162 comments that, “[i]n effect, Mañjuśrī is claiming that there is a reliable cosmic principle whereby one can expect that this magical display (A) will always be followed by a teaching of the *Lotus Sūtra* (B).” This seems to be indeed the case, although it is not clear to me how such a reliable cosmic principle resembles Escher’s hands.
- 41 With reference given to T 235 at T VIII 749b23: 一切諸佛, 及諸佛阿耨多羅三藐三菩提法, 皆從此經出。
- 42 For a survey of occurrences see, e.g., Radich 2015: 150f.
- 43 SN 12.45 at SN II 75,18 and again SN 35.113 at SN IV 91,8.
- 44 Spk II 75,17: *uggaṇhāhi ti ādisu sutvā tuṃhībhūto va paṇaṇaṃ karonto uggaṇhāhi nāma*.
- 45 The present is one of many instances in Āgama literature where disciples, including at times laity, give teachings. In view of that, it is not clear to me what Gummer 2012: 154 has in mind when suggesting that “the distinction between listening and speaking is arguably what distinguishes the Śrāvakayāna, the vehicle of the listeners, from the Mahāyāna, the great vehicle, the vehicle that promises to lead all beings to buddhahood. One of the key features that distinguishes a buddha from other awakened beings is the fact that he not only realizes the dharma himself, but also teaches it to others; he not only hears, but also speaks the transformative *sūtra*.”
- 46 Tilakaratne 2000; see also Salomon 2018: 296, who comments that the notion of *saṅgīti* as the title of this discourse and “as the purpose of its original recitation ... also became the model for the periodic communal recitations of the entire canon that took place

- immediately after the Buddha's death and then at various points in the later history of Buddhism ... recitations [that] are still known by the same term as the sūtra itself, *saṅgīti*." For a detailed discussion of DN 33 and its relationship to the first *saṅgīti* see also von Hinüber 2024: 12–17, who seems to be unaware of the above (and other relevant publications), as he takes the position that this relationship is hardly noted; see von Hinüber 2024: 16: "seltsamerweise dieser Zusammenhang kaum gesehen wird."
- 47 On the possibility that the two collections may have developed from assembling discourses under Ones to Tens to adding a section on Elevens see Anālayo 2013b: 37n109.
- 48 DN 33 at DN III 211,3: *sabbeh' eva saṅgāyitabbam, na vivaditabbam*. This appears to refer to one out of several different modalities of group recitation, where a single reciter acts as the speaker and the others express consent by remaining silent; see also Anālayo 2022a: 10.
- 49 DN 33 at DN III 211,3+17.
- 50 Sv III 974,30.
- 51 The first instruction occurs in DĀ 9 at T I 49c18: 諸比丘, 我等今者宜集法律, 以防諍訟 (the key terms being repeated for the case of the Ones at T I 49c22). The use of 集 in this instruction to designate the commended activity is not entirely straightforward. Nevertheless, the repeated employment of 當共撰集 in the remainder of the discourse (nine instances, preceded by one instance of 當共集) supports the impression that the overall idea is to perform a group recitation; see also Hirakawa 1997: 563 on 撰集. Moreover, in the title of DĀ 9 as 眾集經—just as in the title of the *Saṅgītiparyāya* as 阿毘達磨集異門足論—the character 集 must be rendering an Indic equivalent to *saṅgīti*. The other Chinese parallel is T 12.
- 52 Stache-Rosen 1968: 45,10: *vayaṃ sa(ṃ)hitāḥ samagrāḥ* *sa(ṃ)modamānā bh(ū)va saṃśayāya na vivā*dāmahe. Note that the reconstruction does not contain an explicit reference to performing a communal recitation.
- 53 The actual instruction in T 1536 at T XXVI 367b28 reads: 我等今應和合結集, 佛滅度後勿有乖諍.
- 54 Skilling 2024: 49 notes that "[t]he preamble to the canonical Buddhist *Saṅgītisūtras*—shared by the Pāli, Sanskrit, and Chinese versions—reflects the anxieties that arose within the Buddhist saṅgha when it witnessed the turmoil that unsettled the post-Mahāvīra Jains." With anxieties already present, it would make little sense to adopt a mode of presentation prone to increase these further.
- 55 DN 33 at DN III 271,17: *sādhū sādhū, sārīputta, sādhū kho tvaṃ, sārīputta, bhikkhūnaṃ saṅgītipariyāyaṃ abhāsī ti*.
- 56 DN 33 at DN III 271,19: *idaṃ avoca āyasmā sārīputto. samanūñño satthā ahoṣi. attamanā te bhikkhū āyasmato sārīputtassa bhāsitaṃ abhinandun ti*.
- 57 DN 33 at DN III 211,3: *yathayidaṃ brahmacariyaṃ addhaniyaṃ assa ciraṭṭhikaṃ, tad assa bahujaṇahitāya bahujaṇasukhāya lokānukampāya atthāya hitāya sukhāya devamanussānaṃ*. Similar concerns manifest in the parallels: Stache-Rosen 1968: 45,12: *yathedaṃ brahmacariyaṃ c(ira)sthi(tikaṃ syāt, tad bhaviṣṣa)ti bahujaṇahitāya bahujaṇasukhāya lokānu(kampāya)rthā(ya hitāya sukhāya devamanuṣṣāṇāṃ)*, and in DĀ 9 at T I 49c19: 使梵行久立, 多所饒益, 天人獲安.
- 58 On the formula itself see Anālayo 2014: 41–45.
- 59 See, e.g., the discussion in Norman 1994: 279 of so-called apocryphal Pāli texts: "[b]y title they are *suttas*; they have the standard canonical opening *evaṃ me sutam ekaṃ samayaṃ* ...; the narrative attributes their contents to the Buddha."
- 60 See in more detail Anālayo 2007a.
- 61 The commentary explicitly recognizes the relatively late nature of the discourse by allocating its inclusion in the textual collections to the second *saṅgīti*; see Ps IV 197,2.
- 62 The first instance of this repeated statement occurs in MN 124 at MN III 125,18: *yaṃ p' āyasmā bakkulo ... idaṃ pi mayaṃ āyasmato bakkulassa acchariyaṃ abbhutadhammaṃ dhārema* (the elided part mentions each quality) and MĀ 34 at T I 475b2: 若尊者薄拘羅作此說, 是謂尊者薄拘羅未曾有法; for another example of reciters voicing their opinion in a Pāli discourse see Anālayo 2011: 570f. The formulation employed in MN 124 recurs

in MN 123 at MN III 119,²² (etc.) to extoll extraordinary qualities of the Buddha, with the difference of being spoken by Ānanda rather than by unnamed reciters; see also AN 4.127 at AN II 130,¹⁹. Apparently taking MN 123 to be somewhat paradigmatic for the meaning of the term *abbhutadhamma*, von Hinüber 2024: 20 proposes that as an *aṅga* this could refer to texts that make statements about the life of the Buddha, “könnte sich *abbhutadhamma* auf Texte beziehen, die Aussagen über das Leben des Buddha machen.” Although it is possible that the evidently late MN 124 was modelled on the also quite probably late MN 123 (see Anālayo 2007a: 11f and 2010a: 30 respectively), the proposed understanding of *abbhutadhamma* would imply that the meaning of this *aṅga* was no longer understood already at the time of MN 124 coming into existence, hence the application of *abbhutadhamma* to qualities of a monk rather than to a statement about the life of the Buddha. The same problem becomes further exacerbated with other relevant occurrences. One of these concerns the marvelous quality of the Buddha’s celestial travels in SN 51.22 at SN V 283,6, which is not quite a statement about his life. Moreover, other references concern the marvelous qualities that emerge with people’s response to the Buddha’s teachings in AN 4.128 at AN II 131,²⁸; marvelous qualities of Ānanda in AN 4.129 at AN II 132,¹⁷ and the same in combination with marvelous qualities of a wheel-turning king in AN 4.130 at AN II 133,¹ (both combined = DN 16 at DN II 145,3); marvelous qualities of the lay disciple Nandamātā in AN 7.50 at AN IV 65,¹⁵; marvelous qualities of the ocean and of the *Dhammavinaya* in AN 8.19 at AN IV 198,³ and AN 8.20 at AN IV 206,¹⁸ (= Ud 5.5 at Ud 53,7); and marvelous qualities of the lay disciples Ugga of Vesālī and Ugga of Hatthigāma in AN 8.21 at AN IV 208,²¹ and AN 8.22 at AN IV 212,²⁰ respectively. None of these occurrences fits the idea of a statement about the life of the Buddha. Instead, the sense that emerges for *abbhutadhamma* is clearly that of a marvelous quality, a sense that also fits MN 123 and MN 124 equally well. This in turn gives the impression that the above proposal about *abbhutadhamma* as an *aṅga* may have been made without fully researching the actual usage of the relevant term in Pāli discourses, where its function to designate marvelous qualities of the ocean, for example, simply has no relation to the life of the Buddha. Now, as pointed out in Anālayo 2017a: 460, marvels as an *aṅga* hardly provide a meaningful reference point for creating some type of a textual collection. In other words, the sense of *abbhutadhamma* as a marvelous quality, evident from the above survey, conflicts with the attempt to interpret the *aṅgas* as a means for dividing and allocating the texts in circulation, advocated by von Hinüber 2024: 17ff, for which the idea of statements about the life of the Buddha would work somewhat better. This is relevant in turn to evaluating a reference in AN 5.194 at AN III 237,¹⁷, which mentions the first three *aṅgas* and then proceeds directly to *abbhutadhamma*, considered by von Hinüber 2024: 18 to reflect an early stage in a gradual evolution that eventually resulted in the list of nine *aṅgas*. As I noted in Anālayo 2017a: 457f and 461f, comparison with listings of *aṅgas* in other reciter traditions suggests that *abbhutadhamma* should be in the last place in the ninefold list, which makes it quite possible that its present position in Pāli listings as the penultimate member is a later development taking place at a time when there may have been less of a need to follow the principle of waxing syllables. From the perspective of the possibility that *abbhutadhamma* could have been in the last place of listings of *aṅgas* at an earlier time, the reference in AN 5.194 may just reflect the standard pattern of abbreviation by giving the first member(s) and then the last of a list. The same pattern is evident, as noted by von Hinüber 2024: 25, in the PTS edition of AN 4.191 at AN II 185,7, here in the form of giving just the first two items and ending on *vedalla*. However, this is then followed by shifting to just the first and last item, then none at all, and then just giving the first item. The Burmese, Ceylonese, and Siamese editions available to me do not abbreviate at all, so that this somewhat idiosyncratic pattern could be a specific and probably late feature of the PTS edition. AN 5.194, however, whose presentation has the support of the same three Asian editions, may reflect an earlier situation when the last member of the list would still have been *abbhutadhamma*. It is not quite correct by von Hinüber 2024: 25n55 to refer to Anālayo 2017a: 461–464 with the allegation that I reject his interpretation without entering into the topic of the traditional form of abbreviation,

“[o]hne auf die überlieferten Formen von Abkürzungen einzugehen.” This topic has been taken up by me in a way that I believe suffices for undermining his interpretation of AN 5.194. It may also be noted that an application of the principle of waxing syllables to subunits of a list is not necessarily a sign of later addition but a feature that may well have been present from the outset; see Anālayo 2017a: 476f for another example. In other words, the division of the nine *aṅgas* into three subunits according to the principle of waxing syllables, which works better with and thereby supports the suggested correction to the placing of marvels (see Anālayo 2017a: 458), does not imply that the full list must be the result of a gradual growth starting with the first three *aṅgas* as a supposedly earliest stage; on the unconvincing nature of this idea see also Anālayo 2025a: 292n2. This leaves no clear evidence among Pāli discourses and their parallels supportive of the scenario envisaged by von Hinüber 2024: 27f, according to which the second subunit (*gāthā*, *udāna*, and *itivuttaka*) would have been an alternative division of texts that originated in a different setting than the fourfold division supposedly evident in AN 5.194, with a subsequent combination of the two originally separate schemes then explaining the redundancy of *geyya* and *gāthā*, both of which are taken by him to refer equally to verses. In sum, the proposed evolution of the *aṅgas*, in the form envisaged by von Hinüber 2024 in the context of his interesting attempt to reconstruct the assembling and organizing of texts that led to the *Tipiṭaka* in the form now known to us, is in need of revision.

- 63 Lack of inspiration on just hearing about this arahant’s conduct finds explicit expression in the *Divyāvadāna*, Cowell and Neil 1886: 396,6.
- 64 The introductory line in AN 5.154 at AN III 176,16 and AN 5.155 at AN III 177,3 announce the topic as follows: *pañc’ime, bhikkhave, dhammā saddhammassa sammossāya antaradhānāya samvattanti*.
- 65 AN 5.154 at AN III 177,18: *na sakkaccaṃ dhammaṃ suṇanti, na sakkaccaṃ dhammaṃ pariāpuṇanti, na sakkaccaṃ dhammaṃ dhārenti*.
- 66 AN 5.155 at AN III 177,5: *dhammaṃ na pariāpuṇanti ... yathāsutaṃ yathāpariyattaṃ dhammaṃ na vitthārena paresaṃ desenti ... yathāsutaṃ yathāpariyattaṃ dhammaṃ na vitthārena paresaṃ vācenti ... yathāsutaṃ yathāpariyattaṃ dhammaṃ na vitthārena sajjhāyaṃ karonti*.
- 67 SN 20.7 at SN II 267,19 and SĀ 1258 at T II 345b20; see also Anālayo 2025c: 358n368.
- 68 SN 20.7 at SN II 267,15 and SĀ 1258 at T II 345b17.
- 69 SN 55.53 at SN V 407,10 (the relevant part in SĀ 1033 is unfortunately given in abbreviation).
- 70 Incidentally, this is one of several instances among early discourses that put into perspective the assessment by Cole 2021: 165 that “traditionally the Buddha was understood to be a sage who ... would never reformulate his message to fit his audience and their mental shortcomings.”
- 71 This is not the only instance where the Buddha is on record for being to all appearances unsuccessful in his attempts at inspiring lay disciples to engage in his more transformative teachings and meditation practices; for the case of Anāthapiṇḍika in particular see Anālayo 2010b: 10f.
- 72 Although O’Neill 2020: 44 holds that “structurally, among other things, the Mahāyāna literature differs from its non-Mahāyāna counterpart in the employment of self-referential passages,” it seems to me that the actual evidence points to at least some degree of similarity in this respect.
- 73 DN 32 at DN III 195,20, Hoffmann 1939: 37, Skilling 1994: 466,7 (1.8), and T 1245 at T XXI 217a21; see also fragment 63v3, Waldschmidt 1961/1967: 413 (or Sander 1987: 204), Sander 2007: 173 (§ 5), and Or.15009/601recto line u, Kudo and Shono 2015: 419.
- 74 Skilling 1992: 159 notes that in this way the teaching is authenticated “by giving it the sanction of the Buddha.” The present case is not the only such instance of the Buddha having the role of repeating a teaching given by a celestial, thereby giving it sanction. A particularly noteworthy example is when in AN 6.69 at AN III 424,15 the Buddha’s repetition of the saying of a celestial motivates Sāriputta to give a more detailed explanation of the significance “of what the Blessed One has said in brief,” *bhagavatā*

*saṃkhiṭṭena bhāsita*ssa. This clearly shows that the saying is considered the word of the Buddha, even though he only repeated what an unnamed celestial had said. The opposite also occurs at times, such as when, for example, Brahmā comes to endorse a reflection that had occurred to the Buddha right after his awakening, repeating this reflection and adding verse(s) of his own to it; see SN 47.18 at SN V 167,21, SĀ 1189 at T II 322b10, and SĀ² 120 at T II 410b23.

- 75 In general, a teaching addressed to “monks” is not necessarily exclusively meant for them, in the sense that alongside monks there could also be nuns or lay disciples present; see Collett and Anālayo 2014. In the present case, however, this would not apply, since according to the narrative setting the timing of the Buddha’s delivery of the protective verses is at the end of the night; see DN 32 at DN III 206,5, Hoffmann 1939: 77, Skilling 1994: 526,1 (12.1), and T 1245 at T XXI 219a25 (which even refers to midnight). It follows that his audience should be visualized as made up of those who spent the night in the same place with him, which given monastic etiquette would not comprise women, be they ordained or lay.
- 76 Sv III 969,18 specifies the type of conduct to be adopted in order to forestall interference by non-humans in relation to the recitation. Holz 2021: 209 comments that “[t]he main purpose of one of the oldest Buddhist protective texts, the *Āṭāṇāṭika-sūtra*, is to protect monks, nuns, laymen, and laywomen living in remote areas meditating in the forest from the potential dangers of evil *yakṣas*. They are instructed to learn and memorize the spells of this discourse for their protection and well-being, as well as to overcome troubles and pacify fierce beings.”
- 77 Here and in what follows, quotations are from introductions to the translation of individual discourses in the *Dīgha-nikāya*. The present Volume 2 (1910) and Volume 3 (1921) were translated by T. W. Rhys Davids in collaboration with his wife, C. A. F. Rhys Davids. However, the introductions I quote from these two volumes were just by him. Thus, when referring to “Rhys Davids 1910,” then this is meant as an abbreviation of what would more accurately be “Rhys Davids in Rhys Davids and Rhys Davids 1910.”
- 78 Dhammika 2015: 124 explains that *bīraṇa* corresponds to *andropogon muricatus*, a “common stout tufted grass usually found growing in damp or swampy ground.”
- 79 See Anālayo 2010a: 47–50.
- 80 Waldschmidt 1956: 119 (8b.1+14) and 79 (3f.1–7) or Fukita 2003: 98 and 46.
- 81 DN 24 at DN III 8,15 and its parallel DĀ 15 at T I 67b20.
- 82 Vin III 58,12: *tasmim ca sarīre peto adhivattho hoti*.
- 83 Sp II 374,20: *adhivattho ti sāṭakataṇhāya tasmim yeva sarīre nibbatto*.
- 84 Another instance of the same consideration occurs in a discussion under the main header of “Buddhist Fun in the *Pāṭika-sutta*” by Shulman 2021: 125, who introduces the episode of the speaking corpse with the statement: “Now is when things begin to get funny” (p. 127). Shulman 2021: 128 then refers to the discourse making its points “in a funny, highly dramatized manner, joking about silly naked ascetics and using images of speaking corpses.”
- 85 The point is of course also not to pretend that Pāli discourses are in principle bereft of humor; for some examples see Rahula 1981.
- 86 For a critical reply to Evans 2008 see Anālayo 2013a: 17–23.
- 87 DN 1 at DN I 13,11; for the parallels see Anālayo 2009: 190.
- 88 See Anālayo 2022a: 11–13, 63, and 109–113.
- 89 Franke 1913b: 410, concludes that the *Dīgha-nikāya* “nicht eine Sammlung von Reden Buddhas (und von Jüngern von ihm), sondern ein schriftstellerisch verfaßtes Buch ist.” Referencing his own research published in 1913b, Franke 1913a: 198 in turn states that he believes to have shown there that “die einzelnen Suttas nicht für sich, unabhängig, entstanden sein und also von Buddha herrühren können, sondern daß sie eins im Hinblick auf das andere und im Zusammenhange miteinander entstanden sein müssen.”
- 90 His similar research on the *Majjhima-nikāya* in Franke 1914 has inspired my survey of concatenation in the first parts of that collection in Anālayo 2011: 11–13.

- 91 Franke 1913a: 199: “Der Grundplan des D. ist der Nachweis, daß Gotama Buddha, der Erhabene, ein Tathāgata (‘so gegangen’) sei,” in other words, the *Dīgha-nikāya* is “eine Propagandaschrift” (p. 201).
- 92 The abstract in Shaw 2024: 167 announces “a literary analysis of the role of repetition and recital in two suttas of the *Dīghanikāya*.”
- 93 DN 32 even lacks a counterpart to a “vision” of celestials mentioned in the—from the viewpoint of its function comparable—*Mahāsamaya-sutta*, DN 20 at DN II 256,5. Even this, however, is not a form of visualization but much rather an instance of actual seeing, *dassana*.
- 94 In relation to the venue of the *Āṭānāṭiya-sutta*, it is not clear on what basis Shaw 2021: 222 asserts that Vulture’s Peak “is one of the few places where we know the historical Buddha must actually have stood.” The circumstance that this location is mentioned here and in other texts is not a safe guide to what the ‘historical’ Buddha did. Since the publication of Schopen 1997/2004 there has been a keen awareness among scholars in Buddhist studies that tradition did not place a high value on the accuracy of references to the location of a particular discourse, which should in principle prevent definite assertions about where the ‘historical’ Buddha must actually have stood.
- 95 DN 32 at DN III 195,20: *uggaṇhātu, bhante, bhagavā āṭānāṭiyaṃ rakkhaṃ*.
- 96 DN 32 at DN III 206,14: *uggaṇhātha, bhikkhave, āṭānāṭiyaṃ rakkhaṃ*.
- 97 DN 22 at DN II 295,6 (= MN 10 at MN I 58,9); see in more detail Anālayo 2022c: 2159–2161.
- 98 Unfortunately, this is not the only instance of a conflation of different historical layers in Shaw 2021. An example of the same pattern would be a reference to the *Mahānidāna-sutta*, in the course of which Shaw 2021: 68 speaks of “the split into the dualism of mind (*nāma*) and matter (*rūpa*)” in dependent arising. In the context of the early Buddhist conception of dependent arising, *nāma* does not stand for the whole of the mind but rather for mental activities apart from consciousness; it does not involve a dualism. The notion of a dualism is much rather relevant to the role of name-and-form in the Theravāda scheme of insight knowledges; on these two historically distinct meanings of *nāma* see Anālayo 2017b. Another example is the following statement in Shaw 2021: 77f in relation to the *Ānāpānasati-sutta* (MN 118): “Breathing mindfulness, a meditation that involves arousing mindfulness of the breath passing in its movement throughout the body.” The idea that mindfulness of breathing is about the breath passing throughout the body is a later development; see in more detail Anālayo 2019: 37f and 2024: 161–169.
- 99 Regarding the former, the PTS edition’s title *Cakkavattisihanāda-sutta* receives no support from the Asian editions, the commentary, or the content of the discourse, hence my use of the title *Cakkavatti-sutta*.
- 100 The same pattern of making assertions without consultation of the relevant textual evidence seems to be also at work when Shaw 2021: 14 argues that “[b]eing in the company of others is another, completely necessary, aspect of the conditions for oral literature.” The suggestion that this is completely necessary does not take into account textual evidence for solitary recitation. An example that came up earlier in my discussion is the report of the Buddha reciting by himself in SN 12.45 and SN 35.113 (see above note 43); for more examples see Anālayo 2011: 857.
- 101 DN 26 at DN II 73,1.
- 102 DN 11 at DN I 222,19. The Buddha’s knowledge of these earlier visits by the monk would thus need to be attributed to his supernatural powers rather than to a report given to him.
- 103 See DN 24 at DN III 23,16; the comparison concerns an ascetic who had publicly proclaimed that he will defeat the Buddha in debate and then failed to show up for the debate, which finds illustration in a jackal trying to roar a lion’s roar but only delivering a jackal’s howl. Besides the absence of any explicit comparison of the lion to the Buddha, for this image to work, there is no need even for an implicit relationship of the lion to the Buddha. As explained by Manné 1996: 32, in Pāli discourses in general the image of the lion’s roar stands for “utterances which the speaker is willing to defend in public,” being an adaptation of “the Vedic tradition of challenges in debate.” In other words, had

the ascetic acted in the same way but claimed to be ready to defeat someone else, rather than the Buddha, the image of a jackal trying to imitate a lion would still have been fully appropriate.

- 104 The first reference occurs in the section on fours in DN 33 at DN III 227,7, with the present set of fours featuring under the header *cattāri sotāpānassa aṅgāni*. The second reference is to DN 16 at DN II 93,27, introduced as part of what enables a noble disciple to declare being a stream-enterer. Both instances precede the *iti pi so* formula with the phrase *ariyasāvako buddhe aveccappasādena samannāgato hoti*, which confirms that this is not an instance of teaching recollection of the Buddha as a meditation practice, for which Pāli discourses rather use the formulation *ariyasāvako tathāgataṃ anussarati* (followed by the *iti pi so* formula); see, e.g., AN 6.10 at AN III 285,3. Some awareness of the distinct function of this passage in DN 16 is evident when Shaw 2024: 173 comments that here “the Buddha ... uses an image for the only time in the entire canon... ‘the mirror of the dhamma’ (*dhammādāsa*)” and “the Buddha says it is a reflection to inspect oneself.” Similarly, Shaw 2021: 58 refers to the *dhammādāsa* as “a means by which once can inspect oneself.” Yet, such awareness has apparently not sufficed for appreciating that this mirror relates to declaring stream-entry. It could also be noted in passing that the same term *dhammādāsa*, reportedly used by the Buddha to introduce the same type of exposition, recurs in SN 55.8 at SN V 357,11, SN 55.9 at SN V 358,12, and SN 55.10 at SN V 359,19, wherefore the present passage in DN 16 is, strictly speaking, not “the only time in the entire canon” of this type of usage.
- 105 In relation to the section of DN 1 that precedes the survey of grounds for views, Shaw 2021: 111 reasons that “at the outset of the first sutta of the first nikāya, he [= the Buddha] discusses such moralities in detail. These passages, on morality for monastics, are found in all of the first thirteen *Dīghanikāya* suttas and were probably interpolated later in the subsequent twelve. The first thirteen collectively are called the *sīlavagga*.” The idea appears to be that the *Brahmajāla-sutta* as the first discourse in the *Dīgha-nikāya* provided a template that was then interpolated in the subsequent twelve discourses found in what is actually called the *sīlakkhandavagga*; see DN I 252,29 (a *sīlavagga* is rather found in Jā I 142,14). As evident from the comparative surveys provided by Anesaki 1908: 37 or by Akanuma 1929/1990: 5, the position of the *Dīrgha-āgama* counterpart to DN 1 differs, and the same holds for the Sanskrit manuscript version of another *Dīrgha-āgama* collection, as pointed out by Hartmann 2004: 122. Given that here parallel versions of the discourses with an account of the gradual path occur before their version of the *Brahmajāla-sutta*, the envisaged scenario would not work particularly well for these two *Dīrgha-āgama* collections. The relevant part of the Tibetan parallel to the *Brahmajāla-sutta*, edited and translated in Weller 1934: 12 and 1935: 4–6, brings to light that the Mūlasarvāstivāda version has only a rather short section on moralities. Closer inspection of the Pāli version shows signs of a textual expansion; see Anālayo 2014: 47–50. This appears to have taken off from a commentary on a similarly short section on moralities that in the course of oral transmission became part of the discourse. In other words, the placing together of discourses with a gradual path account in this part of the *Dīgha-nikāya* appears to have its rationale in combining texts with similar content to facilitate their oral transmission, and for the same reason the *Brahmajāla-sutta*, once it had evolved to its present stage of having a long section on moralities, became part of the same set. This offers a more natural way of understanding such a grouping than the idea of a wholesale interpolation. The position taken by the *Brahmajāla-sutta* in the *Dīgha-nikāya* prior to the *Sāmaññaphala-sutta* can in turn be appreciated with the help of the concatenations identified by Franke 2013b: 419–422; see Anālayo 2015: 82f. The same holds for subsequent discourses. The main point that emerges is that the order of discourses and the at times intricate interrelations between them reflect the exigencies of oral transmission. This puts into perspective the comment by Shaw 2021: 246 that “there are too many internal resonances in the *Dīghanikāya* for there not to have been some creative design involved.” This proposal seems to fall into the same error made by Otto Franke, discussed above, and that despite the more than a century of progress in Buddhist scholarship in general and our understanding of orality in particular since his time.

- 106 See also the reference by Shaw 2024: 177 to “the way that the *Brahmajāla-sutta* works,” where “the internal logic of each view in turn renders each so logical and genuinely plausible.”
- 107 DN 1 at DN 127,9: *mando hoti momūho*. Although Shaw 2024: 177 mentions this reference to “those who are just plain stupid,” which shows awareness of this particular ground, nevertheless just a few lines further on the same page she characterizes the presentation in DN 1 as one that “leaves us, the listeners or readers, willingly engaged in each beautifully patterned and internally logical part of the net: we are enmeshed,” followed on the next page by referring to “the listener, persuaded by these wrong views.”
- 108 This forms part of a repeated statement; for the instance that concludes the examination of the first four grounds leading to an eternalist view see DN 1 at DN 17,5: *dhammā gambhīrā duddasā duranubodhā santā paṇītā* (etc.).
- 109 In fact, the commentary, Sv I 109, explains that this intends the Buddha’s omniscient knowledge, *sabbaññutañāṇadharmā gambhīrā duddasā ... veditabbā*.
- 110 DN 1 at DN 146,9+13.
- 111 See, e.g., Anālayo 2017c: 14f.
- 112 Allon 1997: 359: “In total almost 87% (86,8%) of *this* sutta involves quantifiable repetition of one kind or another at a primary level” (italics added). This must be the intended statement, as the referenced Allon 1997: 360 does not mention 87%.
- 113 The quote in the previous note is part of Mark Allon’s conclusions to his “Study 3: Repetition in a Pāli sutta Text,” differing from the conclusions to his studies 1 and 2, found in Allon 1997: 109–111 and 160f.
- 114 Reasoning this through is not meant to endorse the proposal, which I find rather unconvincing (the same holds for some other suggestions made in Cousins 1983). A division according to length, with short texts then further allocated to topic-wise or numerical arrangements, seems sufficiently straightforward for creating textual collections for transmission purposes; it does not require the proposed matching with particular recitation occasions to become sensible. In fact, a reciter of each *Nikāya* would need to have something to offer for different occasions; it would hardly make sense if, to stay with the example, only reciters of the *Dīgha-nikāya* perform on observance days, only reciters of the *Majjhima-nikāya* on evening events, etc.
- 115 The reference in Anālayo 2007b: 19 is to the example of “the householder Citta, who when putting a question to some monks would refer to the *Brahmajāla-sutta*, giving the impression that he was well acquainted with this discourse”; with reference in note 87 to SN 41.3 at SN IV 286,12, followed by pointing out that in the parallel SĀ 570 at T II 151a12 he does not mention the *Brahmajāla-sutta* or any other discourse.
- 116 Anālayo 2007b: 18: “the Pāli *Vinaya* reports that the reciter monks would sometimes pass the whole night busily reciting discourses,” with reference to Vin I 169,6.
- 117 Anālayo 2014: 44; italics are in the original.
- 118 Just to be clear, this is not meant to put into question in principle the possibility of a piecemeal recitation of the *Brahmajāla-sutta*. In fact, this idea could claim support from the circumstance that the discourse is divided into recitation sections, *bhāṇavāra*; see DN 1 at DN 17,10 and 32,3. Such a division points to recitation in phases, and this could in principle be taking place over several days (although it could also happen on the same day at intervals). My point is thus only the misattribution of this idea to the discussion in Anālayo 2007b.
- 119 For the same type of problem in yet another publication by the same author see Anālayo 2020.
- 120 Quoted in Cole 2021: 147.

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