

PART I

Background and Context

This part comprises three chapters. Chapter 1 does two things: it sets out the problem posed by the existence of slightly different versions of what the Buddha taught, deriving from different early schools of Buddhism and preserved in different languages, and it introduces and illustrates the methodology of textual comparison by means of which these very differences can reveal what is most likely to have been the Buddha's original teaching.

Chapter 2 provides the historical context for what I refer to as "early Buddhism", the period covering the centuries following the death of the Buddha until his teachings were written down for the first time. Memorisation of such a large body of doctrine was a demanding exercise, facilitated by chanting aloud in unison and by use of certain mnemonic devices, including standardisation, repetition, and ordered lists.

During the period of oral transmission, if accounts of the First Buddhist Council are to be believed, the version of these teachings authorised by the Council was memorised and passed on in increasing numbers of monasteries scattered across the Indian sub-continent and beyond into Central Asia. Given this development, it is hardly surprising that sectarian differences arose, along with variations in the remembered corpus of teachings, for each school of Buddhism preserved its own canon.

Not all these texts, recorded subsequently in different languages, have survived the intervening centuries. Chapter 3 examines the sources, some quite fragmentary, that have survived the passage of time and can be consulted by scholars. These comprise notably the complete canon of the Theravāda school written in Pali, a significant amount of the Sarvāstivāda canon in Sanskrit, plus more in Chinese translation, and substantial portions of the canons of other schools, also preserved in Chinese.

The chapter ends with a discussion of difficulties encountered in drawing parallels between texts from different schools in different languages; and an account of how the available texts in Pali and Chinese have been transmitted and compiled for publication.

CHAPTER I

Introducing the Project

Siddhattha Gotama, the historical Buddha, lived in North India sometime between the mid-sixth century BCE and the early fourth century BCE. Current scholarly opinion places the year of his death anywhere between 486 and 350 BCE.¹ According to Buddhist tradition, his life can be divided into three periods: the first twenty-nine years as a pampered prince; the next six or seven years as an ascetic, during which he subjected himself to severe austerities; and the last fifty years as a charismatic teacher with a growing band of disciples. Two crucial events divided these three periods. The first was the realisation that human existence inevitably entails suffering, in the form of sickness, old age, and death. The second was the night he attained “enlightenment” and decided to devote the rest of his life to teaching others the path of practice that he had pioneered.

The Buddha’s immediate disciples memorised his key teachings, presented in different places at different times. As the Buddha encouraged his disciples to travel far and wide to spread his message, it is unlikely that even those closest to him, such as Ānanda and Mahākassapa, were present on every occasion. For this reason, shortly after the Buddha died, his followers convened the so-called First Council (*saṅgīti*) to recall as accurately as possible exactly what the Buddha had taught. These teachings were memorised as separate discourses, or *suttas*, and transmitted orally over at least the next three centuries, until they were eventually written down in the second half of the first century BCE.

I use the term “early Buddhism” to refer to the three centuries of oral transmission, and it is this period that the method of comparative analysis developed in this book attempts to illuminate.² Over these three centuries,

¹ Bechert (1989).

² Others limit early Buddhism to the roughly two centuries separating the death of the Buddha from the reign of Aśoka (Griffiths 1983: 56) or to the first sectarian division of the *Saṅgha* into different schools (Schmithausen 1987: 1), which almost certainly occurred during that emperor’s reign

Buddhism spread throughout most of the Indian sub-continent, down to the island of Lanka, and north-west into what is now Pakistan and Afghanistan. Unlike Brahmanism, which retained Sanskrit as its sacred language, Buddhism was taught in vernacular languages, so it would not be surprising if small differences in wording began to creep into some *suttas*. Moreover, it is likely that priority was given to different *suttas* in different monasteries. At any rate, by the end of this period, sectarian differences began to develop in what had once been a single tradition.

For most of this time, no writing system was in general use in India. The Brahmi alphabet began to be widely used only during the reign of the emperor Aśoka (third century BCE). Even then the transmission of Buddhist teachings remained largely oral for a further two centuries, until the Pali version of the “canon”, and other versions too, were committed to writing. So for this whole period there is a shortage of reliable hard data.

Over these centuries the *Saṅgha*, the monastic community that the Buddha originally founded, split repeatedly, yielding an ever-growing number of different schools that disagreed, more or less widely, on matters of doctrine (*Dhamma*) and monastic discipline (*Vinaya*). Consequently, what was finally committed to writing, on the island of Lanka in the first century BCE, was not “the Buddhist canon”. It was one of several such “canons”, each with its own specific sectarian differences. Of the various versions of the *Sutta-piṭaka*, the “Basket of Discourses” that once existed, only the one in Pali has survived largely intact to the present day. It was preserved on Lanka, at a safe distance from the hostile forces that eventually all but extinguished Buddhism on the Indian mainland. A few other versions have survived only in incomplete form, either as scattered fragmentary manuscripts in Indic languages or, indirectly, as partial translations in Chinese or Tibetan.

Given these unfavourable circumstances – a purely oral transmission over several centuries, deep splits within the *Saṅgha*, and extensive loss of manuscript texts following the later demise of Buddhism both in its homeland and subsequently in Central Asia – a present-day reader of the surviving Buddhist *suttas* might well wonder how adequate they are as a record of what the Buddha taught. So it is reasonable to suspect that the Pali version of the *Sutta-piṭaka*, despite being by far the best-preserved and most trusted of surviving versions, may not be sufficiently reliable or complete for us to declare categorically that it contains the essential teachings

(Prebish 2008). Extending early Buddhism to cover the whole period of oral transmission enables the kind of comparative analysis I apply in this book.

of the Buddha in their original form – especially since discrepancies exist both with other versions that have survived and within the Pali canon. By adopting a comparative approach, however, comparing the Pali texts with their surviving counterparts from other Buddhist traditions, including the abundant material in Chinese translation, it should be possible to get closer to the Buddha’s original teachings.

To some in the field of Buddhist studies it may appear that such a project could never succeed. It is natural to assume that early Buddhism must be inaccessible to scholarly research, precisely because no textual records exist. Add to this scepticism about the value of the Chinese *āgamas* (discourse collections) for this kind of research, and the whole project becomes seemingly impossible. Such scepticism is understandable, if only because of the relative inaccessibility of the Chinese texts. Recently, however, sections of the four Chinese *āgamas* have been translated into languages other than Japanese or Korean.³ Comparative studies that take full account of Chinese *āgama* texts have yet to be given the attention they deserve – especially as the *āgamas* include translations from schools of Buddhism using languages other than Pali.⁴ So the research potential of Pali–Chinese *sutta* comparison remains to be revealed. As much of this study depends on such comparison, I shall introduce it in this chapter by demonstrating its effectiveness – and reveal at the same time the limitations of relying exclusively on Pali sources. The following three examples are presented in order of increasing complexity. The texts, people, and events referred to will be introduced more fully in the following two chapters. For now, their importance lies in the way they illustrate the interpretative techniques to be used throughout this study.

Examples of Pali–Chinese *Sutta* Comparison

My first and simplest example is drawn from a not very well-known text, the “Discourse on the Karma-Born Body” (*Karajakāya-sutta*). The Pali Text Society (PTS) version of this is AN10.208 (*sutta* 208 in the Book of

³ For the Chinese *Ekottarikāgama* (T125) a serialised translation, initially into French and later into English, began appearing in *Buddhist Studies Review* in 1983 (vol. 1.2) but ended in 2004 (vol. 21.2) having just reached the beginning of the Threes (<https://ukabs.org.uk/buddhist-studies-review-vols-1-22/>). For the *Madhyamāgama* (T26) an English translation of volume 1 (*suttas* 1–71) appeared in 2013 and volume 2 (*suttas* 72–131) in 2020. The remaining volumes are in preparation.

⁴ Among the most notable comparative studies are Minh Chau (1991[1964]), Choong (2000, 2010), and Anālayo (2007a, 2011). Also noteworthy is Bhikkhu Bodhi’s new translation of AN (*The Numerical Discourses of the Buddha* (NDB), 2012), the first English translation of a Pali *nikāya* that takes account (at least partially) of Chinese parallels.

Tens of the Numerical Collection *Āṅguttara-nikāya*;⁵ the Chinese version is MA15 (discourse no. 15 in the Sarvāstivādin Middle-Length Collection *Madhyamāgama*).⁶

In the Pali version of this discourse the Buddha begins by stating that intentional deeds (karma) inevitably bring their corresponding results, either immediately or later on. He then says further: “Monks, that disciple of the noble ones, thus free from desire and ill-will ... dwells pervading one quarter [of the world] with a heart possessed of loving-kindness; likewise the second, third, and fourth quarters.” Clearly, something is wrong here. The topic switches abruptly from karma and its results to meditation on loving-kindness (*mettā*). Also incongruous is the reference to “that disciple of the noble ones, thus free from desire and ill-will”, since there has been no previous mention of a disciple or of a process of eliminating desire and ill-will. The early translator F. L. Woodward recognised this problem. In a footnote to his English version of the discourse in question (1936), he comments that the account of loving-kindness meditation is “introduced without apparent reason thus suddenly”.⁷ There is a further anomaly, which he apparently failed to notice but which also deserves to be mentioned: the *sutta* contains no set of ten items that might account for its inclusion in the Book of Tens (*Dasaka-nipāta*) of the Pali Numerical Collection.

The parallel Chinese discourse (MA15) throws light on these problems. In it the Buddha begins with the same brief statement about the inevitability of karmic consequences, which he clarifies with a discussion of ten types of wrong action (*kamma-pathā*). He goes on to say that a knowledgeable disciple of the noble ones avoids such wrong actions, gains thereby in virtue and energy, becomes free of desire, ill-will, and so on, before finally turning to the practice of pervading the four quarters with loving-kindness. Here there is a smooth and natural progression of ideas, and there is a set of ten items. In the Pali version a section of the text has evidently been lost, but the gap can be filled by referring to the corresponding Chinese version.⁸

⁵ Numbered 219 in Bhikkhu Bodhi’s translation (<https://suttacentral.net/an10.1/en/bodhi>).

⁶ AN10.208\299–301 = MA15\Ti437b–438b. For a translation and discussion of the Chinese discourse, see Anālayo (2009).

⁷ Woodward and Hare 1932–1936: 193, note 1.

⁸ The gap in the Pali is between *vadāmi* and *Sa kbo*, in line 5 (p. 299). The missing section is represented in MA15 by Ti437b27–438a05. Discovering this was an early factor contributing to my recognition of the value of Pali–Chinese discourse comparison.

This straightforward solution immediately begs the question, however, of how the missing material came to be lost from the Pali version. Perhaps monks in some monastery forgot that section or perhaps one or two folios from a palm-leaf manuscript were mislaid. But there is another, much neater explanation.⁹ A replica of the inferred missing section of the Pali *sutta*, AN10.208, can actually be found in the closely preceding *sutta*, AN10.206.¹⁰ It is likely, therefore, that the gap discovered in *sutta* 208 formerly contained the elision marker *pe*, the Pali equivalent of our “...” or “etc.”¹¹ This would have signalled to early readers of the relevant manuscript that a section of the text has been elided by some monk-editor or copyist and is meant to be supplied by referring back to an earlier occurrence of this section in a preceding *sutta*. The absence of the expected *pe* can then be explained as probably due to accidental loss during hand-copying of the *sutta* text.

Such lack of an expected *pe* is not unusual in the Pali *Sutta-piṭaka*. Instances of it are occasionally pointed out in the critical apparatus to the PTS editions. In the present case, however, the omission apparently escaped the PTS editor’s notice. Even in cases where the required *pe* is present, there can still be problems for the reader. Sometimes it is unclear just what piece of preceding text the *pe* refers to, and in such cases consulting the Chinese parallel can again provide the needed clarification. This example illustrates what is probably the simplest and most basic benefit of Pali–Chinese discourse comparison: rectification of a simple transmission error.

My second example is the “Discourse on the Noble Quest” (*Ariya-pariyesanā-sutta*), whose well-known Pali version is MN26 (*sutta* 26 of the Pali Middle-Length Collection *Majjhima-nikāya*) and which has its Chinese parallel in MA204 (*sutta* 204 of the Sarvāstivādin Middle Length Collection).¹² In both versions the Buddha is addressing a small assembly of monks. He begins by drawing a distinction between the “ignoble quest” (striving after worldly rewards) and the “noble quest” (striving for

⁹ This is pointed out by Bhikkhu Bodhi in his translation of the Pali *sutta* (there numbered 219 at NDB 1541–1543); see note 2185 on p. 1858.

¹⁰ AN10.206\ANv. The intervening *sutta* 207 is partly elided (though less drastically than 208), thus requiring the reader to go one *sutta* further back to 206. Anālayo (2009: 13) suggests that the three consecutive *suttas* 206–208 are likely to be derivatives of a single original discourse, since they are represented in Chinese by a single parallel.

¹¹ *Pe* (or sometimes *pa* or *lā*) is for *peyyālam*, “formula”, in reference to a preceding passage that has to be repeated.

¹² MN26\MNii60 = MA204\Ti775c. For a comparative study of these two versions, see Anālayo (2011b).

nirvana); then he recounts in brief his own successful engagement in the noble quest. In the Pali version the relevant events are as follows.

As a young man in the prime of life the Buddha-to-be leaves home and family, shaves off his hair and beard, and adopts the homeless life of a wandering ascetic. After practising for a time under one teacher and then another, he strikes out on his own and finally attains liberation. He then contemplates the prospect of teaching others the path of practice that he has discovered. Perceiving that this teaching task will be difficult and wearisome, he feels reluctant to undertake it. His mind is inclined to inaction rather than to teaching the *Dhamma*. At this point the god Brahmā Sahāmpati appears and earnestly beseeches him, first in prose and then in verse, to teach the *Dhamma* out of compassion for the world. The Buddha accedes to the god's request and sets out for Vārānasī to teach his former companions, a group of five fellow ascetics, who thus become his first disciples.

So goes the Pali version. The Chinese version matches it closely, except at one point. It has no counterpart for the section where the Buddha feels reluctant to teach but is then persuaded by Brahmā to take on that challenging task. According to this version, the Buddha, having attained liberation, begins without hesitation considering who should be the first to receive his teaching. He realises it should be his former companions and therefore heads for Vārānasī.

These are clearly two versions of a single discourse, yet they differ significantly. Just how the difference should be interpreted is not immediately apparent. One would need, among other things, to weigh up the relative likelihood that the story of the Buddha's reluctance and Brahmā's intervention was added to the *sutta* in the Pali line of transmission, or deleted from it in the Sarvāstivādin line, which the Chinese version represents. That issue will be discussed in relation to the Textual Family Tree below. For now, the point to note is that examining the two versions in parallel, rather than just the Pali version in isolation, leads one to question how the two versions might be related. For example, the two extant versions might be derivatives of a now lost common ancestor, in which case comparing them would provide useful historical perspective.

The previous example had to do with *accidental* modification of a *sutta*: probably due to careless omission of one syllable by a scribe copying the manuscript. This second example appears to involve *intentional* modification in one or the other of two different lines of transmission involving changing a detail in the Buddha's purported biography. Both cases

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illustrate the potential of Pali–Chinese *sutta* comparison to throw light on early Buddhism as transmitted prior to the surviving written texts.

The third and most involved of my three examples is the “Discourse on the Foundations of Mindfulness” (*Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*). In this lengthy discourse, the Buddha gives instructions on how a practitioner of meditation should develop the mental factor called “mindfulness” (*sati*) in connection with four classes of sense-object: the physical body (*rūpa*), feelings (*vedanā*), mind-states (*citta*), and “*dhammas*” – the last probably referring to mental objects (images?), or possibly aspects of the teaching (the *Dhamma*). Corresponding to the well-known Pali version of this discourse, MN10, two broadly similar versions are preserved in Chinese translation. One of these is MA98 (in the Sarvāstivādin Middle-Length Collection);¹³ the other is EA12.1, contained in the Book of Ones of a Numerical Collection (*Ekottarikāgama*) tentatively ascribed to a Mahā-sāṅghika school.¹⁴

These three texts, one in Pali and two in Chinese translation, are in close agreement as regards structure and overall message; so here again we have different versions of a single discourse. The first point of similarity is that all three lack the long explanation of the four noble truths that adds bulk to the Pali tradition’s aptly named “Greater Discourse on the Foundations of Mindfulness” (*Mahā-satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*, DN22). This suggests that the longer text was very probably derived from the shorter “Discourse on the Foundations of Mindfulness” (*Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*, MN10).

At the same time, the Pali MN10 and its two Chinese parallels differ significantly from one another, particularly as regards the composition of the first and fourth of the four foundations: Contemplation of the Body (*kāyānupassanā*) and Contemplation of *dhammas* (*dhammānupassanā*). The relationships among the three versions are summarised in Table 1.1.

Under Contemplation of the Body, the Pali version (MN10) lists six objects to be contemplated: the breathing, bodily postures, everyday bodily actions, the foul aspects of the body, the elements (earth, water, fire, air) of which the body is composed, and the progressive decay of the body after death. The corresponding list in the Sarvāstivādin version (MA98)

¹³ Ti777a12–b10.

¹⁴ MN10i15 = MA98\Ti582b–584c = EA12.1\Tii568a–569b.

Table 1.1 *The three versions of the “Discourse on the Foundations of Mindfulness”*

MN 10 (Pali)	MA 98 (Sarvāstivādin)	EA 12.1 (Mahāsāṅghika)
I. Body	I. Body	I. Body
1. breathing	1. postures	
2. postures	2. actions	
3. actions	3–4. thought-control	
	5. breathing	
	6–9. <i>jhānas</i>	
	10. perception of light	
	11. reviewing-sign	
4. foulness	12. foulness	1. foulness
5. four elements	13. six elements	2. four elements
		3. orifices
6–12. death	14–18. death	4–11. death
II. Feelings	II. Feelings	II. Feelings
III. Mind-states	III. Mind-states	III. Mind-states
IV. Dhammas	IV. Dhammas	IV. Dhammas
1. hindrances	1. sense-bases	
2. aggregates	2. hindrances	
3. sense-bases		
4. <i>bojjhaṅgas</i>	3. <i>bojjhaṅgas</i>	1. <i>bojjhaṅgas</i>
5. truths		2–5. <i>jhānas</i> 1–4

has these same six *plus* a further four, all of which appear to be unrelated to the body as such: thought-control (two types), the four *jhānas* (stages of concentration), perception of light, and a “reviewing-sign” – all pertaining primarily to mental processes. The Mahāsāṅghika list (EA12.1) has three of the six items in the Pali list *plus* one further item; the four items it specifies are the foul components, the elements, the body’s orifices, and the body’s gradual decay after death.

Under the heading IV Contemplation of *dhammas*, the Pali version lists five items: the hindrances (*nīvaraṇa*), aggregates (*khandha*), sense-bases (*āyatana*), factors of awakening (*bojjhaṅga*), and noble truths (*ariya-sacca*). The Sarvāstivādin version lists just three of these five: the hindrances, sense-bases, and factors of awakening. And the Mahāsāṅghika version has just one of them, *plus* an extra one; it lists the factors of awakening and the four *jhānas*.

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Published writings on the theory and/or practice of mindfulness are almost invariably based on the Pali version.¹⁵ The above-noted differences are a reminder that such writings are about mindfulness as understood in just the particular school that has preserved the “Pali canon”. If one wishes to learn about mindfulness as it was understood in the period before the splits that separated the Mahāsāṅghika, Sarvāstivādin, and Pali lines of transmission, then one needs, at the very least, to compare the three versions summarised above.

Such a three-way comparison was the starting point for two academic studies of this *sutta*: one by Lambert Schmithausen (1976), the other by Johannes Bronkhorst (1985). Both of these researchers sought to discover which practices were taught in the presumed common ancestor of the three extant versions of the “Discourse on the Foundations of Mindfulness”. This involves considering the above differences through linguistic analysis, comparison with other discourses on mindfulness, and the place of mindfulness within the overall Buddhist path of monastic training.

Both Schmithausen and Bronkhorst conclude that, under the headings “Body” and “*Dhammas*”, the common ancestor of the extant versions included far fewer items than are listed in Table 1.1. As to just which items these were, they are in only partial agreement. Their failure to agree does not invalidate Pali–Chinese *sutta* comparison: it just indicates that the task begun by these two scholars and since carried forward by others has yet to be completed.¹⁶

The Textual Family Tree

The three examples in the previous section show how substantial differences may be revealed when one compares textual data drawn from more than one school of Buddhism. To better understand this phenomenon, let us begin by looking more closely at the third example, the “Discourse on the Foundations of Mindfulness”. Here the schools represented by the two Chinese versions are believed to be the Sarvāstivāda (for MA98) and some unspecified Mahāsāṅghika school (for EA12.1). Regarding these two schools and their Pali counterpart, the relevant historical background, as currently understood, can be summarised (a little tentatively) as follows.

¹⁵ An exception is Anālayo (2013), which differs from his 2003 work in consistently taking account of Chinese parallels.

¹⁶ See also Sujato (2005) and Kuan (2008).