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Citation for published version:
Appleton, N 2014, 'Buddhist Scriptures: An Overview', *Expository Times*, vol. 125, no. 12, pp. 573-582. https://doi.org/10.1177/0014524614532209

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):
10.1177/0014524614532209

Link:
Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer

Document Version:
Peer reviewed version

Published In:
Expository Times

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Download date: 12. Oct. 2024

Buddhist Scriptures

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Abstract

In this article I provide an overview of what scripture means and does in a Buddhist context. The article has three main parts. First, by way of introduction I explore the history of Buddhist scripture and a few of the different ways in which scripture was defined and classified in the early period. In the second section I use the common division into three 'baskets' of scripture (discourses, monastic discipline and higher teachings) to structure a closer look at some of the main genres of early Buddhist texts. Finally I examine the role of scripture in Buddhist life, as a source of teachings, a means of making karmic merit, and a vehicle of great power.

In the interests of time and space I have chosen to focus largely on the earliest scriptures of Indian Buddhism. Later compositions and compilations, such as the many scriptures of Tibetan or East Asian Buddhism, are not considered here.[1] Because my focus is on the early Indian scriptures I use mainly Sanskrit (Skt) terminology, with the Pāli (P.) equivalent noted where relevant.

Keywords: Buddha, Buddhism, canon, sacred text, scripture

Introduction

When the Buddha (Awakened One) started teaching sometime in the fifth century BCE in northeast India, none of his teachings were written down. Tradition recalls that after his death, five hundred of his awakened followers assembled together for a *saṃgīti* (singing together), which has become known as the 'first council'. Senior monks chanted the Buddha's teachings and committed them to memory, dividing them up into manageable portions such that sub-groups of monks and nuns became specialists in particular sections of scripture. At this stage the teachings were said to have constituted either two categories – *sūtra* (discourses) and *vinaya* (monastic regulations) – or three, with the inclusion of the *abhidharma*

[1] For a good overview of these various canons see Lang 2007.

(higher teachings). It was only several centuries later that these texts began to be written down.[2] From the variety of extant texts, as well as the varying accounts of the first council (and indeed of subsequent councils), it is clear that this process was neither so tidy nor so successful as tradition would have us believe.[3] In reality Buddhist scriptures were compiled and redacted over a period of several centuries, and yet the symbolic value of the first council and the notion of the Buddha's authorship remains key for many Buddhists to this day.

The Buddha taught in a Northeast Indian dialect (or possibly a variety of dialects) related to the classical and – for Hindus – sacred language of Sanskrit. In a religious and political landscape dominated by Sanskrit, it is important that the Buddha taught in a vernacular accessible to more than just the educated elite. However, this vernacular flexibility seems not to have lasted long: while some groups began to present the Buddha's teachings in the elite language of Sanskrit, others tried to reconstruct the actual language that the Buddha spoke and thereby preserve his exact words. This latter move led to the rise of Pāli, a language that is claimed to be that spoken by the Buddha, but which has been shown in reality to be a hybrid and artificial construction. Pāli became the scriptural and liturgical language of what is known as the Theravāda (Doctrine of the Elders) school of Buddhism, which is prevalent in Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia. The Theravāda school is the only one to preserve a full and closed set of scriptures, and it is this that is often referred to as 'the Pāli canon'. Some scriptures from rival schools of Indian Buddhism, preserved in Sanskrit and other Indic languages or in Chinese and Tibetan translations, are also extant, but many were lost when Buddhism died out in India in the early centuries of the second millennium. And as Buddhism travelled into other parts of Asia new texts were composed or 'discovered' and given authority comparable to or even in excess of the earliest sources. Of particular importance are the many texts associated with the Mahāyāna (Great Vehicle) tradition that developed in India a few centuries after the time of the Buddha and became dominant in Central and East Asia.

It is clear even from this brief account that inasmuch as 'scripture' might imply a single fixed body of authoritative texts we must use it with caution in a

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[2] Theravāda tradition tells us that the Pāli scriptures were written down in the first century BCE in Sri Lanka, but the source for this date is itself rather late. Textual fragments from north India do date back to the first century, but they bear little resemblance to extant scriptures. Most likely the process of writing the scriptures down was both gradual and geographically diffuse. For a useful discussion see Berkwitz 2010: 48-51.

[3] On the Buddhist councils see Prebish 1974 and Berkwitz 2010: 42-46.

Buddhist context. Buddhism is not a religion of the book, and attempts to see it as such reveal more about the Protestant backgrounds of its early scholars than about the Buddhist tradition itself.[4] While Buddhist scriptures are now in written form, the earliest Buddhist texts were originally preserved orally, as was the custom at the time in South Asia. The majority of extant manuscript sources are from the eighteenth century onwards, and while recently discovered birch-bark manuscript fragments from the Gandhāran region of Northwest India may date back as far as the first century BCE, these differ in significant ways from the scriptures preserved by living Buddhist traditions.[5] A reference to certain named scriptures in an inscription from the middle of the third century BCE is difficult to relate to extant collections at all.[6] In addition, monastic texts preserve instructions about what to do to recreate a text if a portion of it is forgotten.[7] And to top it all there is no fixed body of scriptures that is accepted by all living Buddhist groups, but rather a variety of textual collections that have shaped – and been shaped by – different Buddhist lineages and sects. However, that is not to say that Buddhists have had no notion of scriptural authority, rather that this notion was fluid and open to multiple interpretations.

Perhaps the most important Buddhist term that might equate to the notion of scripture is *buddhavacana*, literally the 'word of the Buddha'. Everything that the Buddha said is revered as having great value, and all *buddhavacana* could therefore be considered scripture. A text did not have to be spoken by the Buddha himself to be designated authoritative, however. As various scriptures put it, just as whatever the Buddha speaks is well spoken, so also whatever is well spoken is the word of the Buddha.[8] Since the eternal truth that was realised and communicated by the Buddha – known as the *dharma* (Skt), or *dhamma* (P) – is also accessible to others, the emphasis is not upon teachings originating with the Buddha but rather upon

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[4] The effort early scholars of Indian religions made to seek the 'true' religion in the form of scripture and the effect this had on the development of modern Buddhism has been well documented in recent decades. For a pithy and influential argument for rebalancing our use of sources see Schopen 1991.

[5] For an overview of these sources see Salomon 1999, and for a discussion of how they affect the scholarly approach to text and canon see Salomon 2006.

[6] This is the Calcutta-Bairat minor rock edict, one of many inscriptions from the reign of the Emperor Aśoka, who is believed to have been a significant patron of Buddhism. See Hultzsch 1991: 172-4.

[7] See Schopen 1997.

[8] For example see the conversation between the monk Uttara and the king of the gods Sakka in *Aṅguttara Nikāya* 8.8, Bodhi (trans.) 2012: 1120.

teachings that are compatible with the *dharma*. Hence the Buddha is believed to have declared that any teaching – whether heard from himself or from his senior monks – can be checked against the *sūtra*s (discourses) and *vinaya* (monastic discipline) and declared to be *buddhavacana* if it is in accordance with them.[9] Of course in terms of the establishing of a scriptural corpus this is somewhat circular, as it relies upon an existing body of authoritative scriptures against which any newcomers must be tested. Nonetheless the principal would appear to be that scriptural authority comes from identification with the *dharma* rather than with the exact words of the Buddha. This fairly fluid and open definition of scripture inevitably helped the creation of a wide variety of texts and textual collections of varying types.

An early classification of Buddhist scripture is into the Tripiṭaka, or 'three baskets' of *sūtra* (discourses), *vinaya* (monastic discipline) and the somewhat later *abhidharma* (higher teachings). The antiquity of the first two of these 'baskets' is well established, since we not only have a full set of texts in the Pāli canon, but also several parallel texts from different schools of early Buddhism, largely preserved in Chinese translations. We can therefore see that a lot of the core teachings and monastic regulations – though not always down to the details – were shared across schools and must have been compiled before the various divisions in the Buddhist community that began to occur within a century or so of the Buddha's death.[10] The *abhidharma* tradition, which classified the *dharma* into a systematic account, varied significantly between the different Buddhist schools and is clearly a later scholastic tradition.

Another early classification of Buddhist scripture is into nine 'limbs' (*aṅga*s), which can be understood as genres or types of scripture. Top of the list is the *sūtra* or discourse, a teaching of the Buddha given to a particular audience. Usually these are preserved in the form of a dialogue, and so the Buddha's teaching is embedded into a story of where, when, why and to whom the teaching was given. Other textual forms fill up the list: mixed prose and verse (*geya*), verse alone (*gāthā*), ecstatic utterances (*udāna*), quotations (*ityuktaka*, literally 'thus-saids'), explanations (*vyākaraṇa*) and expansions (*vaipulya*). In addition, two explicitly narrative categories are included: stories of 'wonders' (*adbhūta*), understood to refer primarily to events in the Buddha's lifestory, and 'birth stories' (*jātaka*), which are tales of the

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[9] For example the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta* of the *Dīgha Nikāya*. Walshe (trans.) 1995: 255-6.

[10] For an overview of the history of Buddhist schools see Berkwitz 2010: 51-67.

past lives of the Buddha.[11] The inclusion of these latter categories highlights the important role of narrative – particularly stories relating to the Buddha's past and final lives – in Buddhist teaching. In practical terms all of these genres were preserved within the 'basket' of the *sūtra*s.

While explorations of genre played their part, it is the division into three baskets that appears to have the most currency in Buddhist communities both past and present. The Pāli scriptures of the Theravāda school are still classified according to this division, and evidence suggests that other schools of early Indian Buddhism also arranged their scriptures in a similar manner. Even when new texts were circulating amongst the Mahāyāna movement many were explicitly classified as *sūtra*s in order to give them the authenticity of being *buddhavacana*. Thus, having taken a broad look at the concept of scripture in Buddhism and the history of its composition and preservation, I would now like to focus on this division into three baskets. This threefold division will allow us to take a closer look at what early Buddhists – and Theravāda Buddhists to this day – consider to be the most important scriptures.

The Three Baskets of Scripture

The Buddha's Discourses

According to the Pāli scriptures, the 'Basket of Discourses' (P. *Sutta-pitaka*) contains five divisions, or *Nikāya*s: (1) *Dīgha Nikāya*, or 'long' discourses; (2) *Majjhima Nikāya*, or 'middle-length' discourses; (3) *Aṅguttara Nikāya*, or discourses that are 'numeric' in their arrangement; (4) *Saṃyutta Nikāya*, or discourses 'connected' by theme; and (5) *Khuddaka Nikāya*, the 'minor' or miscellaneous collection. Parallel collections to the first four of these texts are also found in the scriptures of other schools, and they are considered some of the oldest Buddhist texts. Their manner of collection – by length, connection, or ascending number of concepts – harks back to their oral heritage and the need for mnemonic devices. The *Dīgha* and *Majjhima* are particularly good introductions to the early Buddhist teachings, and their contents are presented largely in the form of prose dialogues between the Buddha and a variety of followers, challengers and patrons. In these texts we find all the main doctrines of early Buddhism: the impermanence and suffering inherent in all

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[11] The terms are quoted in Sanskrit. The standard Pāli listing is more or less identical: *sutta, geyya, veyyākaraṇa, gāthā, udāna, itivuttaka, jātaka, abbhutadhamma, vedalla.* A division into twelve limbs developed later and largely superceeded the ninefold classification.

existence, the affects of karma on one's rebirth and experiences, the need to control one's attachments and discipline the mind. We also find various attempts to refute the teachings of rival schools, as well as some of the earliest biographical sources for the Buddha's life and an account of past Buddhas of earlier ages.

The fifth *Nikāya* of the Pāli canon, though termed 'minor' or 'little', is actually far longer than any of the other *Nikāya*s. It contains fifteen discrete texts, some of which are understood to be the earliest extant texts of Indian Buddhism, and others of which are probably the latest to have been accepted as canonical. The *Dhammapada*, a collection of 423 verses summarizing the core teachings of Buddhism, is notable not only for its antiquity but also for being the most frequently translated Buddhist text. Complementing the simplicity and elegance of the *Dhammapada* verses, a long tradition of narrative commentary has developed, with many stories of people's past lives or adventures told to explain the occasion on which each verse was spoken by the Buddha.[12]

Another key text belonging to the *Khuddaka Nikāya* is the *Jātaka*, though traditionally only the – often enigmatic – verses of that text belong to the *Nikāya*, with the accompanying prose narrative being officially designated as commentary.[13] The *Jātaka* collection comprises around 550 stories of episodes in the past lives of the Buddha. Many are simple animal stories (the animal realm being included in the rebirth possibilities of Buddhism), while others are longer more dramatic pieces concerning complex human dilemmas. To give two examples at opposite ends of the spectrum, a popular story cycle tells of the Buddha-to-be's life as a wily monkey, who manages to outwit the attempts of a crocodile to kill and eat him. Another tells of the Buddha-to-be's birth as the wise man Mahosadha, and his ability to solve complex riddles and problems, including determining the rightful mother of a child, in a parallel story to that of King Solomon's judgement. Indeed, many stories of the *Jātaka* collection have parallels in other texts both within and outside India. Over time the stories became understood as illustrating the gradual path to buddhahood, and the qualities – such as generosity, wisdom and honesty – that had to be developed by the Buddha-to-be. A long biographical preface known as the *Nidāna-*

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[12] Roebuck's excellent 2010 translation of the *Dhammapada* for Penguin Classics contains a summary of the commentarial stories in an appendix.

[13] For a selection of stories from the Pāli *Jātaka* book see Shaw (trans.) 2006, and for a study that places *Jātaka* texts and stories into the context of the wider ideological history of Theravāda Buddhism see Appleton 2010. *Jātaka* stories were also popular outside of Theravāda Buddhism, as is evidenced by their inclusion in the list of nine 'limbs' of the teaching outlined above. For a delightful example from Sanskrit literature see Khoroche (trans.) 1989.

kathā (Story of the Beginnings) is probably the earliest full chronological outline of the Buddha's lifestory, though its dating is uncertain.[14]

The five *Nikāya*s were the subject of an extensive commentarial tradition, and this came to its height in around the fifth century CE with the work of an Indian Buddhist monk named Buddhaghosa. Buddhaghosa travelled to Sri Lanka in order to study the Pāli scriptures, and he stayed for many years studying both the core texts and the various Sinhalese commentaries that had been written on them. After proving his mettle with an outstanding treatise entitled the *Visuddhimagga* (Path of Purification), he set to work compiling Pāli commentaries that would become authoritative for Theravāda Buddhists throughout South and Southeast Asia. The commentaries – or *aṭṭhakathā*, literally 'saying what it means' – took various forms, explaining philological issues or matters of interpretation, presenting any competing understandings of a given issue (before ruling on his preferred interpretation) or providing extra narrative explanation. Most of the commentaries on the *Nikāya*s, as well as on the *Vinaya* and *Abhidhamma*, are attributed to Buddhaghosa, though some of these – including the copious *Jātaka* book – are almost certainly not his work. Other commentators took up the texts leftover by this great scholar – who was understood by some to be a future Buddha – and in due course other layers of commentary were composed as well.

While the contents of the *Nikāya*s – and especially the *Khuddaka Nikāya* – vary considerably in style, the notion that they are *sūtra* (Skt) or *sutta* (P.) is key to their position as scripture. Within a couple of centuries of the Buddha's death, adherents of the new ideology of the Mahāyāna (Great Vehicle) were circulating their own *sūtras* that communicated the philosophical teachings of emptiness, the core ideals of wisdom and compassion, and the way all beings should proceed on the *bodhisattva* path, or the path to complete buddhahood. These *sūtra*s differ in style to those of the Pāli scriptures and their early Indian parallels, yet they adopt the same genre term presumably in order to add legitimacy to a body of texts believed to have been hidden by the Buddha ready for later revelation.[15]

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[14] Jayawickrama's 1990 translation therefore makes an excellent (and relatively concise) introduction to the lifestory of the Buddha, including his long career of past lives. The *Mahāvastu* (Great Story) forms a much longer text of somewhat parallel genre and similar period of composition, from within the Mahāsāṅghika school of Indian Buddhism; see Jones (trans.) 1949-56.

[15] Mahāyāna Buddhists did not only produce *sūtras*, of course. Other genres of text also circulated, including a large body of philosophical works, and texts outlining the requirements of the *bodhisattva* path. For an excellent translation of the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā,* one of the most prominent Mahāyāna philosophical texts,

Monastic Discipline (Vinaya)

Early Buddhism was a monastic order, originally based around the idea that ordained men and women would wander in small groups, staying only a short time in any one place, except during the rainy season when travel became difficult. Gradually, with increased lay support, including significant land donations from wealthy patrons, monasticism became more settled and institutionalized. Nonetheless the ritual calendar for ordained Buddhists continued to revolve around the notion of the rainy-season retreat, the beginning and end of which were marked by ceremony. Other key rituals included the ordination of new entrants to the order, and a fortnightly recitation of the monastic regulations to re-purify the community; any transgressions of the rules were confessed at this event, and the appropriate sanctions imposed. All these rituals, and in particular the more than two hundred regulations that guided monastic life, were preserved in the Basket of the *Vinaya* (Discipline).

The *Vinaya* code, consisting both of monastic regulations and rituals, and of the stories behind their composition and preservation (including our earliest accounts of the Buddhist councils) is preserved in several extant versions. The Theravāda *Vinaya* is still in use in Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia, where the traditional division into monastic and lay Buddhist adherents is maintained. Although many branches of Mahāyāna Buddhism have rejected the traditional monastic path, the *Vinaya* text of the Mūlasarvāstivādins is authoritative in Tibet, and that of the Dharmaguptakas is preserved in Chinese translation. The variety of extant *Vinaya* texts thus provide crucial insight into lineages of early Indian Buddhism whose early *sūtra* texts are only partially preserved and no longer authoritative for any living Buddhist community.

The rules contained in the *Vinaya* are divided into categories in descending order of severity. The first four rules, if broken by a monk, lead to permanent expulsion from the order; these rules prohibit sexual intercourse, theft, murder, and falsely boasting of spiritual attainments.[16] Lesser categories of offence require a

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see Siderits and Katsura (trans.) 2013, and for a good example of a text exploring the *bodhisattva path* see Crosby and Skilton (trans.) 1995. Whether or not such texts count as 'scripture' is open to debate, especially given that both have named authors, but their influence over Buddhist communities is undeniable.

[16] Nuns have eight offences that lead to expulsion – the same four as the monks, and extras that prohibit physical contact with a man (in two rules), failing to report the expellable faults of a fellow nun, and following an expelled monk. The stories

meeting of the community, confession or training. These regulations cover everything from how to deal with monks who exhibit lustful behavior, to what possessions are permissible and how they should be apportioned, to what constitutes an appropriate place to go to the toilet. Many rules cover areas related to the Buddhist path, which requires pure morality and a clear mind for meditation, while many others are matters of ascetic decorum designed to ensure the smooth running of the monastic community. It was differences in the detail of these rules that led to divisions in the early Buddhist community, since a person is ordained into a particular *Vinaya* code.

The 'Higher Teaching' (Abhidharma)

In addition to divisions according to different interpretations of the *Vinaya*, another key divide between the different early Buddhist schools concerned their *Abhidharma* tradition, and here the variations were more significant. The *Abhidharma*, which makes up the third 'basket', is a scholastic attempt to classify the Buddhist teachings and understand the nature of reality. Several *Abhidharma* (P. *Abhidhamma*) traditions are known of, most notably those of the Theravāda school and that of the Sarvāstivādins. *Sarvāstivāda* means 'the doctrine that everything exists' and refers to that school's understanding of the momentary existence of all aspects of reality (called *dharma*s or *dhamma*s). This is in contrast to the Theravāda understanding that all aspects of reality are empty of inherent existence. This fundamental difference of understanding is just part of a broader set of differences that demonstrate the divergence of Indian Buddhist schools prior to the composition of the *Abhidharma* texts.

The Theravāda *Abhidhamma* is divided into seven sections, each of which takes a slightly different approach to the philosophical and psychological analysis of existence. Given its length and complexity, it is notable that it is not restricted to deep study by Buddhist scholars, but also holds ritual significance as symbolic of the Buddha's teachings as a whole. Two summaries of the collection are commonly used. One is the *mātikā* ('matrix') that is found in the opening book of the *Abhidhamma*, the *Dhammasaṅganī*. This matrix classifies reality into twenty-two triads and one hundred dyads, and so the totality of existence is summarized in a single chant. Another method of abbreviating the *Abhidhamma* is through including only the openings of each of the seven books, thus in a way evoking the entire

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surrounding the creation and maintenance of the nuns' order are complicated and paint an ambivalent picture of women's position within early Buddhism. Berkwitz 2010: 38-42 provides a helpful summary.

collection and the entirety of reality. Chants based on the *Abhidhamma* play an important part in rituals in the Theravāda world, perhaps especially during funerary rites.

Scripture in Buddhist Practice

We have now surveyed the main scriptures of early Buddhism, including the full canon of the Theravāda school. It is perhaps only in this latter school that the notion of canon as a closed set of authoritative scriptures makes sense. A shared acceptance of the Pāli *Nikāya*s, *Vinaya* and *Abhidhamma* binds together the rather diverse lived traditions of Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia. The commentaries of Buddhaghosa, his treatise the *Visuddhimagga*, and the extensive narrative commentaries such as the *Jātaka* book also form part of the shared scriptural heritage of Theravāda Buddhists. And while we may not have a full set of scriptures for any of the other schools of early Indian Buddhism, the extant texts demonstrate that the division into three baskets – with supplementary commentaries, treatises, and narrative collections – seems to have applied across the board. With the development of the Mahāyāna and the circulation of alternative scriptures, and with the gradual loss of Buddhism in its homeland, these early scriptures fell into obscurity.

Although the Pāli canon is authoritative for all Theravāda Buddhists, there is – as several scholars have noted – a disparity between what is listed as forming a part of the scriptural canon, and what others have called the 'practical canons' of Buddhist communities.[17] Prior to modern attempts to edit and translate the full canonical works, monastic libraries seem to have contained more vernacular, narrative or ritual texts, chanting manuals and compilations. Scriptural study remains an important part of monastic life, but a certain emphasis is placed on those scriptures most immediately present in the obligations of the monk, in particular the *Prātimokṣa* of the *Vinaya* (which is chanted every fortnight), chanting texts that are used at rituals such as funerals or merit-making ceremonies, and sermons, often with a high narrative content. While Theravāda Buddhists may nod to the authority of the *Dīgha Nikāya* or *Abhidhamma* texts, they are more likely to be familiar with *Jātaka* stories or ritual abbreviations of the *Abhidhamma*.

An important ceremony amongst Theravāda Buddhists is the *paritta* or 'protective' ritual. In it, monks chant selected scriptures for their protective power.

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[17] See Blackburn 2001 and McDaniel 2008 for two studies of Theravāda scriptural engagement, including discussion of 'practical canon' as a concept in the study of Buddhism.

The ritual relies upon the bringing together of the three 'jewels' or 'refuges' of Buddhism: the Buddha, the *dhamma* and the community of monks. While the monks chant the *dhamma* the Buddha is usually present in the form of an image, and all three jewels are linked by a sacred thread that is later divided and tied around the wrists of those present. *Paritta* ceremonies are carried out to bring benefits to all sorts of occasions, including birthdays, the building of a new house, or the beginnings and endings of rains retreats. They are also conducted in times of famine or disease, or at funerals. The texts included in the *paritta* are short extracts from the *Nikāya*s and *Vinaya*, but their assembly into a new textual collection for ritual use illustrates both the perceived potency of scripture and the flexibility in its arrangement and classification.

As well as the use of scriptural texts in various day-to-day practices, it is clear that the study and preservation of scripture is considered a highly meritorious activity, that is to say it brings good karmic merit that will result in pleasant future experiences. While gaining a better understanding of the Buddha's teachings through the study of scripture also has clear benefits, preserving and venerating scripture in the form of text is not always related to reading or understanding it. Scribal colophons indicate that great merit was believed to accrue from making a copy of a text. Often the scribe declares his intention that this merit be shared with deceased family members. Alternatively, or additionally, the scribe declares his hope that the merit will enable him to be reborn at the time of a future Buddha; rebirth at such a time is considered hugely advantageous in that it allows one to hear the teachings directly from a living Buddha.

While a certain veneration for scriptures in their physical form is present in Theravāda society, a more developed cult of the book appears to have been a part of Indian Mahāyāna tradition. Early Mahāyāna *sūtra*s contain long passages extolling the great benefits of copying the text or enshrining it, or making offerings to it. The symbolic value of the text as *dharma* (teaching, Truth) in some cases appears to have taken on more significance than an ability to understand its contents. *Seeing* the text, like *seeing* the Buddha, was believed to be incredibly potent in its ability to help a being towards enlightenment. Huge collections of manuscripts in Nepal, many of which are poorly copied and incorporate scribal errors, indicate that the injunction to copy a text for merit was taken seriously by those unable to understand the meaning of the text itself.

The idea that texts are symbolically important is linked to their identification as the '*dharma*-body' of the Buddha, that is to say a part of him living on alongside remnants of his physical body in the form of relics and images. These two forms of the Buddha's 'body' are often found paired together, for example when manuscripts are placed inside hollow Buddha images, or enshrined in reliquaries.

Through these combinations of potent leftovers from the Buddha's lifetime his presence – along with all its protective and instructive power - is invoked. While understanding the content of the text may, in such cases, be secondary, it is still important that the text is understood to contain the *dharma*, the true teaching of the Buddha. A parallel can thus be drawn with other ritual uses of scripture, for example *paritta* chanting, in which the audience may not understand the contents of what is being said, but they do trust that the words are *buddhavacana* and embody the *dharma*.

As Mahāyāna Buddhism spread east new scriptures took on particular potency. In particular the *Lotus Sūtra* became central to some movements that advocated chanting as a tool for salvation. In forms of Pure Land Buddhism, adherents use various practices including visualization and chanting in order to gain rebirth in a 'pure land', which is a special realm created by a celestial Buddha. Rebirth in a pure land is a reasonable guarantee of the eventual achievement of awakening, for once there a Buddhist is exposed to the teachings of the resident Buddha until he is ready to attain nirvana. While there are several groups with different methods for attaining this realm, Nichiren Buddhism, a form that emerged in Japan in the thirteenth century, relies upon chanting a homage to the *Lotus Sūtra*, which is believed to contain a extraordinary form of sacrality and power.[18] Once again we see a Buddhist movement using scripture in its practice, with an understanding that scripture is the source of great potency.

These few examples demonstrate the multiple ways in which scripture plays a part in Buddhist practice. While scholars have tended to be primarily concerned with the *contents* of the texts, and in particular with the contents of explicitly doctrinal and philosophical texts, in reality scripture is much more than this. Although there is great respect for the words of the Buddha amongst Buddhists, and although the Theravāda school preserves a closed canon of texts that remains authoritative for South and Southeast Asian Buddhists to this day, studying the contents of texts is only one of many ways in which Buddhists interact with their scripture. As well as communicating the teachings of the Buddha or the reality of the *dharma*, texts can also have symbolic importance and sacred power precisely because they are understood to contain the Truth. In addition, what Buddhists actually read or hear in order to access the *dharma* is often not 'scripture' in the strictest sense but rather sermons, stories or ritual chants, or later texts that provide a philosophical or systematic account of the Buddhist teachings. Just as in any other religion, scripture has a complex and multi-faceted place within the Buddhist tradition.

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[18] See Swanson 2007.

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