

Scribal and Authorial Openings in Theravāda manuscripts: Evidence from the Nevill Collection

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Complete manuscripts of Theravāda Buddhist texts almost always open with an auspicious formula in homage to the Buddha. In manuscripts from Sri Lanka, the two most common opening formulae are the expressions of homage to the Buddha so widespread in other contexts. These are usually the opening formulae of the scribe or copyist, and separate from the authorial opening of the text contained in the manuscript. The latter often has its own auspicious or formulaic opening, which is more elaborate than the scribal opening. Although scribal formulae can usually be distinguished from the beginning of the text proper, i.e. the text as created by the author or redactor, the distinction between the two is not always recognised in printed editions of Pali texts and may be unclear or blurred in the manuscripts themselves. Below I examine the evidence of Sri Lankan manuscripts, especially those of the Nevill collection of the British Library, to see what they add to our current understanding of scribal and authorial openings.

Complete manuscripts of Theravāda Buddhist texts almost always open with an auspicious formula in homage to the Buddha. In manuscripts from Sri Lanka, the two most common opening formulae are the expressions of homage to the Buddha so widespread in other contexts, namely: *namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa* ‘Homage to the Blessed Lord, the worthy, fully Awakened one’, and *namo buddhāya* ‘homage to the Buddha.’ These are usually the opening formulae of the scribe or copyist, and separate from the authorial opening of the

text contained in the manuscript. The latter often has its own auspicious or formulaic opening, which is more elaborate than the scribal opening. Although scribal formulae can usually be distinguished from the beginning of the text proper, i.e. the text as created by the author or redactor, as I shall discuss below, the distinction between the two is not always recognised in printed editions of Pali texts and may be unclear or blurred in the manuscripts themselves. Evidence that the range of manuscript openings was wider than apparent from printed textual editions, and that the *namo tassa* and *namo buddhāya* openings mentioned above are not restricted to the manuscripts of canonical and commentarial texts – contrary to some statements in previous scholarship – has already been adduced by Oskar von Hinüber from Lānnā manuscripts.¹ Below I examine the evidence of Sri Lankan manuscripts, especially those of the Nevill collection of the British Library, to see what they add to our current understanding of scribal and authorial openings.

The Nevill Collection

The Nevill Collection, housed among the Asian and Africa (formerly the Oriental and India Office) collections of the British Library, is the largest collection of Sri Lankan manuscripts outside Sri Lanka. It contains 2227 manuscripts collected by Hugh Nevill, who worked for the Ceylon Civil Service between 1869 and 1895.² Throughout his career, Nevill had enthusiastically studied different aspects of Sri Lankan history, culture, languages and natural history. While his greatest enthusiasm was for the fauna of Sri Lanka, he also took an interest in and published on the history of Buddhism in the country. This interest led him to collect this large number of manuscripts.³ From his notes, it is clear that Nevill took the trouble to seek out and have copied rare texts and particularly early copies. When he left Ceylon in 1895 he took the manuscript collection with him to France, where he died in 1897. After his death the collection was purchased by the British Museum

¹Von Hinüber 1996b. Building on von Hinüber's and Hundius' work (see bibliography) to discuss Lānnā manuscript culture more broadly, see Veidlinger 2006 Chapter Four. For a discussion of the physical form of Southeast Asian manuscripts, in particular Cambodian manuscripts, see Becchetti, who links the physical form with the purpose of the manuscript and the history of the tradition to which it belongs. She also includes some discussion of attitudes towards the sacred status of the manuscript on the basis of scribal colophons (Becchetti 1994). More recently, Berkwitz has summarised information on manuscripts from Sri Lanka and announced the new substantial Sri Lankan manuscript acquisition at Arizona State University Library (Berkwitz 2009).

²See K.D. Somadasa 1995 (Vol.7) for an outline of his life and work.

³B.C. Bloomfield and G. Marrison, "Preface" to K.D. Somadasa (1987-1995) Vol.1: vii.

(Somadasa, 1995, vol.7: x). Lionel Barnett, Keeper of Oriental Printed Books and Manuscripts at the library from 1908 to 1936, produced a handlist in 1908. The full descriptive catalogue of the Nevill Collection in seven volumes by K.D. Somadasa was completed in 1995.⁴

Distinguishing between scribal and textual opening formulae

The opening auspicious formula selected by the scribe or copyist of a manuscript is usually quite separate from any auspicious opening included by the author of the text contained in that manuscript. I emphasise that I am differentiating here between the activity of a scribe and the activity of an author or redactor.⁵ The role of the former is to reproduce a previously established text, either by copying a previously existing manuscript or by putting to the written letter an orally transmitted text. As such he has a skilled role to play in the recording and preservation of the *dhamma*, but not a creative one.⁶ Changes in the text resulting from a scribe's activity are usually the result of scribal error, even if, after generations of copying, they do result in a substantially different text. The latter, i.e. the redactor or author, consciously creates the text in the form in which it is to be transmitted. The different roles may be obscured if a scribe of an established text makes conscious efforts to correct it, perhaps seeking to solve divergent readings or recensions, for example, and thus acts as a redactor creating what is effectively a new recension of the source text. There are other exceptions. The distinction between the role of redactor and copyist may be obscured in the production of practice manuals made by the practitioner for his/her own use, as will be seen below in the case of meditation manuals. The distinction is also obscured in a different way in traditions where the act of sponsoring a copy is important for the status of the sponsor, and the act or occasion of copying is therefore recorded in greater detail. While I have not seen this reflected in Sri Lankan manuscripts, we do see it in the copies of *lik long* ('great writings') in Shan Buddhism. There the copyist

⁴Somadasa 1987-1995. Somadasa has included many of Nevill's own observations where pertinent. Berkwitz lists other catalogues and collections of Sri Lankan manuscripts (2009: 40) to which we can add Bhikkhu Nyanatusita's "Reference Table of Pali Literature" based on Sri Lankan collections. http://resolver.sub.uni-goettingen.de/purl/?gr_elib-66

⁵On this distinction in relation to the colophons of Sri Lankan manuscripts, see Berkwitz 2009: 44.

⁶Scribes or copyists are usually male, but recent findings in relation to manuscript and textual performances of the Shan suggest that occasionally scribes may be female and suggests reasons why their activity is less visible, at least in the Shan context (Crosby and Khur-Yearn 2010)

performs an enhanced, almost authorial role for the initial part of the text. He (or occasionally she) often either replaces an existing scribal introduction or adds an additional one. The scribal introduction may be a substantial piece of writing in its own right. It records details about the occasion of the copying and in particular the details of the sponsors of the copy in creative, poetic ways.⁷ However, there is still a clear, separate beginning to the main text. Thus they conform to the authorial-copyist divide that applies in most cases in Sri Lankan manuscripts, as I shall now describe.

The Beginning of a Text

An authored text begins differently from a *buddhavacana* text, a text which is considered to be the ‘word of the Buddha’. A text which is explicitly, even if anonymously, authored usually begins with a homage to the Buddha, or to the triple gem, composed by the author or redactor of that text. This contrasts with the opening of a *buddhavacana* text. For example, as is well known, most texts of the *Sutta Piṭaka*, which are, or purport to be, *buddhavacana*, that is ‘the word of the Buddha’ or canonical, open directly with the phrase *evaṃ me sutam*, ‘Thus have I heard.’ This phrase is attributed to the Buddha’s attendant Ānanda and labels the text as an account of an episode or teaching in the Buddha’s life as witnessed by Ānanda and recalled by him at the first council after the Buddha’s final *nibbāna*. Manuscripts of *buddhavacana* texts open with the scribe’s homage, e.g. the *namo tassa* formula, then proceed straight into the standard *sutta* opening *evaṃ me sutam* or directly into the verses of a text such as the *Dhammapada*. Nevill manuscript Or.6599(34) is a collection of a number of texts showing this pattern.⁸ Thus the scribe’s opening formula precedes and is in addition to either the

⁷Crosby and Khur-Yearn 2010.

⁸I am not aware of *stotra* / *vandanā gāthā* in the Theravāda manuscript tradition praising the text itself, as are found as part of the manuscript tradition of Mahāyāna *sūtra*. There the *stotra* becomes part of the text copied by the scribe and would be expected in all manuscripts of a particular text, at least in a particular recension. See Skilton 1997: 75ff., where different forms of the *stotra* of the *Samādhirājasūtra* are found in different recensions and are a feature of that recension, rather than a product of manuscript scribes, yet are clearly not part of the *buddhavacana* text. The absence of such *vandanā gāthā* (using the Theravāda term) contrasts with the existence of such a genre in praise of other sacred items, such as particular sacred trees or pilgrimage sites, and reflects perhaps a difference in attitude to the sacred text in the Theravāda tradition, in contrast to the ‘cult of the text’ found in some Mahāyāna traditions (on which, see Schopen 1975). Closer examination of the introductions in *lik long* manuscripts (see above) may alter this picture to some extent.

author's homage or the *evaṃ me sutam* formula or other *buddhavacana* signifier. If successive texts are copied into a single manuscript, the scribe repeats the opening formula before the beginning of each successive text. This is done whether the subsequent text is copied by the same or another scribe.

The devotional opening by the scribe tends to be simple compared with the more elaborate opening by an author, but it is there for some of the same reasons: because it is a traditional pattern of practice; because it is appropriate to pay homage before an undertaking; and because it ensures successful completion of the task. The author sometimes has the additional purpose of demonstrating skill in composition and, perhaps, of linking the content of his text with particularly relevant qualities of the triple gem. Thus in later Pali literature of 12th-13th-century Sri Lanka, at the height of the influence of Sanskrit *alaṃkāraśāstra* (poetics or aesthetics) on Pali literature, commentaries and manuals which allow for little display of erudition and *alaṃkāra* (poetic) techniques in the main body of the text often begin with highly sophisticated and complex introductory verses of homage to the triple gem, previous teachers in the lineage and the personal teachers or promoters of the author. They became the canvas on which the author could display his mastery of the language. In some cases, we also find that the student of an author has added some details to the beginning or end, providing similar information about the qualities of the author himself.⁹

The author-scribe distinction in relation to the *Peṭakopadesa*

In the context of his discussion of scribal practices, based mainly on the manuscript tradition of the Lānnā region of northern Thailand, von Hinüber notes one scribal opening which appears to contravene the customary simplicity noted above.¹⁰ The “unusual benediction” occurs at the opening of a copy of the *Peṭakopadesa* and reads: *namo sammāsambuddhānaṃ paramatthadassīnaṃ silādiguṇapāramippattānaṃ*, ‘Homage to all perfectly awakened Buddhas, who see the ultimate truth and have attained perfection in all the virtues beginning with moral conduct.’¹¹ In the context of scribal practice von Hinüber appears to regard this as

⁹For an example of these patterns see my discussion of the opening verses and related material for works by the 12th-century author and commentary writer Sāriputta (Crosby 2006).

¹⁰Von Hinüber 1996b: 44 note 16.

¹¹Von Hinüber 1996a: §167. Translation of the Pali mine. The list of virtues is the ten perfections, the first of which is moral conduct.

a scribe's manuscript opening.¹² The *Peṭakopadesa* is one of the earliest commentarial style texts within the Pali tradition. While it is sometimes classified as canonical, in that it is added to the *Khuddakanikāya* in Burma according to the *Piṭakat samuiṅ*,¹³ it is recognised by the tradition as an authored text rather than as *buddhavacana*. As such it lacks the *evaṃ me sutam* text opening which indicates a Buddha sermon recalled by Ānanda. It is attributed by the Theravāda tradition to the Buddha's disciple Mahākaccāyana. For example, a manuscript of the text held in the Nevill collection reads, *therassa mahā-kacchāyanassa jambuvanavāsino Peṭakopedese samattā (sic)*.¹⁴ Since it is an explicitly authored text we should expect some kind of authorial homage separate from the scribe's homage. The Nevill manuscript of this text treats the benediction noticed by von Hinüber as the opening of the text of the *Peṭakopadesa* proper, i.e. of the authored text, not the manuscript. This can be seen from two features of the manuscript. The first is the presence of a separate scribal opening: the benediction in question is preceded by the title, which is in turn preceded by the scribal opening *namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa*. Thus the manuscript is supplied with the usual scribal auspicious formula before the title. The second feature is the layout of this particular manuscript. The scribe's *namo tassa*, etc. formula and the title are centred in the middle of the folio. Somadasa recognises this as the Burmese layout, suggesting that the text was copied from a Burmese archetype.¹⁵ Following the centred benediction and title the text is then presented in the usual way, i.e. across the entire folio continuously, including the benediction *namo sammāsambuddhānaṃ* etc. noted by von Hinüber. It seems, then, that the benediction is not the product of the scribe at all, but the traditional homage of the author. Thus it does not disrupt the patterns otherwise observed by von Hinüber for Lānnā scribal openings. I also know of no other elaborate opening which has been attributed to the scribe of a Pali manuscript, in marked contrast to the range of length and style found in the scribal colophons.¹⁶ While as a manuscript opening it would indeed have been rather elaborate, as an integral part of the text it

¹²This is apparent in 1996b but not in 1996a.

¹³Von Hinüber 1996a §156.

¹⁴British Library manuscript Or. 6601(38).

¹⁵Somadasa 1987, vol.1 293.

¹⁶The colophons range from non-existent, through a simple *subham-astu*, to lengthy and informative accounts of the circumstances of the copying of the text. The most elaborate and informative scribal colophons in the Theravāda tradition seem to be those of Lānnā manuscripts. See Hundius 1990, and von Hinüber 1993 and 1996b.

is a fairly modest authorial opening. Since the *Peṭakopadesa* is one of the earliest explicitly authored texts preserved by the Theravāda tradition, this opening is of interest as the earliest example of an authorial opening homage in Pali literature. It is a far cry from the elaborate *kāvya* (formal poetic) style of authorial openings of texts composed in the 12-13th centuries, or even from the more moderately developed style of the opening verses attributed to Buddhaghosa.¹⁷

The blurring of the scribe and author distinction in practice manuals

I have drawn a contrast between authorial and scribal openings, the former being a part of the text and the latter remaining outside the text, specific to the individual manuscript. I mentioned above that the distinction may be obscured in the case of manuals copied for personal use. One such manuscript in the Nevill collection that provides an example of this contains the text *Samatha-vipassanā-Vākkapprakaraṇa*, ‘*Litany for use before Tranquillity and Insight Meditation*’, which is a manual of liturgies to accompany *yogāvacara* (also known as *borān* or *dhammakāya*) meditations.¹⁸ The auspicious opening formula *namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa* is repeated at the start of each chapter. This is possibly on the model of the repeated homage at the start of each text within a manuscript, mentioned above. Alternatively it may be the result of simple repetition of the pattern set by the first chapter, since in this text the later chapters repeat the pattern set by the first chapter, changed only by the names of the relevant meditation exercise, *kammaṭṭhāna*, for which that section of the liturgy is intended. Another possible explanation is that this text, as a manual, may well have been copied by the person who intended it for his own use. In this case, the scribe is also the practitioner. There are several related liturgies accompanying manuals of meditation practice in the collection. By ‘liturgy’ here I mean the broader ritual context, which includes the offerings to be made to both Buddha and teacher. By ‘litany’ I mean the petitions to the Buddha for success in the meditation, which must be recited before each section of the meditation practice.

¹⁷On the latter see Crosby 2003: 74ff.

¹⁸For an edition and translation of this text, see Crosby 1999, Ch.6. On the related meditation manuals see *ibid.* Ch.1. For a discussion of the nature of the *borān*, *yogāvacara* or *dhammakāya* forms of meditation see Crosby 2000. For the confirmed introduction of this tradition to Sri Lanka as part of the 18th-century reform and for a description of a recently identified Sinhala version of the story of Cittakumārī and the five-branched tree symbolising the body, which occurs in meditation texts of this tradition and has been published from Khmer sources by Bizot (1976), see Crosby, Skilton and Gunasena 2012.

Both the meditation manuals and the litany vary according to the exact range of *kammaṭṭhāna* to be practised. It therefore seems that the exact reading of the litany was based on a pool of possible components compiled to form a liturgy to match the particular practices to be followed by the owner of the accompanying meditation manual.¹⁹ In this case the scribe is also the author, in that he is creating the liturgy afresh for his own use.²⁰ Moreover, the *namo tassa* formula is not only found as a scribal opening but also commonly found in Theravādin ritual liturgies, as is widely recognised. It is a recurring component of the more traditional *okāsa vandāmi bhante*, style liturgy for the *pabbajjā*, the lower ordination ceremony, recorded by Bizot.²¹ It is in fact this traditional *pabbajjā* on which the liturgy for the preliminary rituals (*pubbakicca*) of devotion to the teacher to be performed by the meditation practitioner is based.²² The role of scribe and author merge in the *Vākkapparakaraṇa* and so the opening manuscript formula seems also to form part of the *Vākkapparakaraṇa* text. This pattern is confirmed in other manuscripts copied (and redacted) for the scribe's own personal use, including the various meditation manuals from the *yogāvacara* tradition also found in the collection.

The variety among these meditation manuals suggests that, when they circulated in Sri Lanka following their introduction from Ayutthayā to Kandy in the mid-18th century, each person redacted the instructions for meditation as best suited them. The monks of Sri Lanka studied with monks from Ayutthayā, possibly through the Pali medium. The Siamese monks transmitted through them texts not mentioned among those listed as being brought over as written texts from Siam with this same mission. There is variation in the language used (varying degrees of Pali and Sinhala), in the extent to which there is any explanation of the instructions, whether or not diagrams are provided, and in the manner of

¹⁹See Collins 1993: 3-6, for a discussion of the creation of texts on the 'gene pool' model in the context of narrative Theravāda literature.

²⁰I do not mean to suggest that all the *yogāvacara* manuscripts were copied by meditation practitioners, only that personal use is more likely to be the motive for copying an esoteric meditation manual than it is for a better known, more popular text which is copied for ceremonial or ritual use, or for use during *baṇa*. During the revival of 18th-century Sri Lanka, manuscript copying *per se* was emphasised as a religious practice in its own right, rather than as an employment to gain money. Thus this traditional belief in the merits of manuscript copying and hence preserving the dharma received fresh emphasis.

²¹Bizot 1988: 26-32.

²²The *pubbakicca* liturgy for the *yogāvacara* meditation practices is provided in the *Amatākaravaṇṇanā*. It is an adaption of the "*okāsa vandāmi bhante*" *pabbajjā*.

abbreviating what are extensive instructions – the longest involves 3,800 verses containing different instructions.²³ The resulting variety creates quite a challenge for anyone seeking to create a critical edition of these texts and perhaps necessitates, rather, a diplomatic edition of a single version. Thus each of the Sri Lankan monks was creating his particular version of the text on the basis of the oral teaching received from a Siamese teacher. The copies we have of these texts may have been the personal manuals of practitioners, and thus the scribe and ‘author’ is the same.

Most Sri Lankan manuscripts of *yogāvacara* texts, if complete, begin with an auspicious formula, usually the formula *namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammā sambuddhassa*. Manuscript Or.6601(64), *Cattālīsa kammaṭṭhāna*, is an exception in that it begins with the formula *namo buddhāya*. Some versions then additionally follow the pattern of explicitly authored texts mentioned above. Thus while the manuscripts begin with one of the two scribal formulae given here, or occasionally with no formula, but then contain authorial homages. For example, the meditation manual the *Amatākaravaṇṇanā*, which contains the highest proportion of Pali of the different versions of these manuals, provides elaborate authorial verses of homage to the triple gem.²⁴ It begins with a *vandanā* of the triple gem in verse, a homage we find in more or less the same form in each of the several extant copies of the text. Similarly the texts end with the author’s aspiration, the same in each copy. The author’s aspirations relate to the content of the text and success in the practices described in the text, these being meditation manuals. The end of the text (indicated by (title X +) *niṭṭhitam/ā*, “X is complete”) is then usually followed by a colophon giving the scribe’s aspiration for the benefits of having copied the text. While colophons are not the subject of this article, I point out that here again, the author’s conclusion, *nigamana*, must be distinguished from the colophon provided by the scribe. The scribe’s aspiration does not necessarily relate to the content of the text. They vary in the *yogāvacara* meditation manuscripts we are discussing here from a simple *subham-astu*, “May there be good”, to aspirations to rebirth in the presence of the future Buddha Metteyya, to becoming a Buddha (by achieving the perfections and saving all beings from *saṃsāra*), or both.

²³On the type of abbreviation used see Crosby 2005: 171 or 2007; see the latter for more detailed discussion of the various manuscripts of the *yogāvacara* tradition represented in the Nevill collection.

²⁴See Crosby 1999, Ch.1. The version of the *Vākkapprakaraṇa* that is almost entirely in Pali also has an opening panegyric.

Auspicious in form as well as word?

It has been suggested that the opening scribal formulae of manuscripts are auspicious not only in meaning but also in form. The auspiciousness in meaning is clear from parallels with other manuscript practices in the Indian cultural region. It is auspicious to open the manuscript with the name of the deity presiding over the area to which the text contained in the manuscript relates. Hence the Buddha's name is itself auspicious. Further, in the wider context of Buddhist practice the Buddha is an appropriate object of homage before any Buddhist undertaking, whether the action undertaken is an explicitly religious one, such as manuscript copying, or not. The formal auspiciousness of the formulae *namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa* and *namo buddhāya* may derive from the number of syllables which make up each phrase. Thus the *namo tassa* formula consists of eighteen syllables, eighteen being one of the auspicious numbers of Buddhism, the *namo buddhāya* formula has five syllables, a number also replete with sacred symbolism. One tradition within Theravāda that particularly emphasises the symbolic use of language and the powerful significance of numbers, including syllable counts, is the *yogāvacara* tradition that we have already seen attested in the aforementioned manuscripts of the Nevill collection.²⁵ Thus the *namo buddhāya* formula, one of the two most common scribal openings mentioned above, is one of the most frequently found mantras both in the *yogāvacara* tradition and in esoteric Buddhism generally. The number of its syllables, five, is particularly symbolic in esoteric traditions.²⁶ Each of its five syllables is identified with items

²⁵ Also termed Mahānikāy or non-Mahāvihārin Buddhism by Bizot and other French scholars working on the tradition in mainland Southeast Asia.

²⁶ Bizot, starting from the context of the *yogāvacara* tradition, suggests that the belief in this significance is not confined to the esoteric tradition (1994: 36-8). He supports his suggestion that the number of syllables in sacred formulae intentionally adds up to one of the various auspicious numbers in Buddhism with observations regarding the translation of sacred formulae between two different sacred languages of Buddhism. The example on which he bases his theory is the *iti pi so* formula which praises the qualities of the Buddha, Dhamma and Saṅgha. This formula is important not only in the *yogāvacara* tradition but elsewhere, both in Theravāda and the wider Buddhist tradition. It contains one hundred and eight syllables in the Pali tradition. It also contains one hundred and eight syllables in the Sanskrit of the *Mahāvīyutpatti*, even though the parallel words in the two languages would not add up to the same number were it not for some alteration in the Sanskrit/Pali. Thus an effort has been made to maintain the correct syllable count. This suggests that the syllable count is of significance, and offers circumstantial confirmation of my suggestion that the syllable count of the two most common opening formulae of Theravāda manuscripts might intentionally add up in both instances to a number auspicious in Buddhism.

in other significant sets of five. In the *yogāvacara* tradition, these tend to be important *Abhidhamma* categories, e.g. the five elements water, earth, fire, wind and space/atmosphere, or the five *khandha* “aggregates” *rūpa*, *vedanā*, *saññā*, *saṅkhāra* and *viññāna*; or other relevant groups of five, such as the qualities of mother, father, Buddha, Dhamma and Saṅgha, or the five Buddhas of this world-period (*kalpa*), Kakusandha, Konāgamana, Kassapa, Gotama and Metteyya.²⁷ In spite of the recognisable significance of syllable count in these contexts, however, it was not necessarily of significance to the scribes, as can be seen from the variety of other opening formulae and versions of the *namo tassa* formula which lack this auspicious syllable count. Other opening formulae among Lānnā manuscripts examined by von Hinüber include abbreviations of the *namo tassa* formula to *namo tass’ atthu* (‘Let there be homage to him’) or *nam’atthu* (‘Let there be homage’); additions to this formula, such as *namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa. jayatu sugatasāsanam* (‘May the dispensation of the Buddha be victorious’); a combination of both: *namo tass’ atthu. jayatu jinasāsanam*; or a different formula entirely: *svasti* (‘wellbeing’). *namo buddhāya. jayatu sugatasāsanam* and *namo buddhāya. pañca buddhā (sic) namām’aham* (‘I worship the five Buddhas’).²⁸

Re-examining the ‘rules’ of scribal openings

When making the examination of Lānnā manuscripts that I have drawn on here, von Hinüber observes, “While not too much attention was paid to the organisation of the text itself, the scribes were consistent in keeping certain rules concerning the beginning or end of the text. These rules underline the religious significance of the manuscripts.” He begins his preliminary study of the opening formula and colophons with the statement, “It is well known that a canonical Pali text or a commentary should start with the formula *namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa*. ... However, even in Theravāda the beginning of a sacred text is not as uniform as printed editions both oriental and western have it.”²⁹ Von Hinüber then notes some additions which precede or replace this formula

²⁷ See Crosby 2000 which summarises the evidence for this provided by Bizot in several publications on the Cambodian works of this tradition.

²⁸ Von Hinüber 1996b: 44-45. Von Hinüber notes as unusual the opening formula *namo buddhāya. pañca buddhā namām’ aham* on two manuscripts from northern Thailand, one a 16th century copy of the *Samantapāsādikā*, the other an 18th century copy of the *Thūpavaṃsa*.

²⁹ Von Hinüber 1996b: 43-44.

on a couple of *buddhavacana*/commentarial manuscripts and thus undermine this common knowledge.³⁰ Berkwitz observes, “The *namaskāra* that traditionally opens all Buddhist texts from Sri Lanka reads, ‘*namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa*’.”³¹ He also observes scribal insertions after this formula in manuscripts of the *Thūpavaṃsa* as well as auspicious marginalia.³² Thus both von Hinüber and Berkwitz observe some general rules while also noticing exceptions. I shall now examine what the Nevill manuscripts add to this picture.

If the implication on the part of modern editions that the *namo tassa* formula is the accepted opening only for canonical and commentarial texts were correct, it would present a further criterion beyond the *evaṃ me sutam* opening of the text itself for assessing the sacred status of the text contained in the manuscript. Such information could prove a useful tool in assessing the status of those texts regarded as *buddhavacana*, and included in the *Khuddakanikāya*, by some traditions and not by others, such as the *Peṭakopadesa* discussed above. It might further prove useful in assessing the ambiguous status of so-called apocryphal literature. An example of such an ambiguous case is presented by the manuscripts of the *Upāsakamanussavinayaṅṅānā*, a text preserved throughout Southeast Asia, recording the punishment in store for those who commit evil deeds. The punishments are given in terms of durations in particular hells, and the evil deed accorded most attention is disrespect. The text also briefly mentions the most certain way to a heavenly rebirth, namely having one’s son or daughter enter the *saṅgha*, suggesting that it predates the end of the nuns’ (*bhikkhuni*) ordination lineage.³³ The entire text is presented as a teaching given by the Buddha to Ānanda. It is thus presented as the word of the Buddha, i.e. *buddhavacana*. Unlike such discourses preserved in the main body of the canon, however, it does not begin with the *evaṃ me sutam* formula. Rather it begins with an invitation in verse to listen to the text:

*saṃsāre saṃsarantāṇaṃ manussānaṃ hitāvahaṃ
kāruṇṇeṇeva desesi manussavinayaṃ imaṃ
suṇantā sādhukaṇṇeṇeva suṇantu jīnadesitaṃ*

”He taught this Code of Conduct for Mankind solely from compassion

³⁰ *ibid.*: 43-44.

³¹ Berkwitz 2009: 49 note 18.

³² Berkwitz 2009: 44.

³³ See Crosby 2006 for a more detailed discussion of this text.

since it brings benefit to the people trapped in the cycle of *saṃsāra*.
Listening attentively, may people hear it as taught by the Conqueror!”

After the *evaṃ me suttaṃ* opening, a canonical *sutta* would then proceed to set the scene for the Buddha to teach the ensuing discourse. In doing so a canonical *sutta* follows a standard formula. The only variants possible in the standard scene-setting formula are the name of the city near which the Buddha is residing and the name of the location in which the Buddha gives his teaching. The most frequently named city is Sāvattihī (Sanskrit *Śrāvastī*) and the most frequently named location is Anāthapiṇḍaka’s *ārāma* in Jeta’s grove. Thus the typical scene-setting formula in the *Suttapīṭaka* reads as follows,

*Ekam samayaṃ bhagavā Sāvattihīyaṃ viharati Jetavane Anāthapiṇḍikassa
ārāme.*³⁴

”At one time the Lord was living at Sāvattihī in Anāthapiṇḍaka’s park
in Jeta’s grove.”

In the particular text quoted here, the discourse takes the form of a dialogue between the Buddha and Ānanda, which is again presented in formulaic terms:³⁵ in the *Dīghanikāya*.

*Atha kho āyasmā Ānando yena Bhagavā ten’upasaṅkami, upasaṅkamitvā
bhagavantam abhivādetvā ekam antaṃ nisīdi. ekam antaṃ nisinno
kho āyasmā Ānando Bhagavantam etad avoca ‘kimatthiyāni bhante
kusalāni silāni kimānisaṃsānī’ ti?*

”At that time the venerable Ānanda approached the Lord (*bhagavā*).
On approaching the Lord he addressed him, then sat down to one
side. Once seated the venerable Ānanda said the following to the
Lord: “Lord, what is the purpose of wholesome behaviour, of what
benefit are virtuous actions?”

The last sentence, Ānanda’s question, is specific to this particular text and the discourse is the Buddha’s teaching on the subject in response to this and further questions by Ānanda.

³⁴Taken from *Aṅguttara-nikāya, Dasaka-nipāta* I PTS vol V: 1.

³⁵See Allon 1997, chapter 1 for an analysis of the variety of approach formulae using [upasaṅkamati

The *Upāsakamanussavinaya* also places the Buddha in that same location, namely in Jeta's grove near the city of Sāvattihī, and again presents the discourse as a teaching to Ānanda, but unlike the canonical text of the Buddha's teaching quoted above, it does not use the standardised formulae. Rather it reads as follows:

sāvattihinagaraṃ upanissāya jetavane viharanto sammāsambuddho mahākāruṇṇe samāpattito vutthāya dibbacakkhunā veneyyabandhave oloketvā ānandaṃ āmantesi ehānanda mama santikā dhammaṃ sunāhīti vatvā dhammaṃ desento satthā idhānanda saṃsāre bahujaṇā saṃsarantā pāpakammāni karonti.

”While dwelling in Jeta's grove close to the city of Sāvattihī, the perfectly awakened one (*sammāsambuddho*), who had attained perfection in great compassion, stood up and after observing with his divine eye kinsmen in need of training he summoned Ānanda. ‘Come Ānanda, listen to a teaching of the *dharma* from me’. So saying the teacher proceeded to teach the *dharma*: “Now, Ānanda, many people while caught in the cycle of *saṃsāra* commit evil deeds...”

The *Upāsakamanussavinaya* purports to recount a story of the Buddha giving a sermon to Ānanda, but while presenting the same details of where and how the teaching came about as does the text from the canon, it uses none of the pericopes found in the canon. Moreover, the language is reminiscent of commentarial style.

The unstandardised nature of the opening of the *Upāsakamanussavinaya* could be used to argue that the text is late because it is not using the standardised formulae used by the early tradition to memorize the events of the Buddha's life. Alternatively it could be interpreted as reflecting an early tradition uncontaminated by the superimposition of standardisation.³⁶ Allon argues that the standardised formulae in the Pali canon are mnemonics and a feature of the oral nature of the Pali canon.³⁷ He rejects the idea of an imposed standardisation on existing canonical literature because, as his study of the Pali canon reveals, the standardisation is sophisticated, with subtle variations according to

³⁶Both Schopen and Allon discuss the interpretations of a number of previous scholars who have analysed the style of the canon with a view to assessing its orality (and hence earliness) or otherwise. Schopen 1997: 571-572; Allon 1997: 2-7.

³⁷Allon op.cit. 162. The view rejected is that held by Parry and, in particular, Lord.

the actors, narrator and action of a particular text. It is part of the creative process of developing a text for oral transmission, not blindly applied afterwards. This then leads to the conclusion that texts purporting to present the word of the Buddha that are not in this form are late and to some extent inauthentic or ‘apocryphal’. On the other hand, one could interpret texts that are unstandardised as the products of an old oral tradition and use the same data of standardised formulae in the canon to argue the opposite case, namely that the canon’s style is symptomatic of a high degree of editing and intervention in the text. There is, after all, no reason to assume that large-scale editing and standardisation need be an unsophisticated process. Applying the *evaṃ me sutam* formula to a text was clearly understood as marking a text as *buddhavacana*. This is one of the changes made to existing texts in the process of transforming them into Mahāyāna *sūtras* and in the formation of the ‘apocryphal’ *suttas* of Theravāda.³⁸ The passage from the *Kṣudrakavastu* of the *Mūlasarvāstivādaśāstra* studied by Schopen provides guidance for the selection of appropriate standardized formulae into which to set stories of which such details are forgotten or unknown.³⁹ It shows some degree of the sophisticated variation pointed out by Allon. Given these opposite possible interpretations of the *evaṃ me sutam* and other standardised formulae, the specific connotations behind the opening formulae used by scribes in the writing of manuscripts of such a text could gain greater significance. In this case, the scribal formula chosen by the copyist might then indicate to us whether a text such as the *Upāsakamanussavinayaṅṅāna* was regarded as authentic *buddhavacana* by the tradition that preserved it. The *Upāsakamanussavinayaṅṅāna* is in fact preserved in manuscripts with the opening formula *namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa*. Since it is not presented as a commentary, the formula could indicate that it was regarded as canonical.⁴⁰

We have now had two separate examples of texts which do not fit into the categories of canon or commentary, yet are preserved in manuscripts with the opening formula *namo tassa bhagavato sammāsambuddhassa*: the *yogāvacara* meditation and liturgy manuals on the one hand, and the apocryphal *sutta*, the

³⁸Hallisey proposes the phrase ‘allegedly non-canonical’ to “the alternative designations ‘apocryphal’ or ‘counterfeit’, since it is less likely to pre-judge the whole issue of the status of such texts.” (1993: 97, note 2).

³⁹Schopen 1997.

⁴⁰The term *vaṅṅāna* does not necessarily mean ‘commentary’ in text titles of Southeast Asia, although – as already observed – some of the language used is closer to that used by commentaries when glossing the main text.

Upāsakamanussavinayaṇṇanā, on the other. We have reason to be uncertain regarding the perceived status of both examples. Their preservation with scribal opening formulae also found in the manuscripts of canonical and commentarial texts adds to the doubt cast on the association of these formulae with these two genres of texts by von Hinüber in relation to northern Thai manuscripts.

Von Hinüber's discussion rests mainly on the c. 140 northern Thai Pali manuscripts in the monastic library of Wat Lai Hin near Lampang.⁴¹ Further to test the patterns of association between scribal opening and the content of a manuscript in relation to Sri Lankan manuscripts, I shall summarise the evidence of other Nevill manuscripts. While the 2227 manuscripts of the Nevill collection represent a much bigger database than the Wat Lai Hin library, it has a much shorter time span. The oldest dated Wat Lai Hin manuscript dates from 1471, and others range from the 15th to the 18th centuries. In contrast, the Nevill manuscripts date primarily from the 18th and 19th centuries, with a significant number from the seventeenth. Only a handful are dated prior to the 17th-century, mostly on palaeographical grounds, and few of those are undamaged at the beginning. Further, the colophons of the Sinhalese manuscripts are on the whole far less informative than the northern Thai manuscripts about provenance, date, motivation and ownership.

Not all of the Nevill collection manuscripts are explicitly Buddhist. Other subjects represented include history, geography, ethnography, grammar, medicine, astrology, music, poetry, texts to deities such as Pattini, eulogies of individuals, both Sri Lankan and European, etc. Focusing on texts explicitly related to Buddhism in some way, we find that the *namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammā sambuddhassa* formula is by far the most common opening, followed in popularity by the opening *namo buddhāya*.

Copies of the following types of text are found with the opening homage *namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa*:

- Pali canonical texts including 'apocryphal' *sutta*;
- *atthakathā*, *ṭīkā*;
- *abhidhamma-mātikā*;
- *paritta*;
- the vast majority of the very numerous word-for-word glosses, translations and explanations in Sinhala of *sutta*, sacred formulae, *pāṭimokkha* etc.;

⁴¹ Von Hinüber 1996b: 35.

- Sinhalese commentaries, retellings and summaries of *sutta*, of episodes from commentaries, of *jātaka* tales;
- anthologies, e.g. *Suttasaṅgaha*, *Upāsakajanālaṃkāra*;
- *Sahassavatthupparāṇam*;
- *Buddhavandanā*;
- *ānisaṃsa* (text on the merits of particular types of religious activities);
- Sinhalese texts listing the details of previous Buddhas, the lives of the Bodhisatta;
- Sinhalese biographies of the Buddha;
- Sinhalese Paritta commentaries, collections of ritual formulae, e.g. precepts or magical formulae to be used for protection/ healing;
- meditation manuals including *yogāvacara* meditation manuals;
- Sinhalese translations of *Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha*, Sinhalese translations of Buddhaghosa's *Visuddhimagga*, Sinhalese translations of the *Jinacarita*;
- medieval *vinaya* handbooks in Pali or Sinhala, including the *Khuddasikkhā*, *Mūlasikkhā*, *Uposathavidhi*, *kammavācā*; glossaries of *vinaya* terms;
- *Saddharmālaṅkāraya*; *pūjākathā*, chapters from the *Pūjāvalī*;
- sacred cosmology;
- descriptions of first Buddha image, of first council, Sinhalese description of first council;
- chronicles incl. the *Thūpavaṃsa*;
- *Abhidhamma* manuals/anthologies including the *Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha*;
- *Dasabodhisattupattikathā*;
- texts for lay conduct, e.g. *Gihivinaya*, *Upāsakamanussavinaya*; hell texts;
- Pali poems on Buddhist subjects, e.g. by the 18th-century Saṅgharāja Saraṇaṃkara
- *Saddhamma-saṅgaha* ('history of sacred literature')

The length and range of this list of types of texts preceded by the *namo tassa* formula demonstrates overwhelmingly that this formula is by no means restricted to canonical and commentarial texts in the late medieval manuscript tradition of Sri Lankan Theravāda. A great variety of treatises and poetry in both Pali and Sinhala are also found preceded by the *namo tassa* formula. It is clear that the *namo tassa* formula is not exclusive to manuscripts of canonical and commentarial texts. The next step is to see whether manuscripts of such texts exclusively begin with the *namo tassa* formula, or also with other formulae.

The second most common opening auspicious formula is the *namo buddhāya*. The frequency of this formula in the Nevill collection is in contrast to the scarcity of it in the Vat Lai Hin collection noticed by von Hinüber, where it occurs in only two manuscripts, a Vinaya text from the 18th century and a Jātaka from c. 1500 C.E., although it also occurs there as a component of other opening formulae in several manuscripts.⁴²

In the Nevill collection the following types of texts are found in manuscripts which begin with the *namo buddhāya* formula:

- *sutta*, including apocryphal *sutta*;
- commentaries;
- Sinhalese commentaries on non-canonical texts;
- Sinhalese word for word glosses, translation and retellings of *suttas*, *jātakas*, *vandanā* and sacred formulae;
- *ānisaṃsa*;
- *vinaya* commentaries, manuals and summaries incl. *Mūlasikkhā*, *kāmāvācā*;
- *katikāvata*; meditation manuals including one *yogāvacara* manual;
- Sinhalese religious works on topics such as the *pāramī*;
- Pali poems;
- human and veterinary medical texts employing *mantra/yantra/paritta*/power of Buddha's qualities;
- 'tantric'/ritual texts re *mantra*, *yantra*, compilations of *mantra*;
- Sanskrit *stotra*;⁴³
- treatises on how to make *kaṭhina* robes and thanksgiving for gifts of robes;
- treatises on causes of earthquakes;
- *śilpa-śāstra*;
- aspiration verses.

From this list it can be seen that the *namo buddhāya* formula is found on manuscripts of canonical works and commentaries. This means that the *namo tassa* formula was not universally regarded as the only appropriate opening for a manuscript of a canonical or commentarial text. The number of canonical and commentarial manuscripts opening with *namo buddhāya* is however far fewer than those using the *namo tassa* formula, with c.90% preceded by the *namo tassa*

⁴² Von Hinüber 1996b: 45.

⁴³ The *namo buddhāya* formula is the same in Sanskrit and Pali, unlike the *namo tassa* formula.

formula. Sinhalese commentaries and retellings likewise usually begin with the *namo tassa* formula, even though a few have *namo buddhāya*.⁴⁴

Manuscripts containing scientific, medical and ritual texts more commonly open with *namo buddhāya*, although they also often have no opening formula at all, perhaps because – as with the meditation manuals – they are copied by the practitioner himself for personal use. The distinction between a *paritta* text and a text of *paritta* for medical purposes is not always clear. Manuscripts of medical texts also often open with homage to the Buddha in the form *namas sarvajñāya*⁴⁵, “Homage to the omniscient one,” or *namaḥ śrīghanāya*, an epithet of the Buddha more familiar in Mahāyāna contexts. Medical texts which seek to harness the powers of both the Buddha or the three jewels and the Sinhalese pantheon pay homage to both the Buddha and the appropriate deity, with the Buddha placed first.

Conclusions

We have seen that in the majority of cases scribal openings to manuscripts are to be distinguished from textual openings, be these canonical or authorial. Making this distinction allows us to identify the authorial opening of the *Peṭakopadesa* as the earliest in Pali literature, and a modest precursor of later authorial practice. We have also seen that there may be no absolute distinction in the case of manuscripts that functioned as practice manuals for the person who copied them, as is the case with the *yogāvacara* meditation manuals preserved in the Nevill collection. We explored the relatively large number of manuscripts in the Nevill collection to assess the possibility that the scribal openings had a further significance in reflecting the religious status of the text they introduced, as had been suggested in previous scholarship.

This exploration added to the information provided by von Hinüber and Berkwitz, which hinted that earlier assumptions had been too universalised. While there appear to be general tendencies in the Sri Lankan manuscripts of the Nevill collection for some types of text to be preceded by one formula in preference to the other, the usage of the opening formulae is not exclusive or even strongly

⁴⁴I had initially intended to develop a statistical analysis of the manuscript openings in the Nevill collection, but given the lack of variety and the non-specificity of the openings I do not anticipate such a study bearing useful results.

⁴⁵Cf. von Hinüber “A probably unique opening formula is: nama’ sarbbajñāya. purrb-
bācāryebhyo ..., Adhikamāsavinicichāy, CS 940: A.D. 1578” (ibid. 44 note 14)

normative. The same text may be found in multiple copies introduced by the *namo tassa* formula on some and the *namo buddhāya* on others, as is the case, for example, with two copies of the *Vammikasūtrasannaya* and two copies of the identical *bodhivandanā*. The scribes do not therefore seem to have been so “consistent in keeping certain rules concerning the beginning ... of a text” after all. The types of text listed are all in some way representative of Buddhist religion and thus both formulae do to some extent “underline the religious significance of the manuscripts”⁴⁶ (we would not expect to find either formula on a completely un-Buddhist text), but they do not define their contents as closely as we might hope. The one formula that appears to be fairly specific to content is the formula *namo sarvajñāya*, “homage to the omniscient one.” However, it is not specific to one particular religion, but rather used as an epithet of the relevant deity/Buddha worshipped by the author/owner. One medical text, owned by a Christian apothecary, for example, further describes the *sarvajña* referred to in the homage as having blue eyes, perhaps a reference to Christ’s Dutch or Victorian British manifestation. Thus the *sarvajña/sabbañña* formula is mostly found on what we might call scientific texts, such as *śāstra* or medical texts, where invoking the quality of omniscience in the object of homage seems particularly appropriate.

The two most common formulae for the opening of Buddhist manuscripts in late medieval Sinhalese manuscripts, *namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammā sambuddhassa* and *namo buddhāya*, are not used exclusively for particular genres of Buddhist texts. Nor does there seem to be a change in the usage over the period under consideration (17th-19th centuries). It is unclear whether one or the other of the two formulae was popular with different monastic or other traditions, or a matter of scribal preference, since insufficient data of this kind are provided in the colophons of the Nevill manuscripts. Even if it we had more data, such detail would be hard to ascertain, given the frequency of the *namo tassa* and *namo buddhāya* formula. The *namo tassa* opening of the European and Burmese editions of canonical and commentarial works does not, then, reflect the variety of practice in Sri Lankan manuscripts.

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⁴⁶ibid. 1996b: 43.

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