

## PROTESTANT PRESUPPOSITIONS AND THE STUDY OF THE EARLY BUDDHIST ORAL TRADITION

NATHAN MCGOVERN

Although the study of the early Buddhist texts as products of an oral tradition is relatively young, scholarly opinion is nonetheless essentially unanimous that these early Buddhist texts<sup>1</sup> were indeed originally oral. Mark Allon, the author of the most comprehensive study to date of the early Buddhist texts as oral literature, gives five reasons for this scholarly consensus:

1. The Pali Nikāyas do not refer to writing, but do refer frequently to learning and reciting *suttas*.
2. Although a few passages in the Pali *Vinaya* refer to writing, they do not refer to the use of writing to create and preserve texts.
3. The Pali *Vinaya* has rules governing all possible monastic possessions, but none for writing materials.
4. There is no archaeological evidence for the use of writing in India prior to Aśoka.
5. The early texts bear stylistic features characteristic of oral tradition. (Allon 1997b: 1)

This last reason, which refers to the repetitive and formulaic style of the early Buddhist texts, is immediately obvious to anyone who has ever read one of them, whether in an original Indian language or in an ancient or modern translation.

Unfortunately, we know very little about how exactly the early Buddhist oral traditions worked – that is, how and when they came into being

<sup>1</sup> By “early Buddhist texts” I mean the contents of the Pali *Tiṭṭhaka* and analogous texts that have been preserved in Sanskrit, Chinese, and Tibetan, and other languages – that is, most of the pre-Mahāyāna literature.

in the first place<sup>2</sup> and how exactly they originally composed and then transmitted the texts that have come down to us. We do know, mostly from the Pali commentarial tradition, that such an oral tradition existed, that the agents of that tradition were called *bhāṇakas* (lit., “speakers,” from  $\sqrt{bhaṇ}$ , “to speak”), and that these *bhāṇakas* were divided according to specialization in a certain collection of texts, such as the *Majjhima-nikāya*.<sup>3</sup> We also have epigraphical evidence for the existence of a fairly developed *bhāṇaka* tradition, apparently antecedent to the written Pali tradition of Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia, in what is now Madhya Pradesh, dating to the Śūṅga period (2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE) (Lamotte 1988 [1958]: 150 [164–165], 414 [455]).

In a short article published in 1983, Lance Cousins proposed that we could better understand the early Buddhist literature by applying a theory from the field of Classics, the so-called “Oral Theory” first developed by Milmann Parry and Albert Lord. This theory was originally developed by Parry and Lord to explain the composition of the Greek epics the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. They noticed certain similarities, especially in the use of clichéd, formulaic language, to a living oral tradition in what was then Yugoslavia, in which bards sang epic tales without strictly memorizing them, making use of stock formulas to aid them in spontaneously but conservatively improvising the song with each performance. Cousins argued that the early Buddhist literature bears the same features and thus should be studied in light of the insights of Oral Theory. He writes,

The sutta literature shows all the marks of such an approach. It is quite evident that if we compare the Pali recension of the nikayas with other surviving versions, the differences we find are exactly those we might

<sup>2</sup> Traditionally, of course, the Buddhist oral tradition began with the first *saṅgīti* (lit., “singing together”) immediately after the Buddha’s death. Modern scholarship, however, has been skeptical of the historicity of this first *saṅgīti* at Rājagṛha (less so, however, of the second, held at Vaiśālī about 100 years later), and the Buddhist traditions themselves are inconsistent as to what exactly was recited at that first communal recitation. For a translation of all five accounts of the first two *saṅgītis* (from the Theravāda, Mahāsāṃghika, Sarvāstivāda, Dharmaguptaka, and Mahīśāsaka *Vinayas*), as well as a summary of scholarly opinions on their historicity, see Anuruddha Thera et al. 2008.

<sup>3</sup> On the *bhāṇaka*-tradition as described the Pali *Aṭṭhakathās*, see Adikaram 1946: 24–32 and Mori Sodo 1990.

expect to discover between different performances of oral works. The titles tend to change, the location may alter, material is abridged here, expanded there. Even within the existing canon we find a great deal of this kind of thing. Indeed the four great nikayas often read as if they were simply different performances of the same material (Cousins 1983: 2).

This led Cousins to conclude that in the earliest period, the Buddhist oral *sūtra* tradition had a “strong improvisatory element” (Cousins 1983: 9).

Since Cousins published this article, a few scholars have studied the applicability of Oral Theory to the early Buddhist *sūtra* literature.<sup>4</sup> With the notable exception of Rupert Gethin,<sup>5</sup> most (Richard Gombrich, Mark Allon, Alexander Wynne, Anālayo Bhikkhu) have been sharply critical of Cousins’ argument for an improvisatory element to the early Buddhist literature, preferring to understand the formulas found in that literature as aids in the deliberate memorization of fixed texts. In this article, which I dedicate to the memory of Lance Cousins, I will argue that Cousins’ original insight was correct, that the early Buddhist literature did operate according to semi-improvisatory principles as predicted by the Oral Theory, and that the theory that the early Buddhist *sūtras* were transmitted through deliberate memorization is not supported by the evidence. In a conversation in the year before his death, Cousins expressed to me that his critics do not appear to fully understand what “improvisation” means in the context of Oral Theory. I will therefore begin with a brief overview of the Oral Theory, which as originating in Classics may in any case be unfamiliar to a broader Buddhist Studies audience. I will then address the arguments made against “improvisation” by Cousins’ critics in light of Oral Theory and present the actual evidence for the applicability of Oral

<sup>4</sup> Of course, a wider circle of scholars have studied the early Buddhist literature as oral literature, but without contributing as specifically to the debate about the applicability of Oral Theory from Classics. Important examples include Harrison 1992, Hinüber 1989, Hinüber 1993, Hinüber 1994, and Lopez 1995.

<sup>5</sup> And perhaps also Oskar von Hinüber, who in his important work on the orality of early Buddhist texts does not state a firm position on the applicability of Oral Theory but seems to be sympathetic to it. See Hinüber 1993: 104, in which he refers to Oral Theory in explaining the presence of formulas in the early Buddhist texts, and Hinüber 1994: 25, in which he states that “während des Umsetzungsprozesses in die Westsprache neue Formeln geschaffen und damit die Texte gestaltet werden konnten, die Umsetzung sich also nicht streng an einen bereits vorgegebenen Wortlaut zu halten gezwungen war.”

Theory to the early Buddhist *sūtras* through a detailed comparison of one particular Pali *sutta* to its corresponding *sūtra* in the Chinese Āgamas. Finally, I will conclude by discussing some methodological issues that I believe explain why there has been such resistance to the full-fledged application of Oral Theory to the early Buddhist literature, as well as some of the implications of Oral Theory for the fruitful study of early Buddhism.

### **The Oral Theory of Milman Parry and Albert Lord**

Oral Theory has its roots in the work, during the late 1920s and 1930s, of Milman Parry, a classicist who specialized in ancient Greek epic.<sup>6</sup> Parry's work was concerned with the so-called "Homeric Question" – the observation, found occasionally in ancient and medieval works, but not pursued in earnest until the 19<sup>th</sup> century, that Homer's epics are qualitatively different from later literature, insofar as they are characterized by the use of repetitive language and clichéd expressions. Those who, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, sought to solve the Homeric Question were looking for a way to explain how the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* came into being, and in doing so, they generally fell into two schools of thought – "Analysts" believed that the ancient Greek epics were composite texts, and so they attempted to analyze them into strata in order to identify the "original" text, while "Unitarians" rejected this approach and argued that the epics were of unitary authorship. Both of these camps, however, based their view on the assumption that one could speak of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, in ancient times, as stable "texts"; they simply disagreed as to whether the texts that have come down to us under those names represent the "original" texts or not. Milman Parry rendered the entire Analyst-Unitarian debate obsolete, and effectively solved the Homeric Question, by abandoning this assumption, and arguing instead that the Homeric epics were the product of an *oral tradition*, a *process* of development whereby an epic story was told over and over again, without the benefit of the

<sup>6</sup> A useful overview of Milman Parry's life and work can be found in the introduction to his collected papers, edited and published posthumously by his son Adam (Parry 1972: ix–lxii).

technologies of literacy, by bards who did not simply recite the epics word-for-word from memory, but literally *retold* them each time, thus introducing novel features with each new bard and each new performance.<sup>7</sup>

The way in which the ancient bards were able to accomplish this impressive feat (the *Iliad*, at least in the form of the performance that was recorded in writing, is over 15,000 lines long, and the *Odyssey*, over 12,000), Parry argued, was through the use of what he called formulas – i.e., the very stereotyped expressions that had instigated the Homeric Question in the first place. The use of formulas allowed the ancient bards to propel the narrative forward while still maintaining meter. In order to substantiate this theory, Parry set out to what was then Yugoslavia in order to record a living epic tradition, in which, he found, bards indeed give extemporaneous performances of verse epics, to the order of thousands of lines, in the process making use of stock expressions like the formulas found in Homer. Unfortunately, however, Parry was accidentally shot and killed shortly after returning from Yugoslavia in 1935, when he was only 33 years old (Parry 1972: ix, xli). His comparative work, however, was continued by his student and field assistant Albert Bates Lord, who finally published a full, book-length treatment of the Oral Theory he and his late mentor had pioneered, *The Singer of Tales*, in 1964. The publication of this work instigated research into the oral features of literature in not only Ancient Greek and modern Serbo-Croatian, but also Old English, Old French, and a host of other languages – including, as we shall see, Middle Indic.

Since I will be referring to them repeatedly in this article in application to the early Buddhist texts, it will be useful to define here the key technical terms that have been used by Parry, Lord, and their followers in articulating and applying the Oral Theory. The first and most fundamental of these is the concept of the *formula*. Parry himself, in an oft-quoted

<sup>7</sup> See Parry 1972: x–xxi and Foley 1981: 28–32. Foley’s introduction to *Oral Traditional Literature* (Foley 1981) provides a useful overview of the field of oral theory up to the date of publication, although it focuses primarily on work on Old English poetry. A more comprehensive and slightly more up-to-date overview of the field can be found in the Introduction (pp. 3–77) to John Miles Foley, *Oral-Formulaic Theory and Research: An Introduction and Annotated Bibliography* (1985).

passage, defined the formula, within the Homeric context at least, as “*a group of words which is regularly employed under the same metrical conditions to express a given essential idea.*”<sup>8</sup> Parry, as well as Lord and their followers after him, studied *verse* epic, and so his definition of the formula was conditioned by the particular restrictions imposed by extemporaneous *metrical* composition. The work of Parry and Lord showed that oral epic poetry is possible precisely because bards have memorized a whole set of stock expressions that they can draw from at will when they want to express a particular idea at a particular point in the meter. Oral poets of this type do not have the luxury of pondering what to say next, reviewing what they have already said, or revising what they have already said in the same way as do literate authors, and formulas enable them to retell a particular story with a degree of consistency, with the speed demanded by oral performance, and in the form demanded by meter.

The second key technical term associated with the Oral Theory is the *theme*. Indeed, it is themes, together with meter, that determine what particular formulas can be chosen from for use at a particular point in an oral epic performance. The theme, as Lord defines it, is a “group of ideas regularly used in telling a tale in the formulaic style of traditional song” (Lord 1964: 68). As an example, Lord cites the theme of the “council,” which he calls “one of the most common and most useful themes in all epic poetry” (Lord 1964: 68). In this particular example, at any relevant point in an epic performance, a king may summon his councilors together for advice; since this can be a rather frequent occurrence even in a single epic performance, the epic poet describes councils each time they arise in a similar way, and thus “the council” becomes a particular “theme” in his poetry. In this way, themes drive the epic performance on the narrative level in a manner analogous to the way in which formulas drive it on the level of the verse. Lord is at pains to point out, however, that unlike the formula, “[t]he theme, even though it is verbal, is not any fixed set of words, but a grouping of ideas.” He does concede, though, that “[s]ome singers ... do not change their wording much from one

<sup>8</sup> Parry 1972: 272, italics in the original. Albert Lord quotes this definition at the beginning of his chapter on “The Formula” in *The Singer of Tales* (1964: 30).

singing to another, especially if the song is one that they sing often” (Lord 1964: 69).

The third and final technical term that is associated with the Parry-Lord Theory is *tradition*. Lord defines an oral tradition as “the body of formulas, themes, and songs that have existed in the repertoires of singers or story tellers in a given area over usually a long period of time” (Lord 1975: 17). Thus, the Parry-Lord Theory argues that Homer neither, on the one hand, composed the *Iliad* and *Odyssey in toto* from scratch by the workings of creative genius, nor, on the other, did he compile them piecemeal by borrowing from earlier works. Instead, the texts of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are recordings of particular performances of those epics made by a particularly renowned bard, presumably named Homer, who was trained and operated within an oral tradition that likely went back many generations before him. The comparison to Serbo-Croatian epic poetry instigated by Parry and carried out by Lord was intended to demonstrate the existence of such a living oral tradition and to show that the poetry it produces has features in common with the Homeric epics. In a sense, the concept of tradition is the most central concept of the Parry-Lord Oral Theory because it revolutionized the study of Homeric epic and other “literatures” that came to be recognized as products of an oral tradition. No longer could such “texts” be studied in the same way as written texts, as if they were either written down or compiled at a single moment in history; instead, they must be understood as products of constant telling and retelling over the course of many generations, conditioned by the commonalities introduced by shared themes and formulas, but with a degree of uniqueness to each performance. As Lord writes, “Forcing traditional literature, which ... is traditional by its origin and nature, into the straight-jacket of synchronic observation is to distort it beyond recognition” (Lord 1986: 468).

### **Applying the Oral Theory to the Early Buddhist Texts**

Let us begin with the most expansive concept within the Parry-Lord Theory, that of the *tradition*. In the context of the early Buddhist texts, “oral tradition” would naturally refer to the tradition – or rather, traditions – of oral recitation of which the early Buddhist texts that have come down to

us in written form were particular performances. This would include, of course, the texts of the Pali Canon, but also<sup>9</sup> the Āgamas, Vinayas, and Abhidharma texts that have been preserved in the Chinese *Tripitaka* (大三藏),<sup>10</sup> as well as various individual (pre-Mahāyāna) *sūtras* and fragments that have been preserved in Chinese, Tibetan, Sanskrit, Gāndhārī, and other languages. The nascent field of Comparative Āgama Studies<sup>11</sup> is concerned with studying the early Buddhist oral tradition as preserved in the texts of the *Suttapiṭaka* in Pali; the four Āgamas preserved in Chinese; and certain parallels found in other Pali, Chinese, Sanskrit, and Tibetan texts.

Within the context of the early Buddhist oral tradition thus defined, Lord's concept of the *theme* can most often be usefully applied at the level of the *sūtra*, since within this tradition, the *sūtra* is the most basic unit at which a "group of ideas [is] regularly used [to tell] a tale in [a] formulaic style."<sup>12</sup> In this respect, the early Buddhist oral tradition is different from the oral traditions studied by Parry and Lord insofar as it is not a tradition of oral *epic*, and therefore the texts performed by the tradition are usually not long, extended narratives constructed out of a succession of many themes, but rather short texts each governed by a single theme. Such themes can be easily discerned within the early

<sup>9</sup> By far the single most useful tool for comparing the different performances of early Buddhist *sūtras* that is available today is "Sutta Central" [[www.suttacentral.net](http://www.suttacentral.net)], which was created by Roderick Bucknell and Bhikkhus Anālayo and Sujāto. This website not only allows one to view, through simple hyperlink navigation, the cross-linked parallels to any given *sūtra* found within any of the published collections of texts in eight languages (Pali, Chinese, Tibetan, Sanskrit, Prakrit, Gāndhārī, Khotanese, and Uighur) that have been entered into the website's database; it also allows one to instantaneously view any original source text or translation into a modern European language that is available for free on the internet.

<sup>10</sup> This is not to say that all or even most early Buddhist texts that were translated into Chinese were translated directly from oral performances; indeed, Fāxiǎn, Xuánzàng, and Yījīng all travelled to India in search of written Buddhist scriptures to bring back for translation. When Chinese translations of early Buddhist texts were made from written manuscripts, however, those written manuscripts would have gone back, at some point, to oral performances.

<sup>11</sup> A good overview of the work being done in this emerging field can be found in the publications of the proceedings of the Āgama Research Group at the Dharma Drum Institute of Liberal Arts: Dhammadinnā 2013, 2014, and 2017.

<sup>12</sup> To cite again from Lord 1964: 68.

Buddhist *sūtras*. Joy Manné, for example, described three “categories of *sutta*” – sermons, debates, and consultations (Manné 1990). Although she did not use Lord’s category of *theme* to describe them, it is clear that Manné’s “categories” can be considered as such because, like oral thematic themes, they can be distinguished from one another “by their introductory and concluding formulas and by their internal structure” (Manné 1990: 32).

The third and final major conceptual element of the Parry-Lord Theory, the *formula*, unfortunately poses some complications in its application to the case of the early Buddhist oral tradition. The reason for this is that the early Buddhist tradition, unlike the ancient Homeric and modern Serbo-Croatian traditions, created texts primarily in prose.<sup>13</sup> As we have already seen, Parry defined the formula as a “group of words ... employed under the same metrical conditions” (Parry 1972: 272) – a condition which clearly does not apply to the case of the early Buddhist prose tradition. Lord also appears to have believed that the formulas of his theory are only to be found in verse. He writes:

... one cannot have *formulas* outside of oral traditional verse, because it is the function of formulas to make composition easier under the necessities of rapid composition in performance, and if that necessity no longer exists, one no longer has formulas. If one discovers repeated phrases in texts known not to be oral traditional texts, then they should be called repeated phrases rather than formulas.<sup>14</sup>

Note that in this passage, Lord uses the phrases “oral traditional verse” and “oral traditional texts” as if they are synonymous. But as we have already seen, there are several reasons, other than just the existence of repeated passages, that point to the early Buddhist texts as having come from an oral tradition. Given that these texts are in prose, must we then refer to the repeated passages simply as repetitions, or must we

<sup>13</sup> Of course, part of the early Buddhist oral tradition did consist of verse – both in independent *gāthās*, such as are found in the *Theragāthā*, *Therīgāthā*, *Aṭṭhaka*, and *Pārāyaṇa*, and in *sūtras* of the *geyya* type. Unfortunately, little work has been done on the oral features – which might include formulas as classically defined by Parry and Lord – of this portion of the early Buddhist tradition.

<sup>14</sup> Lord 1975: 18; italics in original.

acknowledge that the Parry-Lord conception of the *formula* can fruitfully be applied to oral *prose* texts?

I would argue the latter – and therefore, following Allon,<sup>15</sup> I do use the word *formula* to refer to the repeated passages found in the early Buddhist tradition. In defense of this choice, it is instructive to look at an example. In the *Ambaṭṭhasutta* (DN 3), we find the following passage used to describe Ambaṭṭha, a Brahman student sent by his teacher Pokkharasāti to debate with the Buddha:

Now at that time Pokkharasāti had a resident student named Ambaṭṭha, a scholar, a bearer of the *mantras*, perfected in the three Vedas – together with their vocabularies and rituals, with their phonology and etymology, and the oral tradition (*itihāsa*) as a fifth – skilled in philology and grammar, not lacking in the Lokāyata and marks of a Great Man ...<sup>16</sup>

In the immediately following *sutta* of the *Dīghanikāya* (4), the Brahman Soṇadaṇḍa, who, like Ambaṭṭha, meets with the Buddha and engages in a debate with him, is described in almost identical terms:

For the Venerable Soṇadaṇḍa is a scholar, a bearer of the *mantras*, perfected in the three Vedas – together with their vocabularies and rituals, with their phonology and etymology, and the oral tradition (*itihāsa*) as a fifth – skilled in philology and grammar, not lacking in the Lokāyata and marks of a Great Man.<sup>17</sup>

We can see here that exactly the same words are used in both of these passages, except at the beginning, where the appropriate name and a lead-in appropriate to the context are inserted. In addition to these two *suttas*, we also find the same stock expression used in the same way in

<sup>15</sup> See Allon 1997b: 10–14, for Allon’s argument in favor of the application of the concept of *formula* in a non-verse context. Allon’s argument is somewhat different than my own here, however, insofar as he questions Lord’s insistence that formulas are used only in oral texts that are composed in the course of performance. That is, Allon believes, unlike myself, that texts of the early Buddhist tradition were not necessarily composed in performance.

<sup>16</sup> DN I.88.3–7: *Tena kho pana samayena brāhmaṇassa Pokkharasādissa Ambaṭṭho nāma māṇavo antevāsī hoti ajjhāyako manta-dharo tiṇṇaṃ vedānaṃ pāragū sanighaṇḍu-keṭubhānaṃ sākkharappabhedānaṃ itihāsa-pañcamānaṃ padako veyyākaraṇo lokāyata-mahāpurisa-lakkhaṇesu anavayo.*

<sup>17</sup> DN I.113.24–114.4: *Bhavaṃ hi Soṇadaṇḍo ajjhāyako mantadharo tiṇṇaṃ vedānaṃ pāragū sanighaṇḍu-keṭubhānaṃ sākkhara-ppabhedānaṃ itihāsa-pañcamānaṃ padako veyyākaraṇo lokāyata-mahāpurisa-lakkhaṇesu anavayo.*

several other texts involving Brahman interlocutors, by inserting an appropriate lead-in with the name of whichever Brahman is being described.<sup>18</sup>

Thus, according to the ordinary (non-technical in the Parry-Lord sense) meaning of the word, it seems appropriate to use the word *formula* to describe a repeated passage such as this one. Just as with a mathematical formula, what we have here is an expression consisting both of constants (in this case, every word from *ajjhāyako* to *anavayo*) and a variable (the introductory phrase). Moreover, for this very reason, we cannot dismiss this stock expression as merely a “repetition.” In another article, Lord writes, “The ‘repetition’ ... is a phrase repeated to call attention to a previous occurrence, for an aesthetic or other purpose. *Formulas do not point to other uses of themselves; they do not recall other occurrences.*”<sup>19</sup> But according to precisely this distinction, the stock expression for describing a Brahman learned in the Vedas would have to be classified as a formula and not as a repetition, since it does not call attention to other occurrences of itself.<sup>20</sup> Rather, it is used, in formulaic fashion, whenever a Brahman is introduced in a text of the early Buddhist tradition, in order to indicate that he is learned in the Vedas. In this way, it serves to convey in concrete language the theme of an encounter between the Buddha and a Brahman.

### Objections to the Application of Oral Theory to the Early Buddhist Literature

As already noted, scholars of the early Buddhist literature are virtually unanimous in regarding it as an originally oral literature; in addition, scholarship on the early Buddhist literature has been influenced by Oral

<sup>18</sup> DN 5 (I.130.10–14); MN 91 (II.134.1–3), 92 (II.146), 93 (II.147.8–12), 95 (II.165.26–29), 100 (II.210.1–5); AN 3.58 (I.163.10–13), 3.59 (I.166.17–20), 5.192 (III.223.17–20), Sn 3.7 (p. 104, line 27 to p. 105, line 3).

<sup>19</sup> Lord 1986: 492; italics in original.

<sup>20</sup> This is not to say that formulas in the early Buddhist tradition are never repeated for dramatic effect. At times this happens, especially when conversations are repeated verbatim within a single text, but even then, the passage in question still can be considered a formula insofar as it is used in many *different* texts in order to help convey a particular theme. For a more detailed analysis of the use of repetition in the Pali tradition, see Allon 1997a: 50–53 and Allon 1997b: 341–352.

Theory insofar as it has taken up the term *formula*, albeit in a modified sense, to refer to the stock prose passages found in the early Buddhist *sūtras*. Most scholars, however, have been remarkably resistant to Cousins' suggestion that the full implications of Oral Theory should be applied to the early Buddhist literature – that they were originally transmitted in an improvisatory manner, rather than through strict memorization. Gombrich, for example, although he is overall quite supportive of Cousins' approach to the early Buddhist texts as *oral* texts, writes,

Where I slightly differ from Cousins, as will appear, is in his stress on the probable improvisatory element in early recitations of the Buddha's preachings. The whole purpose of the enterprise (as certainly Cousins would agree) was to preserve the Buddha's words. I think the earliest Pali texts may well be rather like the Rajasthani folk epic studied and described by John Smith, in which the essential kernel is in fact preserved verbatim, but variously wrapped up in a package of conventional verbiage which can change with each performance (Gombrich 1990: 22).

Mark Allon, following Gombrich, has also expressed reservations about Cousins' emphasis on the improvisatory nature of the early Buddhist oral tradition, focusing in particular on the existence of long repeated passages in the Pali texts. He argues that

it is difficult to see the gross forms of repetition just discussed – the repetition of whole passages, with or without modification, and the repetition of structures with the replacement of various proportions of their wording – and the scale on which this is pursued, that is the proportion of the text involved, as anything other than proof, or at least as a very strong indication, that these texts were designed to be memorised and transmitted verbatim.

Alexander Wynne agrees with Allon that “the gross repetition found in the *Dīgha Nikāya Suttas* [studied by Allon], although based on the use of these pericopes, cannot reflect a tradition of improvisational performance” (Wynne 2004: 121). Likewise, Anālayo Bhikkhu, in his recent comparative study of the *Majjhimanikāya*, argues that the “oral characteristics of the Pāli discourses testify to the importance of verbatim repetition in the early Buddhist oral tradition” (Anālayo 2011: vol. 1, 17).

I do not find the objections of these scholars to be convincing. In part, I think that they misunderstand Cousins' use of the word “improvisa-

tion.” Within the context of Oral Theory, “improvisation” does not refer to a chaotic free-for-all in which anything goes. Lord emphasizes that oral traditions are “extremely conservative” (Lord 1964: 158), and memorization *does* play a role in such traditions insofar as formulas are repeated verbatim.<sup>21</sup> “Improvisation” simply means that the text *as a whole* was not memorized word-for-word, and that a roughly similar, but not exactly identical, text could be reproduced with each performance through the use of formulas. A lack of understanding of this distinction is most obvious in the case of Gombrich, who in the passage quoted above, just after questioning Cousins’ emphasis on improvisation, suggests that the early Buddhist tradition was one in which “the essential kernel is in fact preserved verbatim, but variously wrapped up in a package of conventional verbiage which can change with each performance” (Gombrich 1990: 22). It is not clear to me at all how this differs from Cousins’ own argument, nor in fact how such a process cannot be called “improvisation.”

A more sophisticated critique of Cousins’ “improvisation” is given by Allon, who admits the possibility of such early on, but distinguishes that phase from the later phase that produced the texts that have come down to us:

Although I have attempted to show that the early Buddhist *sutta* texts were, in the words of R. Gombrich, “deliberate compositions which were then committed to memory,” I would certainly agree that accounts of what the Buddha is supposed to have said and discourses on his teaching would have been given by the monks and nuns after the Buddha’s death in an improvisatory manner, at times drawing heavily on memorised material, or as R. Gethin (1992) has argued, by using lists as a foundation. Such discourses may then have become the basis of later fixed texts. But these accounts and discourses were fundamentally different from the essentially fixed, memorised texts transmitted by the community, however imperfectly (Allon 1997b: 367).

<sup>21</sup> We might add that given the length and pervasiveness of the prose formulas used in the early Buddhist *sūtras*, this “conservative” element is arguably greater in the early Buddhist oral tradition than in the epic traditions studied by Parry and Lord.

Wynne elaborates on this theory that the formulas of the early Buddhist texts actually represent an early transition from improvisation to transmission of fixed texts:

It is clear that the building blocks [formulas] of the early Buddhist texts must have been composed in a collaborative effort. ... It must have been a joint effort. And if we are to suppose that a joint effort was required to compose these building blocks, we must imagine that the communal factor which determined communal recitation and word for word transmission would have come into existence at the very beginning of Sutta composition. In other words, I am suggesting that if there was collaboration from the beginning, it can hardly have been the case that the collaborators composed oral building blocks and then went off, leaving the pericopes they had fashioned to be used by individuals as they liked (Wynne 2004: 121–122).

This argument hardly seems convincing, given that the living oral tradition studied by Parry and Lord was indeed a “collaborative effort” that “composed oral building blocks” (formulas) which were left “to be used by individuals as they liked” – or, to be more precise, to be used to aid in the performance of texts without need for overall memorization.

Still, we must consider more deeply the arguments made by Allon and Wynne that the formulas of the early Buddhist oral tradition must have facilitated memorization, rather than improvisation. Wynne, in particular, argues that the Buddhist texts themselves evince a concern for word-for-word memorization. He cites three places where he believes word-for-word memorization is referred to in the Pali texts: (1) a reference to learning the *pāṭimokkha* “down to the *sutta*” (*suttaso*) and “down to the letter” (*anuvyañjaso*), (2) a prohibition in the *pāṭimokkha* against teaching the *dhamma* “word-by-word” (*padaso*) to laypeople, and (3) a reference to disputes over both the meaning (*attha*) and the letter (*vyāñjana*) of the *dhamma* (Wynne 2004: 108–112). There are two implicit assumptions in this argument. The first is that such passages are really referring to what we would call “word-for-word memorization.” The second is that they are referring to the Buddhist *sūtra* literature in their full narrative format. Both of these assumptions are problematic.

First, there is no *a priori* reason to take references to learning words and letters at face value as referring to word-for-word memorization in the modern sense. Parry and Lord, in fact, found that the epic bards they studied in Yugoslavia would claim to be singing songs they had learned

word-for-word and from memory, in spite of the fact that they were actually improvising, as could easily be verified by comparing transcripts of two performances. Lord asks if this means that the bard making such claims is lying. “No,” he argues, “because he was singing the story as he conceived it as being ‘like’ [the original story], and to him ‘word for word and line for line’ are simply an emphatic way of saying ‘like’” (Lord 1964: 28). Thus, there is no reason to assume a modern, literate standard of exactitude in the transmission of an oral text, even when expressions of exactitude are explicitly made by the purveyors thereof.

Let us now address the second assumption. Assume for the sake of argument that the passages cited by Wynne actually refer to word-for-word memorization. The existence of *some* memorization is in no way incompatible with Oral Theory; on the contrary, Oral Theory requires that the formulas be memorized. For the passages cited by Wynne to preclude the applicability of Oral Theory, they would have to refer to the word-for-word memorization of *sūtra* discourses in their entirety. In fact, they do nothing of the sort. The first example cited by Wynne refers specifically to the *pāṭimokkha*. This is the list of Vinaya rules followed by monks and nuns and recited communally at the *uposatha*. No one would seriously doubt that this list of rules was memorized. The second example refers vaguely to the *dhamma*, which need not *a priori* refer to the *sūtras* in their full discourse form. The third example actually refers to *disputes* over both the meaning and letter of the *dhamma*, which, while Wynne is correct to point out does imply a certain concern for the wording of the *dhamma*, also implies that differences of wording existed.

In any case, insofar as there was any concern for word-for-accuracy, at what level would that concern have been operative? In his original article, Cousins cited a passage from the *Mahāparinibbānasutta* that indicates that early Buddhists thought consciously about what was important and what not important in considering a particular text as *buddhavacana*. According to this passage, authentic texts “should come into *sutta* and agree with *vinaya*.”<sup>22</sup> If they meet these criteria, they are authentic; if

<sup>22</sup> DN 16 (II.125.12–13): *sutte osāretabbāni, vinaye sandassetabbāni*. This passage and the associated four *mahāpadesas* have been much discussed by scholars. See, for example, Lamotte 2005: 193–196, Dutt 1924: 24–25, and Lopez 1995: 26–27.

they don't, they are not. Clearly, incidental matters, such as where the Buddha was residing, to whom he was speaking, and even in precisely what form he taught the *dharma* are not of central importance in the transmission of the "Buddha's word." As Cousins puts it,

What is envisaged for *sutta* is not then a set body of literature, but rather a traditional pattern of teaching. Authenticity lies not in historical truth although this is not doubted, but rather in whether something can accord with the essential structure of the *dharmma* as a whole. If it cannot, it should be rejected. If it can, then it is to be accepted as the utterance of the Buddha (Cousins 1983: 3).

Cousins' assertion that *sutta* is not "a set body of literature, but rather a traditional pattern of teaching" is somewhat vague, apparently leading Wynne to miss the point in his refutation of Cousins' argument regarding this passage.<sup>23</sup> More precise is Rupert Gethin's argument that "[t]he earliest Buddhist literature was composed orally and built up around lists" (Gethin 1992: 166). Such doctrinal lists would not exhaust the sorts of formulas repeated verbatim in the context of the early Buddhist oral literature; some, like the formula for introducing a Brahman cited above, serve a purely narrative, rather than a doctrinal role. Nevertheless, doctrinal lists are an important component of the formulas found in the early Buddhist literature, and as such they could easily have been passed down with an eye to word-for-word accuracy without requiring that discourses *as a whole* be memorized.

A key confusion here comes from our habit of referring to the early Buddhist discourses as *sūtras*, or in Pali, *suttas*.<sup>24</sup> This practice of using

<sup>23</sup> Wynne 2004: 100–104. Wynne misses the point that the *sutta* that a teaching must fit into is not a full discourse, but rather a doctrinal list, such as the aggregates, elements, spheres, faculties, truths, and dependent origination, specified in the *Peṭakopadesa*.

<sup>24</sup> Some scholars have suggested that *sutta* actually referred originally to the word spelled *sūkta* ("well said") in Sanskrit and was later mis-Sanskritized as *sūtra*. For example, see Bronkhorst 2010: 182, Norman 2006: 135, and Gombrich 1990: 23. I am not convinced by this argument. Although there appear to be cases of words that were incorrectly Sanskritized from Prakrits because later writers/translators did not understand certain words that had fallen into obscurity, I think that we should be hesitant to assume that ancient Indian writers did not properly understand a word so commonplace in the Buddhist tradition as *sutta*. This would require assuming not simply that a single writer mis-Sanskritized a single obscure word in a single text, but rather that the whole Buddhist

the short word *sūtra* to refer to the full discourses is commonplace in modern scholarship and appears to date fairly far back in the Buddhist tradition as well. It is important to remember, however, that technically the full term for the early Buddhist discourses is not *sūtra*, but rather *sūtrānta*, or in Pali, *suttanta*. The word *sūtra* or *sutta* refers to a very specific genre of Indian literature that is extremely pithy and list-like (akin to a “string,” the literal meaning of the word *sūtra*). Good extant examples of this genre are the *Yogasūtra* of Patañjali and the Dharma-sūtras. The early Buddhist discourses, on the other hand, with their decidedly non-pithy narrative format, bear little resemblance to this genre in their extant form, which is certainly why they are properly referred to as *sūtrāntas* (lit., “the end of the *sūtra*”) rather than *sūtras*. Eugène Burnouf recognized the distinction in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century and plausibly argued that the term *sūtra* is applied in the Buddhist tradition in reference to the pithy expressions of *dharma* embedded *within* the discourses, rather than the discourses as a whole.<sup>25</sup> We can thus understand the early Buddhist discourses, the *sūtrāntas*, to be elaborations upon actual *sūtras* (pithy, list-like expressions of *dharma*) embedded within them. I therefore read the criterion that authentic *buddhavacana* “should come into *sutta* and agree with *vinaya*” as requiring that expressions of *buddhavacana*, however expansive, must conform “word-for-word” at most to doctrinal lists (*sutta*) and the *pāṭimokkha* (*vinaya*), not in their narrative entirety.

Confusion over this issue is also relevant to another objection to the full applicability of the Oral Theory to the early Buddhist literature: the institution of the *saṅgīti*, or communal recitation. As Allon writes,

tradition (as well as presumably the Jain?) forgot that *sutta* actually meant *sūkta* and consistently mis-Sanskritized it in all Sanskrit texts as *sūtra*. In addition, the “*sūkta*-hypothesis,” if it may be so dubbed, takes no account of the distinction between *sutta* and *suttanta* and the fact that what we typically call Buddhist *suttas* are in fact, properly speaking, *suttantas*. If this distinction is recognized, as I discuss here, then the problem that the *sūkta*-hypothesis is intended to solve – namely, that Buddhist *sūtras* are not actually *sūtras* by genre – becomes a pseudo-problem.

<sup>25</sup> Katia Buffetrille and Donald S. Lopez, Jr., “Introduction to the Translation,” in Burnouf 2010: 86–87.

... communal or group recitation or performance requires fixed wording. It is not possible for more than one individual to perform at the same time in the manner described by Parry and Lord without producing utter chaos, for in that method, each individual creates his compositions anew each time he performs (Allon 1997b: 366).

I do not feel as assured as Allon does that communal recitation is impossible using the improvisatory techniques described by Oral Theory, especially given the length of the formulas found in the early Buddhist tradition. (One could, for example, imagine a recitation leader guiding the performance of a particular *sūtra*, with other monks joining in for the lengthy recitation of formulaic passages.)<sup>26</sup> But even if we accept for the sake of argument that the early Buddhist discourses could not have been simultaneously performed communally and “improvised,” is the actual evidence for *saṅgīti* in the Buddhist literature sufficient to rule out an improvisatory transmission of the Buddhist discourses?

According to Wynne, “The evidence suggests that communal recitation was the norm ...” (Wynne 2004: 115). He cites two Pali *suttas* as evidence for this. The first is the *Pāsādikasutta*, in which the Buddha, in response to reports that the Jains were quarrelling after the death of their founder, advises his monks to recite communally to avoid falling into disputes (Wynne 2004: 115). The Buddha does not in this *sutta*, however, specify what exactly should be recited communally. The second *sutta* that Wynne cites is the *Saṅgītisutta*, “a name which perhaps indicates that it was composed at a major communal recitation” (Wynne 2004: 116). What Wynne fails to mention is that although the *Saṅgītisutta* involves a communal recitation, the monks do *not* recite narrative discourses in unison. Instead, they recite doctrinal lists and stock passages (describing, for example, the *jhānas*), organized according to number.

<sup>26</sup> In fact, communal Pali chanting by modern Theravāda Buddhist monks is performed in a somewhat similar fashion. When chanting together, one monk will be the leader who, like a conductor, controls the sequence of prayers and thus the overall performance. The other monks will of course have memorized the individual prayers (or else mumble through them if they have not), but there is no need for them to know the sequence since they will be prompted by the leader. The sequence may be fairly fixed for some occasions, but there may also be discretion for the leader to improvise somewhat in the sequence and inclusion of various prayers. I thank Justin McDaniel for sharing with me his experience chanting as an ordained monk in Thailand.

Interestingly, in convening this communal recitation, Sāriputta says that the monks should recite “the *dhamma*” together. This suggests that various references to reciting “the *dhamma*” together or concern for the words and letters of “the *dhamma*” should be seen as references to such doctrinal lists and stock passages, and not to full narrative discourses. And as I have already demonstrated, the memorization of lists and stock passages is not incompatible with Oral Theory; on the contrary, it is required by it.

In his original article, the primary reason given by Cousins for applying the Oral Theory to the early Buddhist literature is the differences found *between different versions of the same early Buddhist discourse*. Although Cousins unfortunately does not provide any examples, what he is referring to is the differences found between Pali *suttas* and *sūtras* corresponding to them in other, non-Pali traditions, most importantly the Āgamas of various non-Theravāda schools preserved in Chinese. Astoundingly, this piece of evidence, which is in fact the central piece of evidence for the applicability of Oral Theory, is completely ignored by both Allon and Wynne, who refer *only* to evidence from the Pali Canon in their critiques of Cousins. To my knowledge, the only scholar who makes comparative use of both Pali and non-Pali evidence in criticizing Cousins is Anālayo Bhikkhu. In *A Comparative Study of the Majjhima-nikāya*, Anālayo exhaustively studies all of the *suttas* of the *Majjhimanikāya*, comparing them to their parallels in other, non-Pali traditions, most importantly the *Madhyamāgama* (中阿含經) preserved in Chinese. As part of this study, he shows the numerous ways in which the *sūtras* of the Chinese *Madhyamāgama*, while quite close to their counterparts in the Pali *Majjhimanikāya*, nevertheless differ in various narrative details. These are precisely the differences that Cousins was referring to in arguing for the applicability of the Oral Theory, but Anālayo takes the position that they are entirely compatible with (indeed indicative of) transmission through memorization and verbatim repetition. According to Anālayo, differences crept into the different versions of the early Buddhist *sūtras* because the *bhāṅakas* understood what they were reciting. This is in contradistinction with the Vedic tradition, which is passed down through strict memorization by people who do not understand what they are reciting. Anālayo cites research on memory that shows that memorization errors are more

common when one understands what one is memorizing than when one does not understand it (Anālayo 2011: vol. 2, 855–891; Anālayo 2009a). Thus, he explains differences between the different versions of the early Buddhist *sūtras* as the result of “errors” in memorization, rather than as indicative of a lack of memorization in the first place.

### **An Example: The *Tevijjasutta***

Any resolution of the question of the applicability of Oral Theory to the early Buddhist tradition must make comparative use of all representatives of that tradition available to us, rather than attempting to intuit the nature of the early Buddhist tradition based on a single representative, the Pali. In this respect, Anālayo’s comparative study represents an important advance. Given that his study exposes differences between the two major versions in Pali and Chinese, can we agree with him that those differences are to be explained solely as due to errors in memory? Anālayo is certainly correct that understanding what they were saying would have led Buddhist monks to unconsciously introduce changes into any texts they might have memorized. This would be akin to a modern speaker of English memorizing, for example, the line, “The rain in Spain stays mainly in the plain,” but then recalling it as, “The rain in Spain *falls* mainly *on* the plain” – which means basically the same thing, but is still slightly different. A non-speaker of English who memorized the line would (akin to a Vedic reciter) be unlikely to make such an error. We must remember, however, that Oral Theory does have a place for memorization *within* improvisation. Memorization errors could be evinced within the early Buddhist tradition without implying that *sūtras* in their entirety were memorized. Put differently, even though some differences between the different versions of the early Buddhist *sūtras* *can* be explained as due to errors in memorization, that does not mean that all differences *must* be explained in such a way.

Based on my own comparative reading of Pali *suttas* and their counterparts in other traditions, I find that the differences between different versions are sufficiently pervasive and of such a nature as to indicate that *sūtras* were indeed improvised with liberal use of fixed (memorized) blocks of text, consistent with Oral Theory. This would ideally be demon-

strated by a close comparison of a wide variety of Pali *suttas* with their counterparts in other traditions,<sup>27</sup> but unfortunately this is impossible

<sup>27</sup> An anonymous reviewer suggested that my thesis would be better supported by a comparison of two versions of one *sūtra* in a *single* sectarian tradition, rather than across traditions. Although there are certain advantages in seeing differences between two “close” versions of a *sūtra*, which I will achieve here through the choice of a *sūtra* from the relatively close Theravāda and Dharmaguptaka traditions, the suggestion that I use two versions of a *sūtra* from the *same* sectarian tradition poses serious logistical difficulties: Usually multiple versions of a single *sūtra* are not found from the same sectarian tradition, and even when they are, they are likely to have been harmonized after having been written down (as with MN 92 = Sn 3.7). In particular, we do not have multiple versions of the longer *Dīrgha sūtras* that are useful for studying oral features from a single sectarian tradition. There are, however, shorter examples of what could be considered to be two versions of a *sūtra* in the same tradition that bear differences consistent with Oral Theory. (1) Although the *Selasutta* (MN 92) is identical to its parallel in the *Suttanipāta* (3.7), it has a partial parallel in the *Mahāvagga* of the Pali *Vinaya* (I.245–246). The *Vinaya* parallel makes use of a portion of the story found in the *Selasutta*, involving a *jaṭila* named Keṇiya, but adapts that story to the very different purpose of setting down a rule about acceptable drinks for monks. Even insofar as the two texts are parallel, they are not word-for-word the same. In particular, the *Vinaya* version uses the “*ṛṣi* formula” (see note 40) when Keṇiya decides to visit the Buddha, while the *Majjhima* version does not. The inclusion of a particular formula in one version but not in another is, as I will argue, a characteristic sign of oral improvisation. (2) Another opportunity for intra-sectarian *sūtra* comparison is offered by the two Chinese translations of the *Samyuktāgama*, both of which are identified by scholars as belonging to the Sarvāstivāda tradition. The corresponding *sūtras* within these two translations are similar but not identical, even when accounting for idiosyncrasies of translation. One can take as an illustrative example *sūtra* 1158 (T.1.2.308b20–309a20) from the first translation and *sūtra* 81 (T.1.2.401c20–402b11) from the second, both of which correspond to the *Dhanañjanīsutta* (SN 7.1). Both of these Chinese versions are quite similar vis-à-vis the Pali version, having the Brahman who visits the Buddha go home to his wife before returning to receive ordination, unlike the Pali version that has him receive ordination from the Buddha immediately. Yet there are small differences. In the first Chinese version, the Brahman’s wife exclaims praises of the Buddha whenever she is going about her business and has a small mishap, while the second agrees with the Pali that she does so specifically when she trips. The first version has the Brahman bare his right shoulder upon being taught by the Buddha, while the second only has him perform *añjali*. The second version has Brahman enumerate the five precepts when he asks to become an *upāsaka*, while the first version does not. The first version has the Brahman’s wife see her husband approach from a distance when he returns and has her use a long formulaic praise of the Buddha in asking her husband whether he debated him, features not found in the second version. The first version has the Brahman specifically ask to perform *brahmacarya* (梵行) when seeking ordination from the Buddha, while the second version does not. Finally, the second version alone includes the formulaic statement at the end of the *sūtra* that the *bhikkhus* were pleased at the Buddha’s words. Again, these small, formulaic statements included in one version and not in the other are hallmarks of oral improvisation.

within the scope of a single article. For the purposes of this article, then, I will demonstrate the applicability of Oral Theory by a close comparison of a single Pali *sutta* and its counterpart in Chinese, taken from the *Dīgha/Dīrgha* tradition so that it will be of sufficient length to display the oral features I wish to demonstrate repeatedly and clearly. The *sutta* I have chosen is the *Tevijjasutta* (DN 13), whose parallel<sup>28</sup> preserved in the Chinese Canon (*Sānmíng Jīng* 三明經, DĀ 26) most likely comes from the Dharmaguptaka tradition.<sup>29</sup> The Theravāda and Dharmaguptaka sects are quite closely related, both belonging to the Vibhajyavāda branch of the Sthaviravāda,<sup>30</sup> and as such the parallels between their *Dī(r)gha sūtras* tend to be closer than those between Theravāda and, say, Sarvāstivāda *sūtras*.<sup>31</sup> Nevertheless, there are still key differences between their two representative “performances” of this particular *sūtra*, which I will argue are more consistent with Oral Theory than a model of memorization.

The overall structures of the *Tevijjasutta* and the *Sānmíng Jīng* are the same; each can be divided roughly into nine parts. First, two Brahmans

<sup>28</sup> The *Tevijjasutta* also has a parallel in the Sanskrit *Dīrghāgama* being studied by Jens-Uwe Hartmann and his students, which probably belongs to the Sarvāstivāda school. On this manuscript, see most recently Hartmann and Wille 2014. Liudmila Olalde’s forthcoming dissertation will include a study of the parallel to the *Tevijjasutta* in the Sanskrit *Dīrghāgama*. Unfortunately, this was not available to me at the time of publication.

<sup>29</sup> The Chinese version of the *Dīrghāgama* was translated into Chinese by Buddhayaśas (Fótuóyěshè 佛陀耶舍) and Zhú Fóniàn (竺佛念) in 413 CE. It is virtually unanimously considered by scholars to be of the Dharmaguptaka sect, in part because of similarities to the known Dharmaguptaka Vinaya, but also because Buddhayaśas was a Dharmaguptaka monk, and all of his other translations but one are of the Dharmaguptaka sect (Mayeda Egaku 1964: 97).

<sup>30</sup> In other words, the Dharmaguptakas are more closely related to the Theravādins than not only the Mahāsāṃghikas, but even the Sarvāstivādins. This close relationship is reflected by the fact that the contents of the Chinese *Dīrghāgama* are more similar to the contents of the *Dīghanikāya* than any of the other Chinese Āgamas – two of which are Sarvāstivādin (MĀ and SĀ) and one of which is uncertain (EĀ) – are to their corresponding Pali Nikāyas.

<sup>31</sup> I have, in fact, chosen such close parallel versions to give the benefit of the doubt to the memorization hypothesis. The *sūtras* of the Pali *Dīghanikāya* and Chinese *Dīrghāgama* are about the closest parallels one can find, so if one can find differences between even them that are consistent with Oral Theory, then that strengthens the case for the latter’s applicability. Other parallels between *sūtras* in Pali and Chinese or other languages tend to have even greater differences, and thus are even less amenable to a theory of memorization.

named Vāseṭṭha and Bhāradvāja, as well as their disagreement over the correct path to Brahmā, are introduced. Second, these two Brahmans approach the Buddha to settle their dispute. Third, the Buddha asks a series of questions about whether any Brahman has ever seen Brahmā face-to-face. Fourth, the Buddha presents a series of similes to show how ridiculous it is to claim to know the way to Brahmā when you yourself have never seen him. Fifth, the Buddha asks a series of questions about the characteristics of Brahmans and Brahmā, showing that they are not commensurate with one another. Sixth, the Brahmans ask if the Buddha knows the way to Brahmā; the Buddha uses a simile to say yes, and he agrees to teach the way. Seventh, the Buddha teaches the way to Brahmā using a modified version of the long formulaic teaching found in the *Sāmaññaphalasutta*. Eighth, the Buddha asks a series of questions about the characteristics of a person who follows this path and of Brahmā, showing that they are indeed commensurate with one another. And finally, in the ninth section, there is a conclusion describing the Brahmans' reaction to the Buddha's teaching.

Since both versions of this *sūtra* follow this basic structure, we can imagine an early performer of it as having memorized the nine or so parts, according to a mnemonic device now lost. The exact words used, formulas utilized, order of ideas presented, and in some cases actual content within each of these nine parts differs substantially between the two versions, however, indicating that there was considerable freedom in the articulation of an early Buddhist *sūtra* at the "local" level of the narrative. This freedom becomes immediately apparent at the very beginning of the first section of the text. According to the *nidāna* of the Pali version, the events recorded in the text took place in the Mango Grove on the Aciravatī River north of Manasākata in Kosala. According to the Chinese version, on the other hand, it took place in a forest near Icchānaṅkala in Kosala. In both versions, the Brahmans Vāseṭṭha and Bhāradvāja are then introduced, but they are introduced in different ways. In the Chinese version, Vāseṭṭha is first introduced together with his teacher Pokkharasāti, and then Bhāradvāja is introduced together with his teacher Tārukkha; in both cases, the formula used for describing a Brahman learned in the three Vedas is used. This formula is not used in the Pali version, however. Instead, a different formula, giving a list of

famous Brahmins, including Pokkharasāti and Tārukkha, is used,<sup>32</sup> and then Vāseṭṭha and Bhāradvāja are simply said, without any particular introduction to themselves personally, to be walking together down a road. What follows is quite similar across the two versions. Vāseṭṭha says that the way to Brahmā taught to him by Pokkharasāti is right; Bhāradvāja says the way taught to him by Tārukkha is right; and Vāseṭṭha uses a formulaic description of the “fame of Gotama” (the *iti pi so* formula used as a prayer in Theravāda countries) to suggest to Bhāradvāja that they go to the Buddha to settle their dispute.

The second and third sections are similar in the two versions, but with some key differences in presentation. In both versions of the second section, Vāseṭṭha and Bhāradvāja approach the Buddha and present their conundrum, but how they do so differs in the two versions. In the Pali, Vāseṭṭha and Bhāradvāja describe their individual positions in turn; the Buddha repeats what they said; and then Vāseṭṭha suggests that perhaps all paths taught by Brahmin teachers lead to Brahmā, just as multiple paths can lead to a single village. In the Chinese, however, Vāseṭṭha and Bhāradvāja do not present their positions at all; instead, the Buddha himself reads their minds, tells them what they have been discussing, and then asks them to confirm that he is correct. This is followed by Vāseṭṭha’s use of the comparison to paths leading to a village, as in the Pali. In both versions of the third section, the Buddha then asks Vāseṭṭha twice to confirm his suggestion that all paths could lead to Brahmā. He then asks him a series of questions about whether anyone has seen Brahmā face-to-face. In the Chinese version, this consists of asking whether any Brahmin, Brahmin’s teacher, or *ṛṣi* has seen Brahmā. In the Pali version, however, he also asks (after the Brahmin’s teacher and before the *ṛṣis*) whether any Brahmin’s teacher’s pupil or any Brahmin up to seven generations in the past has seen him. In both versions, the conclusion is the same: the Buddha declares that since no Brahmin has ever seen Brahmā

<sup>32</sup> DN I.235.8–13: *Tena kho pana samayena sambahulā abhiññātā abhiññātā brāhmaṇa-mahāsālā Manasakāṭe paṭivasanti, seyyathīdaṃ Caṅkī brāhmaṇo Tārukkho brāhmaṇo Pokkharasāti brāhmaṇo Jāṇussoṇi brāhmaṇo, Todeyyo brāhmaṇo aññe ca abhiññātā abhiññātā brāhmaṇa-mahāsālā*. Versions of this formula can also be found at MN 98 (II.196) = Sn 3.9 (p. 115, lines 3–8) and MN 99 (II.202.7–10).

face-to-face, their claims to know the path to him must not be true. In the Pali version, however, he adds that the Brahmans are like a string of blind men trying to lead one another to a certain destination.

Sections four and five differ mostly in the order in which ideas are presented in the two versions. In Section 4, the Buddha uses a series of similes to illustrate the ridiculousness of claiming to know the way to Brahmā when you have never seen him yourself. These similes are presented formulaically, with a similar structure of questions and answers used for each simile. In the Pali version, the first simile is to the sun and moon, which Brahmans cannot reach even though they worship them. The second comparison is to a man who desires the most beautiful woman in the land, even though he has never seen her and knows nothing about her. The third is to building a staircase to a mansion that does not yet exist, and whose orientation is not yet known. Finally, in the fourth simile, the Buddha compares the Brahmans to a man trying to cross the Aciravatī when it is flooded, which in turn he likens to the five hindrances. In the Chinese, the order of presentation is different. The first simile is to the beautiful woman, the second to the sun and moon, and the third to the staircase and the mansion. The final simile is to crossing a flooded river, which is likened to the five hindrances, as in the Pali, but this simile is expanded somewhat in the Chinese version. First, the Buddha compares the Brahmans to someone trying to cross the river by beckoning the other side to come to him; then he compares them to one who does nothing to try to cross it; finally, he compares them to someone who uses effort to cross it.

Section five is characterized by a similar difference in the order in which ideas are represented in the two versions. In this section, the Buddha asks whether Brahmā and Brahmans possess any of five characteristics. The ultimate point is that what is true of Brahmā is not true of Brahmans and vice versa; therefore, they are not commensurate with one another, and Brahmans are not fit to attain union with Brahmā. In the Pali, the characteristics are asked in this order: Do they have possessions (*sapariggaha*)? Are their minds full of anger (*saveracitta*)? Are their minds full of ill-will (*sabyāpajjaccitta*)? Are their minds tarnished (*saṃkiliṭṭhacitta*)? Do they exercise self-mastery (*vasavattī*)? In the

Chinese, however, the order (as well as possibly the characteristics themselves)<sup>33</sup> is different: Do they have ill-will (恚心)? Do they have anger (瞋心)? Do they have resentment (恨心)? Do they have family and property (家屬產業)? Do they exercise self-mastery (得自在)? In addition to this difference of order, the structure with which the Buddha makes the comparison between Brahmins and Brahmā in the two versions is different. In the Pali, he first asks about each characteristic with respect to Brahmā; then he asks them again with respect with Brahmins; and finally he asks if the two are commensurate with one another with respect to each characteristic. In the Chinese, however, he simply asks about each characteristic once, with respect to both Brahmā and Brahmins at the same time.

Sections six, seven, and eight are roughly the same in the two versions. In Section 6, the Brahmins ask the Buddha if *he* knows the way to Brahmā, and he replies by comparing himself to a native of Manasāketa who will naturally know the way to his own village. The Brahmins ask him to teach the way, and he agrees. The Buddha's teaching of the way to Brahmā is found in Section 7, which consists primarily of a very long formula on the "training," which is taken from the *Sāmaññaphalasutta* and its parallel in the Chinese *Dīrghāgama*, respectively.<sup>34</sup> This formula differs from its "typical" presentation only at the end, where instead of describing the attainment of Awakening, the Buddha describes the four *brahmavihāras*, the attainment of which he equates with attaining union with Brahmā. Then, in Section 8, the Buddha again returns to the five characteristics asked in Section 5 about Brahmā and the Brahmins, except that now he asks them about the person who attains the *brahmavihāras*, and he shows that such a person is indeed commensurate with Brahmā and thus can be said to have attained union with him. The order

<sup>33</sup> It is not entirely clear what Indic words the first three characteristics listed in the Chinese version are translating, nor whether they can be exactly correlated to characteristics in the Pali version. Even if they can, however, the order is clearly different since 家屬產業, which clearly correlates to *sapariggaha* in the Pali, is found in the fourth instead of the first position.

<sup>34</sup> Although the *Tevijjasutta* and the *Sānmíng Jīng* use this formula in the same way, the actual content of the formula differs in the two traditions. For a detailed comparison of this formula in all available versions, see Meisig 1987: 39–52.

in which these five characteristics are addressed differs in the two versions, following the orders found already in Section 5.

Finally, the conclusion to the *sūtra* found in Section 9 offers different accounts of how Vāseṭṭha and Bhāradvāja reacted to the Buddha’s teaching. In the Pali version, they respond with a long formula, found in many *suttas* of the Pali Canon, in which they express their pleasure at the clarity of the Buddha’s teaching, which ends with them asking to become the Buddha’s disciples.<sup>35</sup> In the Chinese version, however, they give rise to the Dharma-eye (法眼) and are simply said to be pleased with the Buddha’s words (歡喜奉行).

**Table 1.** A comparison of the elements of the narratives of the *Tevijjasutta* and its Chinese parallel, the *Sānmíng Jīng*. References for each narrative element of the *Tevijjasutta* are to the section number in the PTS edition (DN I.235–252). References for each narrative element of the *Sānmíng Jīng* are to the page, section, and line numbers in the Taishō (T.1.1).

<i>Tevijjasutta</i> (Pali DN 13)	三明經 (Chinese DĀ 26)
<b>Section One</b>	<b>Introduction</b>
Nidāna: Mango Grove on Aciravatī River north of Manasākāṭa in Kosala. (1)	Nidāna: forest near Icchānaṅkala (伊車能伽羅) in Kosala (俱薩羅). (T.1.1.104c17–19)
“Famous Brahmins” formula. <sup>36</sup> (2)	
Conversation between Vāseṭṭha and Bhāradvāja on the true path. (3)	

<sup>35</sup> DN I.252.20–28: ‘Abhikkantaṃ, bho Gotama, abhikkantaṃ bho Gotama. Seyyathā pi bho Gotama nikkujjitaṃ vā ukkujjeya, paṭicchannaṃ vā vivareyya, mūlhassa vā maggaṃ ācikkheyya, andha-kāre vā tela-pajjotaṃ dhāreyya: cakkhumanto rūpāni dakkhanīti—evam eva bhotā Gotamena aneka-pariyāyena dhammo pakāsito. Ete mayaṃ bhavantaṃ Gotamaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāma dhammaṃ ca bhikkhusaṅghaṃ ca. Upāsake no bhavaṃ Gotamo dhāretu ajja-tagge paṇupetaṃ saraṇaṃ gate’ ti.

<sup>36</sup> DN I.235.8–13: Tena kho pana samayena sambahulā abhiññātā abhiññātā brāhmaṇa-mahāsālā Manasakāṭe paṭivasanti, seyyathidaṃ Caṅkī brāhmaṇo Tārukkho brāhmaṇo Pokkharasāti brāhmaṇo Jāṇussoṇi brāhmaṇo, Todeyyo brāhmaṇo aññe ca abhiññātā abhiññātā brāhmaṇa-mahāsālā.

<i>Tevijjasutta</i> (Pali DN 13)	三明經 (Chinese DĀ 26)
	Introduction to Pokkharasāti (沸伽羅娑羅) and Vāseṭṭha (婆悉吒) using “Triple Veda” formula. <sup>37</sup> (104c19–29)
	Introduction to Tārukka (多梨車) and Bhāradvāja (頗羅墮) using “Triple Veda” formula. (104c29–105a8)
Vāseṭṭha praises path of Pokkharasāti. (4)	Vāseṭṭha says his way is better. (105a8–12)
Bhāradvāja praises path of Tārukka. (5)	Bhāradvāja says his way is better. (105a12–15)
Vāseṭṭha delivers “Fame of Gotama” formula <sup>38</sup> to Bhāradvāja and suggests going to the Buddha. (6–7)	Vāseṭṭha delivers “Fame of Gotama” formula <sup>39</sup> to Bhāradvāja and suggests going to the Buddha. (105a15–25)
Section Two	Introduction of Dispute to the Buddha
Vāseṭṭha and Bhāradvāja approach Buddha and exchange greetings. (8)	Vāseṭṭha and Bhāradvāja approach Buddha and exchange greetings. (105a25–26)
Vāseṭṭha announces problem and gives his opinion (pro-Pokkharasāti). (8)	
Bhāradvāja gives his opinion (pro-Tārukka). (8)	
Buddha repeats what they just said. (9)	Buddha recounts their debate and asks if it truly happened that way. (105a26–b3)

<sup>37</sup> T.1.1.104c22–25: 七世以來父母真正，不為他人之所輕毀，異典三部諷誦通利，種種經書善能分別，又能善於大人相法、觀察吉凶、祭祀儀禮，亦有五百弟子，教授不廢。

<sup>38</sup> *Taṃ kho pana bhavantaṃ Gotamaṃ evaṃ kalyāṇo kitti-saddo abhuggato: “Iti pi so Bhagavā arahaṃ sammā-sambuddho vijjā-caraṇa-saṃpanno sugato loka-vidū anuttaro purisa-damma-sārathī, satthā deva-manussānaṃ buddho bhagavā” ti.*

<sup>39</sup> T.1.1.105a18–22: 有大名稱，流聞天下，如來、至真、等正覺，十號具足，於諸天、世人、魔、若魔、天、沙門、婆羅門中，自身作證，為他說法，上中下言，皆悉真正，義味具足，梵行清淨，如是真人，宜往觀現。

<i>Tevijjasutta</i> (Pali DN 13)	三明經 (Chinese DĀ 26)
	The Brahmins confirm the Buddha's account and ask who is right. (105b3–9)
Buddha asks what exactly the problem is. (9)	Buddha asks what exactly the problem is. (105b9–12)
Vāseṭṭha suggests that all paths lead to Brahmā, like different paths to a single village. (10)	Vāseṭṭha suggests that all paths lead to Brahmā (梵天), like different paths to a single village. (105b12–15)
<b>Section Three</b>	<b>Questions about Who Has Seen Brahmā</b>
Buddha confirms twice that Vāseṭṭha is suggesting that all paths could lead to Brahmā. (11)	Buddha confirms twice that Vāseṭṭha is suggesting that all paths could lead to Brahmā. (105b15–18)
Has any Brahman seen Brahmā? No. (12)	Has any Brahman seen Brahmā? No. (105b18–20)
Has any Brahman's teacher seen Brahmā? No. (12)	Has any Brahman's teacher seen Brahmā? No. (105b20–22)
Has any Brahman's teacher's teacher seen Brahmā? No. (12)	
Has any Brahman up to 7 generations in the past seen Brahmā? No. (12)	
Has any <i>ṛṣi</i> (using <i>ṛṣi</i> formula) <sup>40</sup> seen Brahmā? No. (13)	Has any <i>ṛṣi</i> (using <i>ṛṣi</i> formula) <sup>41</sup> seen Brahmā? No. (105b22–29)
Buddha concludes that the Brahmins' claims to know the way to Brahmā are not true. (14)	Buddha concludes that the Brahmins' claims to know the way to Brahmā are not true. (105b29–c4)
Buddha compares Brahmins to blind leading blind. (15)	

<sup>40</sup> DN I.238.18–23: *yesam idaṃ etarahi tevijjā brāhmaṇā porāṇaṃ mantapadaṃ gītaṃ pavuttaṃ samihitaṃ tad anugāyanti tad anubhāsanti, bhāsitaṃ anubhāsanti vācitaṃ anuvācenti – seyyathidaṃ Aṭṭhako, Vāmakko, Vāmadevo, Vessāmitto, Yamataggi, Aṅgīraso, Bhāradvājo, Vāseṭṭho, Kassapo, Bhaḡu.*

<sup>41</sup> T.1.1.105b22–28: 三明仙人舊婆羅門、諷誦通利、能為人說舊諸讚誦、歌詠詩書、其名阿咤摩婆羅門、婆摩提婆婆羅門、毗婆審咤婆羅門、伊尼羅斯婆羅門、蛇婆提伽婆羅門、婆婆悉婆羅門、迦葉婆羅門、阿樓那婆羅門、瞿曇摩婆羅門、首脂婆羅門、婆羅損陀婆羅門。

<i>Tevijjasutta</i> (Pali DN 13)	三明經 (Chinese DĀ 26)
<b>Section Four</b>	<b>Similes</b>
Comparison to worshipping sun and moon. (16–18)	Comparison to desiring hypothetical “most beautiful woman in the land.” (105c4–13)
Comparison to desiring hypothetical “most beautiful woman in the land.” (19–20)	Comparison to worshipping sun and moon. (105c13–23)
Comparison to building staircase to mansion that has not yet been planned or built. (21–23)	Comparison to building staircase to mansion that has not yet been planned or built. (105c23–27)
Comparison to crossing flooded Aciravatī, which is compared to five hindrances. (24–30)	Teaching on five hindrances and comparison to beckoning the other side of a river. (105c27–106a8)
	Comparison to doing nothing to cross a river. (106a8–16)
	Comparison to using effort to cross river. (106a16–25)
<b>Section Five</b>	<b>Questions about Brahmā and Brahmans</b>
Does Brahmā have possessions? No. (31)	
Does Brahmā have mind full of anger? No. (31)	
Does Brahmā have mind full of ill-will? No. (31)	
Does Brahmā have mind that is tarnished? No. (31)	
Does Brahmā have self-mastery? Yes. (31)	
Do Brahmans have possessions? Yes. (32)	
Do Brahmans have mind full of anger? Yes. (32)	
Do Brahmans have mind full of ill-will? Yes. (32)	
Do Brahmans have mind that is tarnished? Yes. (32)	

<i>Tevijjasutta</i> (Pali DN 13)	三明經 (Chinese DĀ 26)
Do Brahmins have self-mastery? No. (32)	
Is there a likeness between Brahmā and Brahmins with respect to possessions? No. (33–34)	Is there a likeness between Brahmā and Brahmins with respect to ill-will? No. (106a25–b2)
Is there a likeness between Brahmā and Brahmins with respect to anger? No. (35–36)	Is there a likeness between Brahmā and Brahmins with respect to anger? No. (106b2–6)
Is there a likeness between Brahmā and Brahmins with respect to ill-will? No. (35–36)	Is there a likeness between Brahmā and Brahmins with respect to resentment? No. (106b7–11)
Is there a likeness between Brahmā and Brahmins with respect to the mind being tarnished? No. (35–36)	Is there a likeness between Brahmā and Brahmins with respect to family and property? No. (106b11–16)
Is there a likeness between Brahmā and Brahmins with respect to self-mastery? No. (35–36)	Is there a likeness between Brahmā and Brahmins with respect to self-mastery? No. (106b16–21)
Buddha disparages 3-fold knowledge of Brahmins. (36)	
	Buddha says that Brahmins cannot answer difficult questions. (106b21–23)
<b>Section Six</b>	<b>Request for Teaching</b>
Vāseṭṭha asks if Buddha knows way to Brahmā. (37)	Vāseṭṭha and Bhāradvāja ask Buddha to teach way to Brahmā. (106b23–27)
Buddha answers by comparing himself to a native of Manasākāṭa, who will naturally know the way to the village. (37–38)	Buddha compares himself to a native of Manasākāṭa (心念國), who will naturally know the way to the village. (106b27–c5)
Vāseṭṭha asks Buddha to teach the way to Brahmā and Buddha asks him to listen. (39)	Vāseṭṭha and Bhāradvāja ask Buddha to teach the way to Brahmā and Buddha agrees. (106c5–10)
<b>Section Seven</b>	<b>The Way to Brahmā</b>
Buddha delivers “Tathāgata arises” formula, but ends with the four <i>brahmavihāras</i> , each of which is compared to a trumpeter. (40–79)	Buddha delivers “Tathāgata arises” formula, but ends with the four <i>brahmavihāras</i> . (106c10–17)

<i>Tevijjasutta</i> (Pali DN 13)	三明經 (Chinese DĀ 26)
<b>Section Eight</b>	<b>Questions about Ideal Person and Brahmā</b>
Does such a person have possessions? No. (80)	
Does such a person have mind full of anger? No. (80)	
Does such a person have mind full of ill-will? No. (80)	
Does such a person have mind that is tarnished? No. (80)	
Does such a person have self-mastery? Yes. (80)	
Is there a likeness between Brahmā and such a person with respect to possessions? Yes. (81)	Is there a likeness between Brahmā and such a person with respect to ill-will? Yes. (106c17–21)
Is there a likeness between Brahmā and such a person with respect to anger? Yes. (81)	Is there a likeness between Brahmā and such a person with respect to anger? Yes. (106c21–26)
Is there a likeness between Brahmā and such a person with respect to ill-will? Yes. (81)	Is there a likeness between Brahmā and such a person with respect to resentment? Yes. (106c26–107a1)
Is there a likeness between Brahmā and such a person with respect to the mind being tarnished? Yes. (81)	Is there a likeness between Brahmā and such a person with respect to family and property? Yes. (107a1–6)
Is there a likeness between Brahmā and such a person with respect to self-mastery? Yes. (81)	Is there a likeness between Brahmā and such a person with respect to self-mastery? Yes. (107a6–10)
<b>Section Nine</b>	<b>Conclusion</b>
Vāseṭṭha and Bhāradvāja respond with “Excellent, excellent!” formula and ask to be accepted as lay disciples. (82)	
	Vāseṭṭha and Bhāradvāja give rise to Dharma-eye and are pleased with the Buddha’s words. (107a10–14)

The comparison between the Pali and Chinese versions of the *Tevijjasutta* is summarized in the table above. In this comparison, I have focused on broad differences in the narrative, rather than specific differences in wording, to which a comparison between Pali and Chinese versions is not amenable.<sup>42</sup> While it is technically possible to explain any difference between the two versions as the result of an error in memorization, we must ask ourselves if the nature of the differences is such as to be more plausibly explained in this way, or rather as evidence of a lack of intent to memorize in the first place. For example, in every single case where ideas are presented in list-like form in the *sūtra* we have looked at (the questions about various Brahmans having seen Brahmā in Section 3, the similes in Section 4, the questions about the five characteristics in Sections 5 and 8), the order in which the ideas are presented differs between the two versions. Anālayo addresses at some length the issue of lists presented in different orders and argues that memory works in such a way that the order of a list can be easily mixed up by a memorizer because it does not affect the meaning (Anālayo 2011: vol. 2, 873–876). This is certainly true, but we could just as easily argue that there was never any particular effort made to memorize the order of the list because, again, the order has no effect on the meaning. Moreover, in two instances in this *sūtra*, the lists are not even exactly the same, with a more elaborate set of questions found in Section 3 of the Pali and an elaboration of the simile of the flooded river in Section 4 of the Chinese. How exactly is this to be explained as a memorization “mistake”? Did a *bhāṇaka* behind the Chinese version “forget” some of the questions and a *bhāṇaka* behind the Pali version “forget” to elaborate the simile of the flooded river? Or did the converse happen, with *bhāṇakas* “accidentally” adding features that were not originally there? Likewise, in section 5, the way in which the two versions give the permutations of questions about five characteristics is different. They’re really just two different ways of describing the same basic set of questions. But if we insist on strict

<sup>42</sup> Comparison of specific wording is most feasible when working with Pali and a version in a language closely related to Pali, such as Gandhari or Sanskrit. Unfortunately, the most extensive parallels to the Pali *suttas* are found in translation in the totally unrelated language of Chinese.

memorization, are we to believe that a certain *bhāṇaka* “forgot” the “correct” way to structure the questions? What evidence is there, other than the assumption of modern scholars, that the precise structure and elaboration of these lists was ever subject to an intent to be intentionally fixed?

Formulas appear to have been borrowed from the common tradition inconsistently by the two versions as well. The Pali version ends with a stock formula in which the Brahmans declare their amazement at the clarity of the Buddha’s teaching and ask to become lay disciples, while the Chinese ends with a simple statement that the Brahmans attained the Dharma-eye. Which is the “correct” version, and which is the “mistake”? Similarly, in Section 1 the Chinese version makes use of the very common formula for describing a Brahman learned in the Vedas to introduce Vāseṭṭha, Bhāradvāja, and their teachers, while the Pali version does not make use of this formula. Instead, the Pali version makes use of a different formula that gives a list of famous Brahmans. Again, which is the “correct” version, and which is the “mistake”? Is it not much simpler to argue, consistently with Oral Theory, that different *bhāṇakas* made different choices of what formulas to use in their performances of this *sūtra*?

Relatively innocuous details that do not have much effect on the overall narrative are frequent loci of differences between different versions of early Buddhist *sūtras*. Section 2 of this *sūtra* consists of the approach of Vāseṭṭha and Bhāradvāja to the Buddha to present their disagreement about the path to Brahmā, but the way in which their positions are presented is completely different. In the Pali, they simply tell the Buddha, but in the Chinese, the Buddha reads their minds and has them confirm that his description of their dispute is correct. How is this to be explained as a memory error? Did some *bhāṇaka* “forget” that really the Buddha read their minds, or rather that he did not and then made it up? Is it not simpler to assume that one *bhāṇaka* told the story in one way and another *bhāṇaka* in another way? After all, it makes no difference to the story overall whether the Buddha read the two Brahmans’ minds or if they simply told him what they were thinking.

The two versions of this *sūtra* do not even agree on where the events recorded within it took place. According to the Pali version, it took place

in the Mango Grove on the Aciravatī River north of Manasākaṭa in Kosala, but according to the Chinese version, it took place in a forest near Icchānaṅkala in Kosala.<sup>43</sup> Such discrepancies between *nidānas* of parallel versions of the same *sūtra* are extremely common throughout all four Nikāyas/Āgamas. Indeed, as Gregory Schopen has shown, there even exists a short account in the Mūlasarvāstivāda *Vinaya* in which the Buddha provides a list of stock places and persons to use when one forgets the actual places or characters involved in a particular *sūtra*. Accurate transmission of these minor contextual details appears to have been of little concern to the early Buddhist tradition; indeed, at the end of his instruction here, the Buddha even adds, “In this there is no cause for remorse” (*'di la 'gyod par mi bya'o*) (Schopen 1997). This sort of nonchalant attitude cannot simply be attributed to the idiosyncrasies of one fairly late tradition, either; instructions to freely “make up” forgotten details of a text’s *nidāna* are found in the Mahāsāṅghika *Vinaya* and the *Ekottarikāgama* preserved in Chinese (Anālayo 2009b: 822).

Note that I have drawn attention here specifically to those differences between the two versions of the *Tevijjasutta* that are likely to stem from the vicissitudes of an oral tradition. On the one hand, they are substantial enough to make it unlikely that they are simply the result of memory lapses in the transmission of texts by strict memorization. On the other hand, they have little or no bearing on the doctrinal content or narrative substance of the *sūtra*, making it unlikely that they were introduced intentionally by a particular *nikāya*, whether during the phase of oral transmission or after the *sūtra* was written down. To be clear, the existence of such evidence for oral improvisation does not preclude the possibility that certain changes were introduced intentionally by a particular sectarian tradition. This is particularly likely in doctrinally-laden formulas, which may have been adjusted to suit the doctrinal positions of a particular *nikāya*. There are, for examples, differences between the

<sup>43</sup> Admittedly, the *nidāna* for the Pali version makes more sense, since it is reflected in the actual content of the *sutta*, insofar as the Buddha makes reference both to the Aciravatī and Manasākaṭa in the course of his discussion with Vāseṭṭha and Bhāradvāja. While this *nidāna* is therefore arguably more original, the fact that an entirely different *nidāna* is used in the Chinese version demonstrates the fluidity with which *nidānas* could be assigned in any given performance of an early Buddhist *sūtra*.

different sectarian versions of the “Tathāgata arises” formula, which contains a full description of the Buddhist training (*śīlaskandha*), which I have not explored here, but which have been studied elsewhere (Meisig 1987).

Far from evincing minor deviations that could stem from accidental misrecollections of a fixed, memorized text, the two versions of the *Tevijjasutta* are rather two tellings of a single story, whose structure has been defined, but not wholly determined, by a narrative framework, certain stock formulas borrowed from the broader tradition, and additional groups of ideas peculiar to this particular story. The *Tevijjasutta* is hardly unique in this respect. In comparing Pali *suttas* to their counterparts in Chinese and other languages, repeatedly one finds the same pattern: usually the basic story is the same, but the *nidāna* is often different, different formulas are used in different places, and in general small narrative details that have little effect on the overall story are different. What we are clearly seeing in the different versions of the early Buddhist *sūtras* is snapshots of performances of what was once a living oral tradition. In this oral tradition, stock formulas and narrative frameworks maintained a remarkable consistency (especially in doctrine) over the centuries, but each performance was nevertheless made without resort to a fixed, memorized text.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, then, I concur with Cousins that there must have been a stage – possibly quite long, in fact – during which the early Buddhist texts were performed in a somewhat “improvisatory” manner, as understood within the Oral Theory developed by Parry and Lord. While scholars such as Gombrich, Allon, and Anālaya are certainly correct in emphasizing that there was a certain conservative element within the early Buddhist tradition from a fairly early date, this insight is in no wise inconsistent with the Parry-Lord Oral Theory, and it certainly does not warrant the use of such strong terms as “memorization” and “verbatim repetition.” Interestingly enough, this sort of debate over “improvisation” and “memorization” is by no means new to the field of Oral Theory. Even within the context of oral epic for which the Oral Theory was

first designed, there were attempts to minimize the role of improvisation suggested by Parry and Lord. In responding to one such critique, Lord wrote, “Smith and I have different views of what is meant by ‘improvisatory technique’ and ‘memorization.’ ... A ‘more or less stable core’ and a fixed memorizable text are not the same thing” (Lord 1987). As I have shown in this article, the texts of the early Buddhist tradition are consistent with the Parry-Lord Oral Theory – and thus can, properly speaking, be called a “tradition” – precisely because they have a “more or less stable core” that was articulated in any given performance through improvisatory technique and *not* through overall memorization.

This insight has a profound impact on the way we approach the study of the early Buddhist *sūtra* literature. First, such study must be comparative and not based solely on the Pali Canon. The nascent field of Comparative Āgama Studies has made significant strides in this respect, especially in bringing attention to the importance of the Chinese Āgamas for understanding early Buddhism. Second, the comparative study of the Pali *suttas* and their counterparts in other languages must be done in such a way as is consistent with their nature as representatives of an oral tradition. A model of strict memorization has the side-effect of reproducing in an oral framework the same assumptions found in the study of written texts: different versions can be considered derivatives of a single Ur-Text, although here the “Ur-Text” is not a text per se, but a memorized script of which the difference extant versions are the result of the fallibilities of memory through centuries of transmission. According to Oral Theory, however, there is no Ur-Text; comparison of two or more versions of a single *sūtra* can tell us nothing about what the “original” *sūtra* was, since every single possible version of that *sūtra* will be unique. Instead, the focus of our comparative efforts must be on the early Buddhist oral tradition as a whole. We can compare not only individual *sūtras* to one another, but also whole traditions. This may include the comparison of the way in which *sūtras* are distributed (or even included at all) between different Nikāyas/Āgamas. In so doing, we may gain insight into the way in which the early Buddhist oral tradition developed over time. In addition, we can compare formulas, which in a sense form the “DNA” of an oral tradition. In the *sūtras* that come down to us, formulas tend to be word-for-word the same across a *single* sectarian tradition, but they can

show differences *between* sectarian traditions (e.g., the Theravādin Nikāyas in Pali vs. the Sarvāstivāda *Samyuktāgama* in Chinese).<sup>44</sup> Finally, although the narrative differences between two versions of a single *sūtra* are mostly random, the distribution of *themes* across multiple *sūtras* in various sectarian traditions<sup>45</sup> can provide insight into how new ideas spread in the early Buddhist tradition.

Given the strong evidence for the applicability of Oral Theory to the early Buddhist literature and its great utility, one must wonder why there has been such resistance to it among modern scholars. A key assumption lying behind the arguments of many of these scholars appears to be that the early Buddhist “scriptures” are “sacred” and therefore could not possibly have been performed in an improvisatory manner. Anālayo, for example, writes that the “task [of oral epic, such as studied by Parry and Lord,] is to present the main elements of a tale in such a way as to best entertain the audience.” This is different, he contends, from the purpose of the early Buddhist tradition, which “was the preservation of sacred

<sup>44</sup> This is distinct from and complementary to the approach to formulas that has already been outlined by Hinüber, which makes use of only the Pali tradition. The prose of the Pali texts follows a characteristic rhythmic structure of waxing syllables, and by studying deviations from this rhythmic structure, Hinüber is able to determine whether a particular formula was originally composed in an Eastern form (i.e., from the homeland of Buddhism) or in a later Western form (i.e., from the region in which Pali was standardized). He concludes, “Diese Feststellung ist insofern von Wichtigkeit, als das Nebeneinander von der östlichen und der westlichen Lautgestalt des Wortes zeigt, daß noch während des Umsetzungsprozesses in die Westsprache neue Formeln geschaffen und damit die Texte gestaltet werden konnten, die Umsetzung sich also nicht streng an einen bereits vorgegebenen Wortlaut zu halten gezwungen war” (Hinüber 1994: 25). This suggests an approach to determining whether a particular formula was created early or late within the development of the early Buddhist oral tradition. I am suggesting that by comparing the Pali formulas to their parallels in other sectarian traditions, we can also see if the precise content of a formula changed over time.

<sup>45</sup> By this I mean the deployment of various narrative details and formulas in a *sūtra* so as to appeal to a particular theme. Patterns only become clear when looking at multiple *sūtras* in different sectarian traditions. When comparing the versions of a particular *sūtra*, the choice of the *bhāṇaka* to deploy certain formulas and tell the story with certain narrative details may seem random, but in then comparing to other *sūtras*, it will become clear that he is appealing to a particular theme that is popular in his sectarian tradition but not popular (or possibly even non-existent) in the others. While formulas are like the DNA of oral traditions, themes are like viruses that propagate through a particular sectarian tradition, infecting multiple *sūtras* that in other traditions are just as easily told without the theme in question.

material, for which free improvisation is inappropriate” (Anālayo 2011: vol. 1, 17). In criticizing Cousins’ model of improvisation, Gombrich similarly emphasizes that “[t]he whole purpose of the enterprise ... was to preserve the Buddha’s words” (Gombrich 1990: 22). According to Wynne, “the Buddhist texts are solemn compositions which can hardly have been transmitted in performance. ... [They] are viewed as sacred utterances rather than compositions to be performed.”<sup>46</sup> Finally, although he does not specifically appeal to the category of the “sacred,” Allon implies such a special status for the early Buddhist texts when he argues that they must have been “fixed, memorized texts” because their “function ... is to preserve the teaching of a religious leader and the rules deemed necessary to guide the conduct of the members of that religious community,” in distinction to the Yugoslav epics, which “portray the lives and activities of heroes” and are “primarily performed for entertainment” (Allon 1997b: 365–366).

Setting aside for a moment the fact that it is problematic to treat “sacred” as a natural, trans-cultural category, I do think we can admit that there is something different between the purposes of oral epic and the early Buddhist literature. Early Buddhist literature was indeed intended to preserve and transmit *buddhavacana*, the word of the Buddha. And as we saw, Oral Theory not only allows for but requires a certain amount of memorization – the formulas that are the building blocks of the tradition and in the Buddhist case contain the key doctrinal content of the *dharma*. But there is absolutely no basis for the assumption that the early Buddhist discourses (*sūtrāntas*) in their entirety could only be faithfully preserved and transmitted through strict memorization. Such an assumption, to my mind, clearly comes out of a set of Western assumptions about the nature of religion. As in the Buddhist tradition with its *vacana*, in Christianity the “word,” or *λόγος*, is thematized. But this thematized “word” is transmitted from the very beginning in writing,

<sup>46</sup> Wynne 2004: 113. Wynne goes on to cite passages from the Pali Canon which simply criticize future *suttantas* that will be poetic, as well as singing the *dhama* with a “drawn-out voice.” These passages say nothing about the “solemnity” or “sacredness” of Buddhist *sūtras*, which of course are simply modern Western categories that Wynne has read into the passages. They also in no way preclude the “performance” of *sūtras*; they only criticize a particular way of performing them.

which bears with it a completely different habitus than the oral culture of early Buddhism. Moreover, since the Protestant Reformation, the word of God as embodied in a fixed scripture has become fetishized as the one and only source of religious authority. The association between fixed words and authority has been even further compounded in the last century or so with the rise of fundamentalist Christianities that reject traditional Biblical hermeneutics in favor of a so-called “literal” interpretation of the Bible, which of course valorizes the notion of a fixed text. But there is no reason to project these trends in Christian thought on early Buddhism. The evidence *there*, I argue, points to an improvisatory but conservative oral tradition, consistent with the model provided by Oral Theory, and only modern Western prejudices provide any reason to argue otherwise.

### Abbreviations

AN	<i>Aṅguttaranikāya</i> . See Hardy 1896 and Morris 1885.
DĀ	<i>Dīrghāgama</i> .
DN	<i>Dīghanikāya</i> . See Rhys Davids and Carpenter 1890–1903.
EĀ	<i>Ekottarikāgama</i> .
MĀ	<i>Madhyamāgama</i> .
MN	<i>Majjhimanikāya</i> . See Chalmers 1898.
SĀ	<i>Samyuktāgama</i> .
SN	<i>Samyuttanikāya</i> .
Sn	<i>Suttanipāta</i> . See Andersen and Smith 1913.
T	Taishō. See Takakusu and Watanabe 1924.

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#### ABSTRACT

Several decades ago, Lance Cousins published an article arguing that the Oral Theory from the field of Classics is useful for understanding the early production and dissemination of the Buddhist literature. Since then, several scholars, while at times adopting the language of Oral Theory, have been critical of Cousins’ argument that there was an improvisatory stage in the dissemination of the early Buddhist literature, arguing instead that it must have been passed down through strict memorization. In this article, which I dedicate to the memory of Lance Cousins, I argue that his original insight was correct, and that if we understand Oral Theory properly as implying a conservative tradition characterized by a certain amount of improvisation rather than strict memorization, then its applicability to the early Buddhist literature is born out by comparison of Pali *suttas* to their counterparts preserved in other languages. I further argue that resistance to this conclusion is rooted in certain Protestant assumptions about religion as located in a fixed scripture.