

Abstract

The Making of New Communicative Space in Early Buddhist Canon: Modes of Address and Social Dialogues in the Pāli Nikāyas and the Theravāda Vinaya Piṭaka

Conversations, speeches and narrative devices as tools of preaching and intellectual communication were prevalent in the religious domain in India from a very early period. The preaching and addresses carried out in oral forms were frozen into written texts centuries later to build up a layered and accretive textual tradition. In the Theravāda Nikāyas and the Vinaya Piṭaka there are concrete indications that a wider intellectual forum based on complex communicative modes was being fashioned in a systematic way from 4th century BCE to 1st century BCE. The Pāli Buddhist suttas known as the Nikāyas, the four principal texts within the Sutta Piṭaka, the Dīgha, the Majjhima, the Saṃyutta and the Aṅguttara and the Vinaya Piṭaka also from the Theravāda collection were originally oral texts, dating roughly from the fourth century BCE, when they were taking shape as recognizable ‘texts’ and were set down in writing shortly before the beginning of the common Era. Most scholars had assumed that these parts of the Theravāda canon contain the oldest sources for the study of Indian Buddhism.

A careful examination of the selected texts of the Theravādin collection and an assessment of the cultural information contained in the texts can help us to delve into the problems of understanding at least tentatively, the composition of certain modes of address in the early Buddhist texts. Tools of cultural Anthropology and folkloristics have been used to understand the process of oral composition and dissemination to understand the context and constructive principles of the addresses.

On a macro level the historical method has been used to help us define more accurately the development of a broader communicative space involving the

ranked community of monks and the outer world during the period between fourth century BCE to first century BCE. The speech-acts were assembled as authoritative utterances and were given a societal shape. New patterns of cultural behaviour were transmitted and endorsed within an extended community through the Nikāyik programme, while the Vinaya articulated a propensity for positive conduct and thus sought to delineate a wider fabric of appropriate behavior.

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