

The Buddhist Councils and Formtion of the Theravada Canon

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The paper is concerned with the early part of the processes of transmission of the Buddha's words, immediately after Parinibbana. The actual processes are significant because they closely relate to the integrity of the texts that are accepted as being Buddha-vacana today.

The paper investigates the popular and generally-held belief that the Theravada Buddhist Canon was created during the First Buddhist Council [483 BC] primarily through the works of the Venerables Mahakassapa, Upali and Ananda. It disagrees with some earlier-held opinions of scholars that this never took place and was a myth based on doubtful evidence.

The very existence today of a canon of texts is evidence enough of this, or another event with similar outcomes, having been held. Otherwise how came the Canon into existence?

Attempting an answer the paper examines parts of the Canonical texts to point out the various processes that would have had to be applied to arrive from oral recollections, via written texts, to those available to us today. The examination includes the selection processes; the identification of the Buddha's purposes and related classification criteria that must have been applied to the massive amounts of materials that were recounted and that would have been analysed in order to arrive at, and structure, the content of the Vinaya and particularly the Suttantas; historical evidence from the texts themselves; the complexities of text structures and the inter-relatedness of themes; the subtleties and sophistication of language; the insertion of mnemonic devices to assist the remembrances of the bhikkhus; the use of subtle formulae to assist with the classification and recollection of oral texts and to indicate textual types etc. All these suggest a highly complex and sophisticated series of exercises that, without some sort of meeting similar to that described in the Vinaya, the Buddha-vacana existing today could scarcely have been realised.

Nevertheless the possibilities of the compilation of the sophisticated and complex texts that exist today, as is popularly believed, emerging from one single large gathering of monks, assembled for a period of approximately seven months at the First Council, is highly unlikely, particularly without written texts on which to work - despite the fact that many participants would have been Arahants.

Questions therefore remain: when were these materials collected into the formats and structures that we possess today, by whom and where? When, where and by whom were mnemonic devices and formulae conceived and inserted? On whose authority and when were the various groupings of texts each individually 'closed' so as to be recognized as their part in the 'final' Canon that exists today in Sri Lanka?