

Foreword

Mark Allon is well-reputed for his work on the composition and transmission of early Buddhist literature. It is our great pleasure to be able to present his newest outstanding contribution to this field in our series, which draws on his work with Gandhari manuscripts, the oldest Indic manuscripts we have. Building on the comparison of passages in the different versions of texts written and/or transmitted in Pali, Gandhari, Sanskrit, and Chinese, Allon's analysis and conclusions are far-reaching indeed. They open up new and revealing perspectives on the question of how differences in the texts of various Buddhist schools came into existence.

Based on a concise identification of the stylistic and structural characteristics as well as the principles employed in the creation and organization of sutra and verse collections, Allon contends that these texts originated as oral compositions meant for memorization and verbatim transmission. In the course of diffusion they underwent changes, which were—typically and generally—intentional in nature. Given the fact that communal recitations and other measures assuring the correct word-for-word transmission of the text are common, Allon makes the point that it is difficult to account for major changes that are unintentional. He also argues against the view that so-called formulas, i.e. textual units appearing throughout the corpus of texts in almost identical versions, function as the most central elements of a text and, so to speak, constitute the text itself. Equally, Allon demonstrates convincingly that it is unlikely for new doctrines to originate on the basis of creative rearrangements of such modules. Instead, he insists that new texts are not merely the result of a playful and creative combination of existing formulas but rather respond to the needs of a coherent and—if required—updated doctrinal position: Whoever initiated these changes paid attention to the plot, idea, structure, and purpose of the newly created text. In Allon's words: "Meaning was of more concern than wording."

The same holds true for the idea that differences in the transmitted versions of Buddhist texts are due to the fact that these were not all memorized in a verbatim fashion but actualized in marginally different forms whenever they were preached. In this case too, Allon shows conclusively that there is little to no reason to assume this. By contrast,

he argues that similar versions of a text transmitted at different times and places “are not the frozen snapshots of oral performances, but formal ‘editions’ sanctioned by the community concerned.”

Michael Zimmermann and Steffen Döll