

Review Article



Playing with Formulas

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Abstract

This article considers three recent monographs (Allon 2021, Shulman 2021, Anālayo 2022) concerned with the composition and transmission of early Buddhist texts. While these texts are generally accepted as composed and initially transmitted orally, three issues emerge as contested by the authors: (1) how far the variations in language, wording and arrangement are indicative of a period of relatively free oral composition and transmission during which the texts remained unfixed; (2) the role of repeated formulas in oral composition and transmission; and (3) whether the texts are better regarded as compilations of textual memories of the Buddha and his teachings or as deliberate literary compositions. The article argues that neither the kinds of variation we find between different versions of texts (surviving in Pali, Buddhist Sanskrit, Gāndhāri, and Chinese translation) nor the aspects of literary construction presented by the texts are adequately accounted for by Anālayo's theory of layered 'textual memories'; these require something close to the Parry-Lord theory of oral literature (as first proposed by Lance Cousins) and Shulman's notion of 'the play of formulas'.

Keywords

early Buddhist literature – Nikāyas/Āgamas – oral literature – Parry-Lord – sutta/sūtra – Buddhist narrative – Sāmaññaphala-sutta – Alagaddūpama-sutta – Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta

Mark Allon, *The Composition and Transmission of Early Buddhist Texts with Specific Reference to Sutras*. Hamburg Buddhist Studies 17. Bochum/Freiburg: projektverlag, 2021. xi + 142 pp. ISBN 978-3-89733-552-3. €17.00. Open access: <https://www.buddhismuskunde.uni-hamburg.de/pdf/4-publicationen/hamburg-buddhist-studies/17-allon.pdf>

Bhikkhu Anālayo. *Early Buddhist Oral Tradition: Textual Formation and Transmission*. Sommerville, MA: Wisdom, 2022. ix + 303 pp. ISBN 978-1-61429-827-4. \$34.95.

Eviatar Shulman. *Visions of the Buddha: Creative Dimensions of Early Buddhist Scripture*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2021. xvii + 255 pp. ISBN 978-0-19-758786-7. \$120.00.

It is generally accepted that the texts contained in the various early Buddhist Nikāya-Āgama collections which come down to us in Pāli, Buddhist Sanskrit, Gāndhārī, and Chinese translation were composed and initially transmitted orally without recourse to writing. Two features of these texts are immediately apparent: (1) that different versions of the same texts exhibit variations in the language of transmission, wording and arrangement; (2) that their content depends in significant part on the use of repeated ‘formulas’ or ‘stock passages’. Beyond this, we enter disputed territory, as is apparent from the three works under review, each of which offers different perspectives on the manner of oral composition and transmission of these early Buddhist texts. Three inter-related issues in particular emerge as contested: (1) how far the variations in language, wording and arrangement are indicative of a period of relatively free oral composition and transmission during which the texts remained unfixed; (2) the precise role of the repeated formulas in oral composition and transmission; and (3) whether the texts are better regarded as compilations of memories (some accurate, some less so) of the Buddha and his teachings or as deliberate literary compositions. Although none of the three works under review puts the matter exactly in these terms, the challenge each faces is to come up with a model of oral composition and transmission that convincingly addresses these three issues.

The three books under review have been published more or less at the same time: Mark Allon's and Eviatar Shulman's in 2021, and Bhikkhu Anālayo's the following year in 2022. (A substantial article by Nathan McGovern published a little earlier, in 2019, is also relevant to the issues and worthy of mention: 'Protestant Presuppositions and the Study of the Early Buddhist Oral Tradition'.) Each author engages with the others' theories to some extent, though there is some asymmetry in the way this is done.

Allon's book was the first to be published. This in part explains why, even though the book makes reference in passing to many of Anālayo's publications, there is no sustained engagement with Anālayo's overall understanding of early Buddhist oral tradition. In his final chapter Allon does, however, engage with both McGovern and Shulman's theories directly, referring to several of Shulman's earlier articles and having had access to *Visions of the Buddha* prior to its publication (Allon 2021: 113–114).

Although writing before the publication of Anālayo's book, Shulman devotes some space to a critique of aspects of Anālayo's approach as set out in his many previous publications; he also addresses aspects of Allon's theory primarily from his 1997 monograph, *Style and Function*, and briefly refers to McGovern. Anālayo's is the last of the three monographs to be published; he is fully aware of Allon's book—he is in fact acknowledged by Allon as having provided pre-publication feedback—but only rather briefly engages with his ideas (Anālayo 2022: 184–186). Anālayo is also aware of McGovern's article and Shulman's book, but mentions them only to somewhat summarily dismiss their theories of oral composition and transmission by referring the reader to three of his own publications for his critique (Anālayo 2022: 7, 190, citing Anālayo 2020, 2021a, 2021b), the last, "Visions of the Buddha": A Critical Reply', taking the form of a direct rebuttal of Shulman's approach and theories.

With regard to the oral composition and transmission of early Buddhist literature, each of the three books has a different focus. Allon's book devotes more space to detailing the types of variation we find in parallel versions of texts; Shulman is more concerned with the role of repeated formulas and literary creativity; Anālayo concentrates on the role of memory in the transmission of the texts. Each book also brings into consideration many different details that bear on the discussion in one way or another. In what follows I pass over many of these in an attempt to discern and bring out more clearly what is at issue in the different positions taken by each author regarding the oral composition and transmission of early Buddhist literature.

At this point it is worth expanding on the two features of the Nikāya-Āgama literature and three contested issues I highlighted at the beginning. The first feature concerns the kinds of variation we find in the different versions of

the texts. It is apparent that during at least the early phase of transmission early Buddhist texts were not fixed in terms of language: versions of what is substantially the same ancient textual material existed in Pāli, Buddhist Sanskrit and Gāndhārī.¹ This tells us that the early reciters of Buddhist texts were quite ready to change and adapt the language of transmission. This contrasts with the ancient Indian Vedic textual corpus in which the aim was to transmit texts with no change in language (Witzel 1997: 258–259). (Allon in particular considers this aspect of the texts, providing useful analyses of these linguistic variations.) Furthermore, different Buddhist schools' versions of what are again substantially the same texts in terms of content exhibit variations in the wording (although often very close), arrangement and ordering of material. Compare, for example, the Pāli *Mahāsudassana-sutta*, the Buddhist Sanskrit *Mahāsudarśanāvadāna*, and the *Mahāsudarśana-sūtra* in Chinese translation (see Gethin 2006); or the Pāli *Mahāpadāna-sutta*, the Buddhist Sanskrit *Mahāvadāna-sūtra*, and a Chinese translation (T 1 [1] 1b10–11a1) from a lost Indian (perhaps Gāndhārī) language original. These are my own examples, neither of which is explicitly discussed by Shulman, Allon or Anālayo. I offer these examples as they seem to me to illustrate exactly the rearrangement and reordering of certain blocks of shared material. Numerous further examples might be cited from Anālayo's *A Comparative Study of the Majjhimanikāya* (2011), while McGovern (2019) considers the versions of the *Tevija-sutta* and Shulman the *Udumbarikasihanāda-sutta* (Shulman 2021: 28–40) among others. These variations between different versions of the same basic text (as far as narrative frame and content are concerned) illustrate that wording and arrangement were in *some sense* not fixed. This again contrasts with the Vedic tradition of oral transmission.

This then gives rise to the first contested issue: did the first reciters of early Buddhist texts aim to transmit the teaching of the Buddha using the form of what were intended, in principle at least, to be complete and final fixed texts (*sūtras*), or did they rather adopt a method of oral transmission that was in some way not based on the notion of a complete and final fixed text? In the former case the variations in wording and arrangement might represent errors or deliberate interventions in the process of transmission; in the latter case they are traces of a method of oral composition and transmission. In broad

1 For example, a version of what is known in Pāli as the *Cūḷa-Gosiṅga-sutta* (MN 1 205–211) existed in Gāndhārī as the *Goṣiṅga-sutra* and in Buddhist Sanskrit as apparently the **Gosiṅgaśālavana-sūtra* (T 26 [1] 730b27–731a28), although the original Sanskrit text is lost; see Silverlock 2015; cf. Allon 2021: 93–98.

terms, Allon and Anālayo tend to the former view (with Anālayo emphasizing slips in memory and Allon deliberate intervention), Shulman (and McGovern) to the latter.

Regarding the second feature, the repetition of stock passages or formulas, as both Shulman and Allon discuss, there is a considerable variety of formulas, which take the form of shorter or longer passages that are repeated, sometimes verbatim but also often with adaptation to particular contexts. Significantly, while many of these formulas are doctrinal in form (related to the familiar lists and topics of Buddhist doctrine), others concern various narrative tropes and events (descriptions of wanderers and brahmins, journeys, arrivals, meetings, departures, etc.). The second contested issue concerns the role these formulas played in the composition of early Buddhist literature. This is closely related to the previous issue: the frequent use of formulas is either to be viewed as a simple mnemonic device facilitating the oral transmission of a corpus of complete fixed texts, or it is seen as providing the key to understanding how a method of oral transmission that is not based on complete and final fixed texts might work. Again in broad terms, Allon and Anālayo tend to the former view, Shulman (and McGovern) to the latter.

The third contested issue—whether the texts are better characterized as memories of the Buddha and his teachings or as deliberate literary compositions—emerges in the discussion of the parallel versions of texts and the role of the repeated formulas. Of course, in so far as memories may themselves be constructive and literary compositions may be based on memories, their opposition is not absolute. Nonetheless, in the works under review, Anālayo repeatedly characterizes the early Buddhist texts as in principle ‘textual memories’, while Allon and especially Shulman seek to consider how the texts are deliberate literary constructs. For Anālayo, constructive memories are problematic, representing failures in the transmission of a textual memory (see below).

Shulman is particularly concerned to explore the literary dimension of the Nikāya-Āgama texts. While he has a tendency to underestimate the work of his predecessors, such as Steven Collins, in this area (see below), he is certainly right to suggest that the literary dimension has yet to be properly considered. To restate and develop some of the points he makes in this connection (Shulman 2021: 44–45), the texts do not take the literary form of attempts by eyewitnesses, or better earwitnesses, to relate what the Buddha said on such and such an occasion. Rather they set his teachings within narrative frames (sometimes minimal, sometimes elaborate) that are narrated in the third person by, in literary terms, an anonymous all-knowing, all-seeing narrator. Take

the *Sāmaññaphala-sutta*. In all its surviving versions,² this begins on the roof of King Ajātasattu's palace with a conversation that took place between him and his attendants; it then tells the story of his journey through the moonlit night to Jīvaka's Mango Grove and his long exchange with the Buddha; it ends with a further conversation between the Buddha and his monks after the king has departed. It thus does not relate a series of events (or conversations) that could have been witnessed by any single person. We are thus told a story which frames the Buddha's teachings. Moreover, while the Nikāya-Āgama sūtras begin with a first person statement ('This is what I have heard'), the anonymous speaker of this statement who is now recounting the story appears not to be presented as its author; rather, as so often in later Indian tradition, he (or maybe even she?) tells us a story apparently heard from someone else (also unknown).³ It seems someone (or some group) has at some point deliberately and carefully composed and constructed this story of what the Buddha taught. (Stating the matter in these terms does not, of course, preclude the possibility that in parts the story accurately reflects what the Buddha taught.) An important concern of Shulman's book, then, is to take proper account of the fact that early Buddhist texts have *authors*. This is the starting point of his consideration of the literary and creative dimensions that inform the composition of early Buddhist texts. Although Allon does not focus on the literary aspect, he too talks of the authors of the texts, emphasising that these early sūtras are 'highly structured and stylized, extremely formulaic and repetitive, carefully crafted constructs' (Allon 2021: 10).

1 From Parry-Lord to Shulman's 'play of formulas'

In this connection, a question Shulman seeks to explore in his book is just what constitutes a basic 'text' in early Buddhist literature. He thus wants to problematise the category of the 'discourse', that is, the *sutta/sūtra*, suggesting that we must look beyond this and explore how sūtras are the 'end products of different dynamics of formula combination' (Shulman 2021: 4). His study

2 See Meisig 1987; MacQueen 1988.

3 Of course, later tradition tells us it is Ānanda at the first council who speaks the words, 'This is what I have heard'. But this is to present Ānanda as the ideal reciter of accounts—or 'stories'—of the Buddha's teachings, in line with the tradition of four possibilities for an 'authoritative source' (*mahāpadesa*) from whom someone might have heard an account of what the Buddha taught: the Buddha himself; a particular monastic community including senior and eminent monks; a group of learned elder monks who have mastered the tradition, and know the teachings, the discipline, and summary lists; a single such monk.

proceeds by considering four dimensions of early Buddhist literature: (1) the literary (chapters one and two), (2) the contemplative (chapter three), (3) the folkloric (chapter four), and (4) the oral (chapters five and six). Because these perspectives are ‘deeply intertwined,’ the literary and oral perspectives pervade the whole book.

Shulman’s whole study is premised on the idea that it is the formulas underlying sūtras that must be considered primary. The early sūtras should be seen as constructed, he argues, by early Buddhist preachers or reciters (*bhāṇaka*) through the creative use, application and adaptation of doctrinal and narrative formulas—what Shulman refers to as ‘the play of formulas.’ In this respect he builds on an idea first proposed by Lance Cousins in his 1983 article, ‘Pāli Oral Literature,’ namely, that the Parry-Lord theory of the composition and transmission of the Homeric epics might be adapted and applied to the composition and transmission of early Buddhist texts. As Shulman points out, scholars writing directly on the topic in the intervening years have mostly dismissed Cousins’ suggestion. Allon and Anālayo continue in that tradition, while McGovern (explicitly) and Shulman (more hesitantly)⁴ attempt to reconsider how the theory might be applied to early Buddhist texts, albeit in an adapted or refined form.

One sticking point has been that the Parry-Lord theory concerned verse formulas, while the early Buddhist formulas are prose. McGovern (2019: 454–459) attempts to address this point, and as Allon points out (even while rejecting the application of the theory to Buddhist texts), Buddhist ‘sutra prose [...] is as highly structured as verse, if not more so,’ and at times uses a kind of metrical prose (Allon 2021: 17–19).⁵ Another sticking point has been the notion of individual in-performance ‘improvisation,’ when there is evidence to suggest that early Buddhist texts were memorized and recited communally as fixed texts. McGovern (2019: 455, 461) and Shulman (2021: 194–196) independently point out that Lord understands the term ‘improvisation’ in a somewhat restricted if not technical sense, and that it should not be seen as implying some kind of free performance; rather it occurs within, and is constrained by, a specific notion of ‘tradition.’ And referring to the work of Ruth Finnegan on oral poetry, Shulman further points out that ‘improvisation’ (in the sense of the freedom

4 Shulman, in fact, at one point explicitly denies that he wishes to revive the theory: ‘Let me state clearly at the outset, however, that I do not aim to redeem or re-establish the Parry-Lord paradigm in relation to the early Buddhist texts, and I certainly do not see them as records of live performances.’ (Shulman 2021: 12).

5 Referring to the rhythmic prose known as *vedha*; see Bechert 1988, 1991; von Hinüber 2018: 115–118.

to creatively adapt and enhance traditional material) can take place prior to actual performance, such that what finally emerges in performance is in fact something of a fixed text and composition. Again both McGovern and Shulman question the insistence that communal recitation of early Buddhist texts precludes 'improvised' or creative adaptations. As McGovern points out, communal recitation of an unfixed text led by a single reciter is quite possible when much of the material (e.g. the formulas) is fixed. And as Shulman points out, the memorization and communal recitation of fixed texts does not mean that there was not also individual recitation and adaptation.

In contrast to McGovern and Shulman, Allon in his study wishes to defend the position that the Buddhist tradition from an early stage was in principle concerned with the composition and transmission of *fixed* texts to be memorized for communal recitation. Yet he acknowledges that the differences we find between versions of what the tradition presents as the same text⁶ must mean that the texts were nonetheless in practice not fixed, in so far as they were deliberately adapted and changed:

[T]hose who transmitted these texts consciously reworked them to improve them, to make them more compelling, to make them better suit their purposes and their understanding of their audience's expectations, to make them better reflect their understanding of the Buddha and his teaching, sometimes also creating new sutras on the basis of familiar elements.

ALLON 2021: 112

Allon speculates that the authority to make changes must have lain with a few senior reciters, and remains resistant to the application of anything resembling

6 It is worth noting here that sutras tend to tie a particular teaching of the Buddha to a particular occasion by way of a specific place and specific narrative frame; the particular teaching, location and narrative frame are in general terms reproduced in the different versions (as in the examples of the *Sāmaññaphala-sutta* and *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*), but with variations, some minimal, some more substantial. To this extent we are dealing with versions of the *same* text and require some model of oral composition and transmission that explains how such variations in the same text arose. In some cases, it seems, we are dealing with teachings of the Buddha that are only loosely or conventionally tied to a specific occasion in so far as these details vary across the different versions or default to what the Pali texts refer to as the *Sāvattihinidāna*; such cases seem to be acknowledged in the *Mūlasarvāstivāda-vinaya* suggestion that monks who forget the details of the occasion for a teaching should 'declare it was one or another of the six great cities, or somewhere where the Tathāgata stayed many times' (Schopen 1997: 575).

the Parry-Lord theory to early Buddhist literature. And yet his acknowledgement of deliberate change is perhaps to move significantly towards the position of McGovern and Shulman, in so far as their position does not entail the claim that the period of ‘improvisation’ or ‘creative adaptation’ endured indefinitely (manifestly it did not as the texts became fixed), or that it was open and unrestricted in the sense that any monk, preacher, or reciter of Buddhist texts had the authority and freedom to make changes at will. After all, the Parry-Lord theory relates to specialist poets (‘the singers of tales’) who embody a particular tradition. Applying it in the context of early Buddhist literature is only to suggest that it relates to those who specialised in and oversaw the composition and transmission of the literary tradition. We might envisage a situation in which at the beginning of the tradition it was relevant more generally, but gradually became more and more restricted until the texts became fixed in the form of the various editions that come down to us.

Anālayo remains the most opposed to the application of the Parry-Lord theory to early Buddhist texts. His opposition is related to his resistance to the suggestion that the differences we find in the texts are to any significant degree the result of conscious and deliberate change and adaptation (see below). While he does not deny absolutely that the early texts show examples of intentional change, he sees these as restricted to minimal adaptation to accommodate different audiences and to the introduction of basic ‘commentary’ into a text (Anālayo 2022: 196). He does also acknowledge that ‘various tools of oral transmission and memorization in the form of repetitions, formulas, lists, abbreviations, etc., [...] have a creative dimension of their own’ (Anālayo 2022: 196). But for Anālayo this creative dimension, rather than informing the beginnings of Buddhist oral transmission as something positive, emerges in its final phase, producing unwarranted additions and innovations, thereby betraying yet another way in which human memory is fallible, in this case by not being simply reduplicative but also constructive and creative (Anālayo 2022: 96, 136).

2 Playing with Formulas

Returning to Shulman’s book, in contrast to McGovern, Allon and Anālayo, Shulman makes a point of focusing his attention on a single tradition of early texts, namely the Pāli Nikāyas. His justification, in part, is that this allows him ‘to confront another central philological paradigm in contemporary Buddhist studies, which is that the best way to understand the early texts is to compare different versions of them’ (Shulman 2021: 13). Shulman suggests that what drives the comparison of different versions of a sūtra is typically the desire

to decide which is earlier, and so closer in time to the words of the Buddha. While this has often been the motivation, it is clearly not universally so. In fact in places Shulman slips into generalizing about scholarly approaches at the same time as appealing to scholars whose approaches differ, as when he cites Jonathan Silk's 2015 article 'Establishing/Interpreting/Translating: Is It Just That Easy?' to counter 'the common philological approach that assumes that "parallel" texts [...] can be compared to each other in order to identify more reliable, authentic, or "earlier" versions' (Shulman 2021: 7). Or as when he scrutinizes 'reading practices that are commonly employed by scholars of Buddhism' when in fact his focus is Anālayo's work (Shulman 2021: 150–156).

Nonetheless, looking at sūtras within a single tradition allows a better appreciation of their literary construction through the play of common formulas and reveals their intertextuality. It also allows Shulman to suggest that in some cases we might see different suttas *within* the Pāli Nikāyas as different versions of each other (Shulman 2021: 138, 160). In fact, Shulman does also consider parallel versions from the Chinese Āgamas and other sources. But in doing so his concern is to bring out how parallel versions belonging to different traditions are better understood, not as revealing how texts have 'developed according to neat, linear hierarchies' from a hypothetical, now lost, original (as seems to be assumed in Anālayo's model of layers in the development of textual descriptions of the Buddha's teaching, on which see below), but rather as alternative, equally possible, versions of each other, formed through the play of formulas. In this context Shulman invokes the botanical metaphor of the rhizome (borrowed from Deleuze and Guattari). Such an image contrasts with that of a tree which suggests the development of various branches from the same root and trunk; the rhizome (as in grass), on the other hand, 'grows horizontally, branching off in numerous directions and sprouting roots at each new node or hub', thus illustrating how 'different elements of a text connect to each other and proliferate through new links of significance' without reference to a genealogy or the implication of a hierarchy (Shulman 2021: 172–173). (It is not clear, however, that such an image entirely bypasses the notion of a first source.)

In this way Shulman is throughout his study concerned to expose the way in which formulas of various sorts inform the content and structure of sūtras to such a degree that they have a life of their own independent of the sūtras. In this he appeals to a suggestion first made by T.W. Rhys Davids in 1903, that the repeated doctrinal formulas may well be the oldest portions of early Buddhist texts. Shulman extends this to formulas more generally, including narrative formulas. But, as Allon (2021: 115–116) points out, while the doctrinal formulas may have been compiled independently (and we have some evidence for that in various versions of the *Samṅīti-sutta*), it is difficult to see how the narrative for-

mulas evolved apart from literary constructions that resembled sūtras, even if they were in effect subsequently added to a pool of formulas that the tradition could draw on.

Emphasising the priority of formulas over fully formed sūtras allows Shulman to understand the formulas as the basic resources of the earliest Buddhist preachers, yet in doing so there is perhaps a danger of creating a misleading opposition. I take it that Shulman would not wish to deny that what preachers preached were sūtras, not formulas, so sūtras still in some sense remain the basic expressions of Buddhist teaching. Moreover, while Shulman's focus on the play of formulas may reveal something of the creative process of sūtra composition, in places it feels in tension with his concern to explore the literary dimensions of the sūtras. To fully explore their literary dimensions we must also consider individual sūtras in their own right, and not just as alternative rehearsals of the same formulaic material.

Given his uneasiness with the tendency to use comparative studies of versions of sūtras from different ancient schools of Buddhism as a basis for deciding which is earlier and which later, it is odd to find Shulman himself attempting to stratify on *literary* grounds different sūtras in the Pāli tradition that in part rehearse the same material; he suggests, for example, that a version he considers the more 'polished' fixes an 'irregular' earlier narration (Shulman 2021: 161–162). The problem is that such judgements are often subjective. Back in 1998 Collins observed (while, like Shulman, decrying the scholarly preoccupation with chronological stratification and neglect of literature):

Story motifs, especially in an oral culture, may often be found in other combinations in other contexts; but one must still analyse particular motifs in particular texts, and attempt to understand those particular texts in their given, as-redacted-to-us form.

COLLINS 1998: 480–481

For 'story motifs' here we might substitute 'formulas'. Thus, in places Shulman forgets his own literary sensibilities and lapses into the idiom of chronological stratification. For example, in the case of the *Alagaddūpama-sutta*, he suggests that 'there is, at best, a weak connection between the opening story and the doctrine' that is the principal focus of the sūtra, namely, 'not self' (*anattan*). This leads him to raise the possibility of 'borrowing from an earlier source' (Shulman 2021: 164–165). In fact it seems possible to detect a clear thread running through the *Alagaddūpama-sutta*, namely, wrongly grasping what the Buddha has taught: the sūtra begins with Ariṭṭha's misunderstanding of the Buddha's teaching on the dangers of sexual activity (that it is not a problem

when you engage in it without desire), prompting the Buddha to offer two similes illustrating the problem of not grasping things correctly (the similes of the snake and the raft), before moving on to discuss the doctrine of not-self and how some fail to grasp this correctly and accuse him of teaching a form of nihilism.

Nonetheless, Shulman is very effective in reminding us just how much narrative and storytelling there is in the sūtras. Again and again he draws our attention to how the texts employ story motifs. In this context he brings out how this often revolves around the figure of the Buddha in a manner intended ‘to produce a sense of beauty at his unique being, and to allow devotion to grow in his followers’ hearts’ (Shulman 2021: x); this functions in effect as a kind of ‘recollection of the Buddha’ (*buddhānusr̥ti/buddhānussati*)—hence his title *Visions of the Buddha*. Yet in wanting to tie the poetic and literary dimensions of the texts to the figure of the Buddha (Shulman 2021: 47) and then contrasting this with the goal of preserving Buddhist teachings (Shulman 2021: 37), he is sometimes in danger of underplaying the manner in which the literary and narrative elements of the sūtras equally serve the purpose of preserving and communicating Buddhist doctrine. In this he overlooks the contribution of Steven Collins, who long ago bemoaned the scholarly failure to study the Pāli sūtras as literature, complaining of ‘the dour-faced and humorless positivism with which these texts are so often read’ (Collins 1998: 494). In his own work Collins was particularly concerned to bring out how ‘systematic thought’ might be expressed through ‘narrative thought’ (Collins 1998: 121). Thus for Collins, a sūtra such as the *Cakkavattisihanāda-sutta* ‘tells a witty story, by turns pleasantly farcical and fearsomely imaginative, with some familiar doctrinal motifs in unexpected narrative settings; the whole parable being a disbelief-suspending morality tale’ (Collins 1998: 495).

3 Anālayo’s Theory of ‘textual memories’

Referring to the same article by Silk (2015) as did Shulman, Anālayo rejects the quest for the Ur-versions of the sermons of the Buddha, acknowledging that we cannot hope to recover the actual words spoken by the Buddha on a particular occasion. Nonetheless he suggests we must still think in terms of ‘a starting point’, albeit one that ‘can no longer be convincingly reconstructed’ (Anālayo 2022: 154). What we have access to now are the ‘textual descriptions’ presented by Buddhist tradition as the teachings of the Buddha; these textual descriptions are the product of ‘a prolonged period of textual transmission’; by employing the methods of historical-critical study, he argues, it is ‘possible to discern layers

in the development of such descriptions' (Anālayo 2022: 179). This does seem to assume a stemmatic model for the development of sūtras of the kind which Shulman especially calls into question.

Unlike Shulman and Allon, Anālayo doesn't really offer a theory of oral *composition*, only one of transmission in terms of *remembering*, or as he puts it, 'textual memories' (Anālayo 2022: 195). Anālayo identifies among scholars of early Buddhist literature a 'tendency to opt too easily for intentionality as the reason for change'; for him this is to overlook the 'shortcomings of memory' (Anālayo 2022: 183–184). In fact, he suggests, the variations we find are due to the 'natural vagaries' (Anālayo 2022: 169) or 'natural fluctuations' of oral tradition that do not require or indicate the intervention of 'redactors' or 'editorial committees' (187). For Anālayo, what we are in the main confronted with in the different versions of ancient Buddhist texts is evidence of 'the limitations of human recall' (Anālayo 2022: 191). (An exception to this rule is the intentional 'improvement' and 'embellishment' of stories illustrating Vinaya rules; see Anālayo 2022: 27–36.)

In chapter three of his book, entitled 'Memory Errors', Anālayo offers eleven instances of variation which he argues are not to be seen as examples of deliberate editorial intervention, but as examples of how shortcomings in human memory have introduced errors into the textual tradition (Anālayo 2022: 76–88). The problem here is that certainly in ten out of the eleven cases we might dispute that what he presents as an 'error' is really such:⁷ elements that appear puzzling or awkward might exist in a text for various reasons; labelling them 'errors' is to prejudge the matter. In one instance the 'error' is essentially manufactured by Anālayo's English rendering of the following:

yaṃ vitakkaṃ ākaṅkhissati taṃ vitakkaṃ vitakkessati, yaṃ vitakkaṃ n' ākaṅkhissati na taṃ vitakkaṃ vitakkessati. acchecchi taṅhaṃ, vāvattayi saṃyojanaṃ, sammā mānābhisamayā antam akāsi dukkhassā ti.

MN I 122.2–5

7 The one case where something self-evidently seems to have gone wrong is the Theravāda version of the *Chabbisodhana-sutta* (MN III 29–37), which describes only five types of purification rather than the six indicated in the sutta's title. As Anālayo notes (2022: 87), this discrepancy is old and acknowledged by Buddhaghosa in his commentary (Ps IV 94.19–95.5). Buddhaghosa first suggests that we can get six sections by dividing the section on purification related to the senses (MN III 32) in two, by way of the one's own body and others' bodies. Such a solution seems forced. Buddhaghosa then notes that the elders 'who live across the sea' take the section on the senses as one but recite six sections with a section on the four foods. This turns out to be precisely what we find in the Sarvāstivāda *Madhyama-āgama* version preserved in Chinese translation.

Anālayo sees a syntactical problem in the use of the future in combination with the aorist. To convey this ‘problem’ he renders the sentence as follows:

Whatever thought they will want, they will think that thought; whatever thought they will not want, they will not think that thought. They *cut off* craving, *did away with* [any] fetter, and by rightly penetrating conceit made an end of *dukkha*.

ANĀLAYO 2022: 81; emphasis added

But the use of the future to emphatically affirm a present state of affairs is surely quite normal (cf. Coulson 1992: 207). That there is no problem here becomes apparent if we supply the implied logic of the sentence and translate (beginning with the previous sentence *ayaṃ vuccati, bhikkhave, bhikkhu vasī vitakka-pariyāyapathesu*) as follows:

Monks, this monk is called a master of the ways and courses of thought. [It will turn out to be the case that] whatever thought he will want [to think], he will think that thought; whatever thought he will not want [to think], he will not think that thought. [In becoming a master of the ways and courses of thought,] he *has cut off* craving, *done away with* [any] fetter, and, by rightly penetrating conceit, made an end of *dukkha*.⁸

But there seems to me a more general problem with the way Anālayo approaches these ‘errors’ of transmission. In each case Anālayo argues that the ‘error’ has arisen in the Pāli transmission while the (Mūla-)Sarvāstivāda Āgama version preserves a text free of the error in question. This begins to look suspicious: are we to suppose that the reciters in the Theravāda tradition consistently suffered from worse memories than those in the Sarvāstivāda? One could equally argue that these examples reflect how the Pāli textual transmission became fixed relatively early, while the Sarvāstivāda versions show a later, deliberate intervention intended to improve the way a passage reads. Allon (2021: 3) notes that the versions ‘of the Sarvāstivādins and Mūlasarvāstivādins

8 Anālayo (2022: 81) also perceives a doctrinal problem here: he finds the inclusion of a stock phrase indicating the attainment of awakening (*acchecchi taṅhaṃ vāvattayi saṃyōjanaṃ sammā mānābhisamayā antam akāsi dukkhassa*) at the conclusion of an account of five methods for stilling thought and achieving *samādhi* ‘rather puzzling’ and so sees the *Madhyama-āgama* version, which omits the phrase, as free of both a syntactical and doctrinal ‘error’ in transmission. I can only say that I perceive neither a syntactical nor a doctrinal error in the Theravāda version.

[...] are generally far more elaborate than, say, the Pali versions', suggesting that we might consider that they became fixed rather later. But perhaps the more significant difficulty for the claim that the differences between versions of a text result in the main from failures in memory is that it seems inadequate to explain the most common kinds of difference, namely, the differences in order and arrangement of material, and the inclusion or not of particular formulas. I will return to this presently.

Anālayo suggests that the starting point of oral transmission is 'when someone says something' (Anālayo 2022: 199). Anālayo does not tell us whom he understands this 'someone' to be in the case of the early sūtras. It would seem he is thinking of the Buddha himself. So, if I understand Anālayo's theory correctly, the oral transmission of the Buddha's teachings begins with the Buddha, and in some cases his immediate disciples, speaking words which their listeners then attempt to recall and memorize *as best they can*, given their failed attempt to employ Vedic techniques of verbatim memorization (Anālayo 2022: 64–65). The early sūtras take shape naturally as 'textual memories' based on these earliest recollections. These textual memories are then passed on by oral recitation, with only minimal and occasional *intentional* editorial intervention on the part of reciters and preachers. Yet in time slight and sometimes quite substantial variations *naturally* creep in as a result of the shortcomings of human memory. The plausibility of such a model seems to me to rest on three points:

1. That in failing to master and use the specialised techniques of Vedic memorization to pass down their texts, the first reciters of Buddhist texts were forced in the main to rely on their natural ability to recall what the Buddha and his disciples had said.
2. That the kinds of variation we find between different versions of a text are primarily of the sort that are best explained by reference to the shortcomings of human memory.
3. That early Buddhist sūtras are better characterised as 'textual memories' than deliberate authored compositions.

To my mind, each of these points is open to challenge. With regard to the first, in a developed oral culture with a tradition of handling complex and sophisticated bodies of learning without recourse to writing, to imagine that the only established mnemonic devices available were the Vedic techniques of verbatim memorization seems to me problematic. It is precisely here that the use of numbered lists (*mātikā/māṭṛkā*; see Gethin 1992) and succinct doctrinal formulas as ways of embodying and transmitting learning come into play. That such devices predate Buddhism seems likely. Cousins (2015: 1–2) comments: 'At the time of the Buddha, when writing was as yet unknown in Eastern India or at least not used for religious purposes, the creation of such a list [as that of

the sixteen stages of mindfulness of breathing] must have been the equivalent of today's authoring a book.' This leads us back to Rhys Davids' focus on the repeated doctrinal formulas and to Shulman's play of formulas.

Regarding the kinds of variation we most commonly find in different versions of the texts, I can only side with Shulman, McGovern and, before them, Cousins: the rearrangement and reordering of formulaic material, the omission, addition, or substitution of one formula or another do not look like errors that have arisen in the course of trying to recall a fixed memorized text. In fact, they do not look like *errors* at all; they read as deliberate attempts to creatively explore and communicate the Buddha's teaching. This relates to the third point: different versions of early Buddhist sūtras are better understood not as more or less accurate textual memories of what the Buddha said on one particular occasion, but as carefully considered compositions, each designed to communicate an understanding of his teachings and significance. (To be clear, this does not preclude their reflecting accurately what the Buddha taught.) This seems to me the best way to make sense of the kinds of variation we find in the versions of the *Mahāsudassana-sutta* (Gethin 2006) and *Mahāpadāna-sutta*, in the sūtras of the *silakkhandhavagga* (within the Pāli tradition; see Shulman 2021: 54–73), and in the sūtras across traditions setting out the different permutations of the gradual path (Gethin 2020).

4 Versions of the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*

None of the four authors considers the example of the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* directly in the works under review, but looked at from the perspective of Shulman's 'play of formulas' (and of Cousins' and McGovern's and even Allon's theories), it seems clear that it is problematic to think in terms an 'original' or 'first' *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* delivered by the Buddha on one single occasion long ago, which has been either well or not so well recollected in the various versions that come down to us. Even though the two surviving versions both choose to frame the sūtra as delivered by the Buddha on a particular occasion when he was staying in Kuru in a small town called Kammāsadhamma,⁹ it is

9 This is a relatively rare location. In addition to the (*Mahā*-)*Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* six suttas in the Pali Nikāyas are located here: the *Mahānidāna-sutta* (DN II 55–71), *Māgaṇḍaniya-sutta* (MN I 501–513), *Āneñjasappāya-sutta* (MN II 261–266), *Nidāna-sutta* (SN II 92–93), *Sammasa-sutta* (SN II 107–112 T II 82a Rājagṛha), *Ariyāvāsa-sutta* (AN V 29–32). The parallels surviving in Chinese translation agree on the location in the case of the *Mahānidāna-sutta* (T I [I] 60a29–b1) and *Āneñjasappāya-sutta* (T 26 [I] 542b5–6); the parallel to the *Māgaṇḍaniya-sutta* is located

rather unlikely that the Buddha expounded his teaching on the applications of mindfulness in the way set out in the sūtra on just one single occasion.¹⁰ What comes down to us, then, are various *possible* versions, all ‘authentic’. As Kuan (2008: 145–154) and Anālayo (2011: 1, 73–97) have documented, the Pāli version offers six ways of ‘observing the body’ (*kāyānupassanā*), using familiar formulaic material found elsewhere in the early texts; (1) mindfulness of breathing, (2) knowledge of postures, (3) full awareness in undertaking routine activities; (4) reviewing the parts of the body, (5) reviewing the body as constituted by the elements, (6) visualising the body as a corpse in various stages of putrefaction. The *Madhyama-āgama* version (preserved in Chinese translation) suggests all these (although in a slightly different order and with some other variations), but adds several more ways, again drawing on formulaic material found elsewhere: (1) two methods for dealing with distracting thoughts (using formulas in part paralleled in Theravāda sources in the *Vitakkasanthāna-sutta*),¹¹ inserted near the beginning, which makes good sense; (2) observing the feelings that pervade the body in the attainment of each of the four *dhyānas*; (3) observing light, and (4) reviewing the sign of contemplation. These latter additions are placed after the practice of mindfulness of breathing, which again makes good sense if this is taken as essentially an exercise in calming the mind; the addition of the *dhyānas* also finds a parallel in the Pāli *Kāyagatāsati-sutta*. A further version of the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* is found in a Chinese translation of the *Ekottarika-āgama*. This offers a somewhat reduced list, but adds awareness of the body’s orifices. Similar types of variation (additions and omissions of formulaic material) are found under observing dhammas (*dhammānupassanā*). Moreover, as Anālayo observes (2011, 1, 80), reduced versions of ‘observing the

in Kuru but not Kammāsadhamma (T [1] 26 670a28–29); the *Nidāna-sutta* has no parallel; the parallel to the *Sammasa-sutta* is located in Rājagṛha (T 99 [11] 82a1–2), and the parallel to the *Ariyāvāsa-sutta* in Śrāvastī (T 125 [11] 775c19–20).

10 The scenario outlined here has some affinity with that envisaged by Silk (2015: 207), namely, that, given the likelihood that the Buddha ‘presented “the same” sermon’ more than once and in different locations, ‘but in different terms, and perhaps organized somewhat differently’, it is theoretically possible that ‘the same’ sermon could have been remembered even verbatim in ‘multiforms’. This does not, however, fully account for the process of levelling whereby different traditions of textual transmission (say, the Theravāda and Sarvāstivāda) come to attribute the same location and same narrative frame to ‘the multiforms’ of a teaching on a particular topic, as in the case of different versions of the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* and *Sāmaññaphala-sutta*: clearly while the teaching associated with a particular occasion (location and narrative frame) is fixed in general terms, it is not fixed in detail.

11 See MN I 119.5–26, 120.33–121.17; see Kuan 2008: 86–90 (discussed here with reference to the *Kāyagatāsati-sutta*).

body' are also found *within* the Pāli tradition in the *Paṭisambhidāmagga* and *Vibhaṅga*. Are we really to read all this as reflecting reciters' confused and unclear memories of what the Buddha taught under the heading of 'observing the body' and 'observing dhammas' in the context of the applications of mindfulness?¹²

If we imagine that the Buddha, himself educated in a culture in which learning was transmitted orally, made use of numbered lists and succinct doctrinal formulas in his teaching, then it is not impossible that the part of the play of formulas that involves these reflects something of his own style of teaching and that of his earliest and immediate disciples. We might then imagine that these doctrinal lists and formulas gradually became combined with narrative formulas to produce literary compositions—the first sūtras—which, by setting those teachings in compelling narrative frameworks, more effectively communicated the Buddha's teachings. If we then imagine these sūtras are likely to become more fixed in form as time goes on, such that the authority to change and edit them rests only with recognised reciters and those who oversaw the early Buddhist 'councils', the *saṃgītikāras*,¹³ we introduce elements of Allon's model also.

5 Conclusion

Shulman in places wishes to distance his own theory from that of Parry-Lord, emphasising that he is not attempting to revive it, yet to my mind his theory is best understood as an adaptation and refinement of it to make it more applicable to early Buddhist oral literature. These adaptations are meant to accommodate some degree of verbatim memorization in the process of composition and transmission. Yet the essentials of the Parry-Lord theory seem to me to remain in his 'play of formulas': the composition and transmission of early Buddhist texts is at every turn informed by stylized repetition and the use of narrative and doctrinal formulas. And yet their use is not merely mechanical, not merely

12 In his discussion of the different versions of the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* in his comprehensive 2011 comparative study of the *Majjhima-nikāya*, Anālayo does not explicitly discuss how the particular variations in question arose (Anālayo 2011: I, 73–97). However, his rejection of the Parry-Lord theory and his general argument that it is in the main the failings of human memory that are responsible for the variations we find is already set out in the study; see Anālayo 2011: I, 17; II, 857–891.

13 On the possible role of the *saṃgītikāras* as redactors, editors and even authors of the canonical collections of Buddhist texts, see Skilling 2009: 59–64; Skilling 2010: 15, 34, 38–39.

formulaic; they are continually adapted to new circumstances, facilitating the application of the Buddha's teaching to different situations.

Thus with regard to the three issues I highlighted at the beginning of this review article, it seems to me that the nature of the variations between versions of the same sūtra and the way the same formulas are used and repeated in different texts make it difficult to avoid the conclusion that in the earliest phase of composition and transmission sūtras were not taken as final fixed formulations. Following on from this, it also seems to me equally difficult to avoid the conclusion that the earliest reciters of Buddhist texts were in some sense 'authors' who, working within the constraints of tradition, creatively adapted doctrinal and narrative formulas and frames in order to better communicate the Buddha's teaching. In part this may reflect the way the Buddha himself taught. Whether we call this creative process 'improvisation', whether this creative process took place 'in performance' or prior to it or in some way that combined elements of both are moot points. And, as I have said, none of this of itself need suggest that the sūtras as we have them do not contain the authentic word of the Buddha.

The three works under review adopt opposing positions on a number of issues. In some respects these might be reconciled to a degree, in others not. All three bring to the discussion a wealth of examples, details and ideas. None, in my view, succeeds in providing a finally satisfying model of how the oral composition and transmission of early Buddhist texts actually worked. Perhaps such a model must remain elusive. Still, whether or not we agree with Shulman's book in all points, details, and formulations, his notion and analysis of 'the play of formulas' does bring us closer to an appreciation of the way in which the oral composition of early Buddhist texts might have operated, though some will continue to be reluctant to countenance this way of understanding the composition and transmission of early Buddhist texts.

Reading Allon's, Shulman's and Anālayo's monographs together reaffirms my own sense that Lance Cousins was essentially right: the most plausible model for the composition and transmission of early Buddhist texts involves some form or adaptation of the Parry-Lord theory of oral literature. If this conclusion should seem to be born of a disciple's desire to honour his teacher's memory,¹⁴ I can only say that those who come up with good ideas deserve to be honoured.

14 Lance Cousins (1942–2015) supervised my doctoral research at the University of Manchester between 1982 and 1987.

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