CHAPTER III.3

THE VEDIC TEXTS KNOWN TO THE EARLY BUDDHISTS

Questions pertaining to the relationship between the early grammarians and the Veda are relatively straightforward. We are in possession of texts which presumably have been composed by those early grammarians themselves. Most scholars agree that the Aṣṭādhyāyī is, for the most part, the work composed by Pāṇini himself. They further agree that the Mahābhāṣya is the work composed by Patañjali, exactly or almost exactly in the form in which it has come down to us. With regard to the vārttikas, too, there is quasi-unanimity that all of the prose vārttikas, or almost all of them, have been composed by Kātyāyana. The extent of the acquaintance of these authors with the Veda can therefore be investigated on the basis of their own words.

It has been pointed out above that these three grammarians, and Pāṇini in particular, constitute one of the two main pillars on which late-Vedic chronology is traditionally based. The other one is the Buddha. The Buddha is often claimed to be more recent than certain portions of the Veda—primarily the oldest Upaniṣads—and the reason usually given for this is that Buddhist teaching continues, and is in a way based on, certain developments that made their first appearance in those portions of the Veda. The doctrine of rebirth and karmic retribution is fundamental to Buddhism; it was presumably new at the time of the early Upaniṣads. The conclusion is often drawn that Buddhism must be later than those Upaniṣads.

The unsound nature of this argument has been discussed in earlier chapters. The present chapter will address a different but related question: What parts of the Veda are known to the earliest Buddhist texts that have been preserved?

This question must be treated with the greatest care. The question is not: Which portions of the Veda were known to the Buddha? This latter question is of the greatest interest, and would deserve our full attention if only it were possible to answer it.¹ It is however...

¹ Some claims to this effect will be considered below.
highly unlikely that a satisfactory answer to this question will ever be found. Unlike Pāṇini, Kātyāyana and Patañjali, we do not possess any work that has been composed by the Buddha himself; not even the Buddhist tradition makes any such claim. We do have a number of canonical texts which claim to preserve his words, but it is far from certain that this claim is reliable in all cases.

In view of the above we cannot but reformulate the question and give it the form indicated earlier: What parts of the Veda are known to the earliest Buddhist texts that have been preserved? This question, in this particular form, gives rise to various other questions, among which we must consider the following:

a. Which are the earliest Buddhist texts that have been preserved?

b. What conclusions can be drawn from an enumeration of Vedic texts that were known to those earliest Buddhist texts?

These two questions are of course interrelated, and connected with a third one: What does it mean that parts of the Veda were “known to” certain early Buddhist texts? Since texts themselves do not have “knowledge” in the strict sense, we will have to translate our findings into statements like “the original author of this particular Buddhist text knew (or had heard of) that particular portion of the Veda”. However, there can be no doubt that different texts (or portions of texts) of the Buddhist canon were “originally” composed, or formulated, by different authors. There was no single author for all of them, and therefore perhaps no single person who “knew” all these different parts of the Veda. And there is no guarantee that these different authors were each other’s contemporaries, nor that they were particularly close in time to the Buddha.

Few scholars nowadays would agree that the texts of the early Buddhist canon were all composed at one at the same time. The tradition according to which the sermons of the Buddha—all of them—were recited by the disciple Ānanda soon after the demise of his master does not find many followers in academic circles. Other portions of the ancient canon are widely considered to be even less old than this so-called Sūtra-Piṭaka. It is frequently pointed out that according to the Ceylonese tradition canonical texts were not written down until the first century BCE, which leaves several centuries between the first composition of at least some of these texts and their fixation in writing. During this long period they were preserved orally; the reliability of this oral tradition cannot be verified. It may