She Who Heard Much: Notes on Receiving, Interpreting, and Transmitting *Buddhavacana*

Maria Heim

Buddhism scholars are gradually turning to commentaries not only for what they might teach us about how they gloss words and interpret particular passages in root texts, but also to explore the distinctive forms of intellectual work they valued and practiced (see Nance 2012).[1] Among the important questions we are learning to ask in this endeavor is how commentaries portrayed their understandings of commentarial practice and what services commentaries are meant to perform. These services sometimes differ from how modern scholars have interpreted the aims of traditional commentaries, and they often depart from what modern scholars take to be the work of exegesis. Working toward a better understanding of traditional South Asian theories of exegesis, genre, and systematics[2] will include, among other things: exploring the purported qualities of *buddhavacana* and textual Dhamma (*pariyatti-dhamma*); asking how *buddhavacana* was transmitted and accepted; investigating how the genres of textual Dhamma were understood and how scripture and commentary were conceived to be located in history; and exploring what they say about the nature of an ideal audience and the impact the texts were projected to have on the future. In what follows I offer a small contribution as part of this larger project that considers how the Pali commentarial tradition understood the nature of *buddhavacana*, how and by whom it was to be transmitted, and how it was understood to be located in particular contexts. I do so by examining what sixth-century CE commentator Dhammapāla says about the transmission of the

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Itivuttaka, a collection of *sutta*s said to be heard and conveyed to the Saṅgha by a lay woman, Khujjuttarā. This exploration will advance our understanding of the distinctive genre of teaching the commentators took *sutta*s to be.

In the Pali tradition the most thoroughgoing systematic reflection on what texts are and what commentarial practice should be is provided by the *nidāna*s, or introductory sections of the *aṭṭhakathā*s. *Nidāna*, in a general sense, can mean context, origin, occasion, introduction, and causal condition, and it is useful to keep all of these possible senses in play as we consider the roles textual *nidāna*s had in introducing a text. The *nidāna* introduces and contextualizes the teachings of the Buddha and occurs at several levels of a text; according to Buddhaghosa, a *nidāna* is present in the *sutta*s themselves, beginning with Ānanda's opening of his recitation with the words "thus have I heard" and then his specifying the "time, place, teacher, narrative, assembly, and region" of each sermon (*Dīghanikāya-aṭṭhakathā* 1.50).[3] While present in this way in the *sutta*s, a *nidāna* is also a service that the commentators provide to expand upon the particulars mentioned in the canonical *nidāna*, as well as to frame, contextualize, and reflect upon a *sutta*, a text, and even a genre (*piṭaka*) as a whole. When treating a *sutta*, a commentarial *nidāna* expands on the contextual circumstances given by Ānanda of the time, place, teacher, and so on, in which the *sutta* was uttered, amplifying narrative detail that situates the Buddha's teaching among very concrete particular people and purposes. When treating a book, a commentator will often provide a *nidāna* that introduces the work as a whole. Finally, each *piṭaka* is provided with a *nidāna* introducing its particular form of Buddhist knowledge, in contrast to the other two *piṭaka*s. Buddhaghosa provides extensive introductory *nidāna*s on the *Brahmajāla Sutta* of *Dīgha-nikāya* (which is taken to be the first *sutta* of the first book of the Sutttanta), in his *Atthasālinī* on the *Dhammasaṅginī* (the first book of the Abhidhamma) and in the *Samantapāsādikā* on the Vinaya. Dhammapāla follows suit in his *ṭīkā*s on these texts and in his *aṭṭhakathā*s on other texts. These commentarial *nidāna*s offer the most systematic reflection that we have from them on how they understood the genres of Pali thought and what they took Buddhist knowledge to be. In what follows I suggest that the commentators are telling us to read texts through a complex idea of context.

Buddhavacana and its Transmission

Textual *nidāna*s are all, in one way or another, concerned with the qualities, circumstances, and transmission of Buddha's speech. There are many long encomiums to *buddhavacana* and the well-proclaimed Dhamma that advance well-known tropes such as how the spoken Dhamma is "lovely in beginning, lovely in the middle, and lovely at the end, and entirely complete and perfectly pure in meaning (*attha*) and phrasing (*byañjana*)" (*Majjhimanikāya* 1.179; *Majjhimanikāya-aṭṭhakathā* 2.202–205 *Visuddhimagga* 213–214; *Itivuttaka-aṭṭhakathā* 2.85–87) and which extol the countless ways that the Buddha taught out of compassion for beings to promote their highest and manifold happiness (*Majjhimanikāya-aṭṭhakathā* 2.202). Less well known is how the commentators regarded the spontaneity of the Buddha's sermons and the ways they artlessly spoke to their immediate audience. Dhammapāla suggests that the Buddha teaches the Dhamma "on the spot (*ṭhānuppattika*) according to the dispositions and attainments of the audience." The Buddha does not prepare his compositions in advance working them out through inference or reasoning, but rather teaches only on the spot according to the dispositions of those who are teachable (*Itivuttaka-aṭṭhakathā* 1.6). This quality of thinking on his feet and responding in a way uniquely tailored and adapted to the needs and capacities of whatever audience and occasion were at hand captures a distinctive quality of *buddhavacana* that grounds it in how it was prompted by and received in its original context.

These and other extraordinary qualities of the Buddha's speech and the Dhamma that he taught pose interesting questions of what it would mean for others to speak for him, particularly after his *parinibbāna*. On the one hand, no one can be well spoken in the ways the Buddha is well spoken. On the other hand, the Buddha not infrequently affirmed the Dhamma instruction provided by his disciples, and the Theravāda tradition has regarded the recitations of Ānanda and Upāli at the First Council as authoritative and definitive transmissions of the Buddha's words. They are so because they echo exactly what they had heard. These disciples are, first and foremost, *hearers* (*sāvaka*s), people who heard well and attentively and could convey exactly what they had heard.

In the *sutta*s occasions arise in which the Buddha's disciples can be found preaching and the Buddha praises their teachings. This happens

perhaps most frequently in the case of Sāriputta, chief among the Buddha's monks in wisdom, who is frequently assigned topics to preach. Mahā-kaccāna, chief among monks for expounding in detail what was said in brief by the Buddha, is known to elaborate the Buddha's teachings in several *sutta*s (*Majjhimanikāya* 1.113–114). We also find a few instances of women acclaimed for their preaching. The nun Khemā is sought out and requested by King Pasenadi to give a teaching, which she does and in which he delights; at a later date, the king approaches the Buddha with the same questions and finds that the Buddha delivers exactly the same sermon that she gave, prompting the king to marvel at "how the meaning and phrasing of the Teacher coincide and agree with the meaning and phrasing of the hearer (*sāvakā*) and are not at variance on the important points" (*Saṃyuttanikāya* 4.379). A similar occurrence happens with the nun Dhammadinnā whose exchange with a lay man on essential points of Dhamma is commended by the Buddha as "explained by the nun Dhammadinnā exactly as I would have explained it" and recorded as the *Cūḷavedalla Sutta* (*Majjhimanikāya* 1.304). These examples indicate very clear authorization by the Buddha for others to speak in his stead, and the recognition that they can exactly replicate, expand upon, and even anticipate his words.

When the time came to deal with the Buddha's death and the subsequent transmission of the teachings, the commentarial tradition makes much of the qualities of Ānanda and Upāli who were authorized to recite the Dhamma and the Vinaya respectively (the issue of the transmission of the Abhidhamma is, of course, a more complicated one). Buddhaghosa discusses at great length what is meant by Ānanda's "thus have I heard" (*evam me sutam*) which is supposed to open his recitation of each *sutta* (*Khuddakapāṭha-aṭṭhakathā* 99–104; *Majjhimanikāya-aṭṭhakathā* 1.2–10). While there is much in his fascinating treatment of this opening that is important and warrants further attention, what is most significant for our purposes is how the commentators see not only the work it does in authorizing Ānanda's echoing of the teachings, but the challenges and tensions it instructively develops in conveying the distinctive ways in which the Buddha taught. Since Ānanda was recognized by the Buddha as "chief among monks who have heard much and chief in behavior, memory, fortitude, and service," when he says "*evam me sutam*" he "generates a desire to hear among beings" and what he says "should be

regarded as just the meaning and the phrasing, neither more nor less and not otherwise" than what the Buddha taught (*Khuddakapāṭha-aṭṭhakathā* 101, citing *Aṅguttaranikāya* 1.24). The commentators are also interested in how Ānanda's recitation captured the distinctive quality of the Buddha's speech of being endlessly adaptable for all audiences. In his discussion of what is meant by "thus" (*evam*), Buddhaghosa says: "Who is able to understand in all its different ways the Bhagavan's speech which is skilled in various methods, originating from many dispositions [of the audience], perfect in meaning and phrasing, possessing various marvels, profound in the penetrating, teaching, and meaning of the Dhamma, appropriate for all beings, and reaching the ears of each in their own languages?" The answer of course is Ānanda, who, "though he has generated with all his might the desire to hear, yet hears in just one way" (*Khuddakapāṭha-aṭṭhakathā* 101; compare *Itivuttaka-aṭṭhakathā* 1.20). Like all of us, Ānanda hears speech that is endlessly suitable for all ears in just the way it reaches his. Yet he is able to rehearse the Dhamma as taught by the Buddha in all the ways it can be heard. Saying "thus" signals that he is merely quoting the contents of what he heard as he heard it, though what he heard has these qualities.

In his treatment of the whole phrase "*evam me sutam*" Buddhaghosa asserts that when Ānanda utters this "he passes beyond the plane of being a non-*sappurisa* not by assuming as his own the teachings conveyed by the Tathāgata, [but instead, by] acknowledging his condition of being a hearer, he enters into the plane of being a *sappurisa*." He "moves his mind away from non-Dhamma, to establish it in the Dhamma"; "he effaces himself, he speaks of the Teacher, he delivers the Buddha's words, he establishes the guide to the Dhamma" (*Khuddakapāṭha-aṭṭhakathā* 103–104). This utterance—*evam me sutam*—is a declaration of authority as well as a disclaimer. It signals his status as a hearer and *sappurisa*, but at the same time it indicates that he is merely reporting the Buddha's words, not authoring them. The text goes on to say that "*evam me sutam*" disclaims any authorship or invention on Ānanda's part of what he heard "face-to-face" (*sammukhā*) from the Buddha. The utterance instills faith in those who hear it and removes all doubt about "words, phrasing, meaning, and ideas" (*Khuddakapāṭha-aṭṭhakathā* 104), thereby establishing the *sutta*s in the four *nikāya*s as definitively spoken by the Teacher and heard in this way by an unassailable and faithful transmitter of it.

Iti Me Sutam

It is well known that the varied texts of the *Khuddaka-nikāya* have diverse authors and, though classified as belonging to the *sutta-piṭaka*, do not all have a clear and direct line of transmission from the Buddha to Ānanda. The *nidāna*s provided by the *aṭṭhakathā*s on these texts invoke various strategies to connect their contents to what the Buddha said. Among them, one of the most interesting is the effort by Dhammapāla in his *aṭṭhakathā* on the *Itivuttaka* to establish its *sutta*s as *buddhavacana* faithfully conveyed in much the same terms as the *sutta*s of the four *nikāya*s beginning with "*evam me sutam*." The *Itivuttaka* is a short text, comprised of one hundred and twelve relatively brief *sutta*s in prose and verse and organized in a manner similar to the *Aṅguttara* method in enumerating things that can be grouped into ones, twos, threes, and fours. It gets its name, *Itivuttaka*, "As It Was Said," from the way each *sutta* opens by stating "this was stated (*vutta*) by the Bhagavan…so thus (*iti*) was it heard by me." The text itself does not mention the circumstances in which these *sutta*s were uttered, and it is only in the commentary that we get an account of its origin, context, and circumstances.

Like Buddhaghosa, Dhammapāla provides an extensive *nidāna* in his commentaries and sub-commentaries and also theorizes the importance of *nidāna*s in general. His *nidāna* to the *Itivuttaka* is quite long (nearly a hundred pages in Peter Masefield's translation), but then again his *aṭṭhakathā* on this relatively short text is also substantial (Masefield's two-volume translation runs over eight hundred pages). His *nidāna* of the text provides exegesis on the opening line of the text as a whole (which is in fact also the opening line to each *sutta* since they all begin identically): *vuttañhetaṃ bhagavatā*, *vuttamarahatāti me sutaṃ* ("this was said by the Bhagavan, was said by the Arahat, so thus was it heard by me"). Much of Dhammapāla's *nidāna* is given over to commentary on how to understand the Bhagavan, who is the paradigmatic Arahat, and his utterances, but he is also concerned to explain the last part of the opening line: *iti me sutam* (*Itivuttaka-aṭṭhakathā* 1.19–29). Here he follows, mostly verbatim, Buddhaghosa's extensive treatment of *evam me sutam* (*Khuddakapāṭha-aṭṭhakathā* 101–104); while he does recognize some differences between the senses of *evam* and *iti*, *iti* conveys most of the same meanings and disclaimers of the passages cited above in Buddhaghosa's treatment of *evam*.

For example, the utterance "*iti me sutam*" is attributed to Ānanda, reciting at the First Council what he had heard. When he says it, "he passes beyond the plane of being a non-*sappurisa* not by assuming as his own the teachings conveyed by the Tathāgata, [but instead, by] acknowledging his condition of being a hearer, he enters into the plane of being a *sappurisa*." He "moves his mind away from non-Dhamma, to establish it in the Dhamma"; "he effaces himself, he speaks of the Teacher, he delivers the Buddha's words, he establishes the guide to the Dhamma" (*Itivuttaka-aṭṭhakathā* 1.28). If this sounds familiar, it is because it is: it is exactly the same text that Buddhaghosa provides to explain the significance of *evam me sutam*. This traveling piece of text emphasizes the "face-to-face" transmission of the Dhamma from the Bhagavan to Ānanda, which elicits faith in those who hear it (*Itivuttaka-aṭṭhakathā* 1.28; *Khuddakapāṭha-aṭṭhakathā* 104).

Given the emphasis placed by Dhammapāla on Ānanda's role in the faithful transmission of the *Itivuttaka* in this extended discussion of *iti me sutam*, it is surprising to learn, very late in the introduction (*nidāna*), that it was in fact a lay woman, Khujjuttarā, who first heard and transmitted the *sutta*s that comprise it. Concerned with the potential problem that the opening (*nidāna*) to these *sutta*s does not declare the usual time and place in which they were uttered, Dhammapāla says that "this *nidāna* was not first uttered by the Venerable Ānanda, but rather by Khujjuttarā who was recognized by the Bhagavan as chief among lay women who have heard much, a noble disciple (*ariyasāvakā*) and one who had attained the discrimination of a trainer (*sekha*), since it was uttered by her to five hundred women with Sāmāvatī at their head" (*Itivuttaka-aṭṭhakathā* 1.29). It was in fact she who uttered the opening lines of the *Itivuttaka sutta*s, for it was she who had gone regularly to Kosambī, heard the Buddha preach, and returned to tell them to the five hundred women. *Iti me sutam* were her words, and they "absolve her as merely recounting the Dhamma that she had heard taught by the Teacher and reveal that it was heard in the presence of the Teacher." Nuns then gathered the *sutta*s from her, and "so it was by this lineage that they were entrusted also to the monks and their origin (*nidāna*) became well known" (*Itivuttaka-aṭṭhakathā* 1.32). It was of course Ānanda who recited them at the First Council, though he retained "the opening line just as it had been entrusted by [this lineage] and thereby preserved the ambiguity [or twofold nature] of the origin

(*nidāna*)." For Dhammapāla this solves the problem of why these *sutta*s do not mention the time, place, or other contextual details that the *sutta*s in the four *nikāya*s do: there was no need to mention the time and place of these *sutta*s since it would have been well understood that they were uttered at Kosambī in this manner (*Itivuttaka-aṭṭhakathā* 1.32).

Dhammapāla acknowledges that some authorities do not accept this account. Instead they regard the *Itivuttaka* as collected by enlightened elders who knew the appropriate methods for reciting the Dhamma, in which on some occasions *evam me sutam* is not uttered and a collection of verses or prose or both are stated without a *nidāna* at all. While he acknowledges that this is plausible, he prefers the account in which Khujjuttarā is given as the source. He cites at several junctures a purported authorization from the Buddha himself who mentioned that Khujjuttarā was "chief among his lay women disciples of those who had heard much" (*Itivuttaka-aṭṭhakathā* 1.32, citing *Aṅguttaranikāya* 1.26). In this assertion he appears to be drawing an intriguing parallel with Ānanda, who is, of course, "chief among those who had heard much." Indeed, this particular distinction was granted by the Buddha to only these two people—the venerable monk Ānanda (chief among monks for this) and the lay woman Khujjuttarā (chief among lay women for this).

Moreover, Dhammapāla appreciates her story and provides a full account of it. Khujjuttarā was a hunchback slave living in the house of a wealthy merchant named Ghosaka in Kosambī. She encounters the Buddha's teaching one day through a sort of accident; she had been sent out by Sāmāvatī, the mistress of this household, to buy flowers, but the flower merchant has no time to sell them to her because he is rushing off to hear the Buddha. He invites her to join him, suggesting that the Buddha will teach a path that can free her from her condition of servitude. And indeed, upon hearing the Dhamma she becomes established in the stream-winner fruit. After this she brings twice the amount of flowers to Sāmāvatī than she usually did, since prior to this she had been regularly filching half the money, but now, newly honest, she uses all of the money given to her to buy the flowers. Moreover, newly reformed and now incapable of lying, she confesses to Sāmāvatī that she had until then been siphoning off her money. Instead of reprimanding her, Sāmāvatī, who is "chief among lay women abiding in loving-kindness" (*Aṅguttaranikāya* 1.26), is intrigued by what Khujjuttarā might have learned from the Buddha and urges her

to teach her and her women. Khujjuttarā agrees, but on condition that she is first bathed, dressed in fine clothes, given a proper seat, and fanned. Then, being established in the discrimination of a trainer, she proceeds to teach the Dhamma in "the very same way that it had been taught by the Teacher," bringing all the women to the fruit of stream-entry. The Dhamma does indeed improve her social mobility: she is instructed to stop her slave duties and occupy instead "the position of mother and the position of teacher (*ācariya*)" (*Itivuttaka-aṭṭhakathā* 1.30–31). Thereafter she goes daily to hear the Buddha preach and returns to teach the women of the house.

It is for this reason, Dhammapāla asserts, that the Buddha accorded her the status of chief among lay women who had heard much. Dhammapāla also mentions the tradition that she later became a *tipiṭakadharā*, a status not shared by many people in these sources, and perhaps surprising to find in a lay woman (*Itivuttaka-aṭṭhakathā* 1.31). He also offers accounts of how in her previous lives, she had aspired for the status of being chief among lay women who had heard much when encountering a person with this status during the time of a previous Buddha. He also tells stories that account for her condition of being a hunchback (she had in a previous birth mocked a slightly hunchbacked Paccekabuddha) and of being a slave (again in a previous birth, for presuming to ask a female *arhat* nun to do her the service of fetching a basket) (*Itivuttaka-aṭṭhakathā* 1.29–31).[4]

Thus it is that we learn, late in Dhammapāla's treatment of the origins of the *Itivuttaka*, that Ānanda's recitation of this collection is, in effect, at least third hand. He is reciting what the Buddha said having heard it from monks and nuns who learned it first from Khujjuttarā. Dhammapāla acknowledges that it was she who heard it "face-to-face" from the Buddha (*Itivuttaka-aṭṭhakathā* 1.32) and that it was her words *iti me sutam* that Ānanda was reciting at the Council. Furthermore, it cannot escape our notice that it is a slave and female lay person who is credited with this important role in the transmission of the Dhamma, acquiring it prior to Ānanda, teaching it verbatim, and as such presumably enjoying the credentials and authority that so much of the commentary on *iti me sutam* confers upon Ānanda. It is of course possible that this text was always associated in the commentarial tradition with Khujjuttarā, and Dhammapāla is merely reiterating this historical trace as it is known to him. At the same time, it is important to recognize what assigning her this important

involvement in the transmission of the text does. For Dhammapāla, Khujjuttarā's role in the transmission of the text gives it a *nidāna*; it would otherwise be a disembodied and decontextualized teaching, and we would know nothing of where and why and when it was said and by whom it was heard. The text's apparent lack of a *nidāna* is the problem that Khujjuttarā's involvement is meant to solve: her hearing it at Kosambī keeps it from being a decontextualized teaching and gives it a time, location, and hearer. But why is having such a context so important?

Text and Context

For the commentators the qualities of a *sutta* are that it has a teaching, a listener, an occasion, and a teacher. The teacher is usually the Buddha, of course, but these other circumstances, the commentators suggest, vary in ways that are important for interpreting the meaning of the teaching. Dhammapāla asks quite pointedly why the *nidāna* (in the sense of the opening Ānanda provides beginning with his *evam me sutam*) is necessary, when surely only the Buddha's words should be recited in a *sutta*. He answers that a "teaching tied to a time, place, teacher, audience, and region is established, long-lasting, unconfused, and credible like a legal contract that is tied to notations of place, date, maker, and reason" (*Itivuttaka-aṭṭhakathā* 1.33). A *nidāna* anchors a teaching to the circumstances in which it was taught which give it believability and authority. The *nidāna* provides authority (*pāmaṇa*) for both the Teacher and the Teaching (*Itivuttaka-aṭṭhakathā* 1.34). At the same time, the *nidāna* does more than just legitimize or authorize a text and its transmission. As we have seen, Dhammapāla says that the Buddha does not resort to prior preparation, inference, or reasoning when teaching. Because his extraordinary knowledge is unobstructed and because it appears only for the well being of others, it flows spontaneously from him "on the spot" according to the dispositions of the assembly in this or that particular place (*Itivuttaka-aṭṭhakathā* 1.16, 1.34). The meaning and significance of a teaching can thus only be fully appreciated by knowing the context which prompted it.

Dhammapāla argues that the Buddha's words are meaningful only when heard and received properly. He offers several possibilities for why the *Itivuttaka* opens each *sutta* by stating the word "was said (*vuttam*)" twice.

One reason is that doing so reinforces that the Buddha speaks only on occasions in which he is speaking specifically to "the taints and so on of the audience, the right place and right time, and how to cause his aim to be successful." Mentioning that a sermon was said twice is a way of emphasizing that it was *fully stated*, which entails that its intended meaning was successfully realized in those who heard it. Further, for the Buddha to have properly said something is also to indicate that it has been properly heard, and something "whose meaning fails to be cognized, and that which fails to become practiced cannot be properly heard; moreover, that which is not properly received has not been said" (*Itivuttaka-aṭṭhakathā* 1.17). The reception and audience are an integral element of the meaning and significance of the Buddha's spoken words. What a *nidāna* does then, is to specify the nature of that reception.

Even while the *nidāna* furnishes the evidence that the Buddha's words were fully stated and fully heard, it also offers cues for how to interpret the *sutta* or text as a whole. The *nidāna* reveals the successful attainment of both Teacher and Dispensation (*sāsana*). First, it makes manifest the qualities of the Buddha's omniscience, his absence of taints, his lack of holding back teachings, and his lack of any favoritism toward his disciples (*Itivuttaka-aṭṭhakathā* 1.33). Because he always teaches "on the spot," as the dispositions and circumstances of his audience inspire him, his omniscience and generosity are in full evidence because his teaching speaks directly to the needs of the people present. The commentators often elaborate on the back stories of the people present at the sermon, and we learn how the Buddha's words speak directly to them. Secondly, Dhammapāla asserts, the *nidāna* reveals the success of the Dispensation in that the Teacher never does anything useless or for his own benefit; everything he does is solely and wholly for the sake of others. It is always brilliantly beneficial and immediately pertinent to the audience, and we can thus see the Dispensation at work in spreading welfare and benefit. To make this known, the *nidāna* with time, place, and so on, is declared (*Itivuttaka-aṭṭhakathā* 1.34).

In this commentarial theory of what the Buddha's words are we find an important dependence on their reception not only to authenticate their occurrence and transmission, but also to show how they should be interpreted. *Sutta*s are richly contextual, engaged with their time, place, and audience. According to the commentators' interpretations of genre (which

are spelled out in Buddhaghosa's *nidāna*s to each *piṭaka*, as for example, the *Atthasālinī*, 18–28), *sutta*s are teachings in accord with common usage (*vohara*), with what is suitable (*anuloma*), and appropriate to the various dispositions, tendencies, and behaviors of beings. These features are carefully contrasted to the genres of both Vinaya and Abhidhamma which have different purposes and make use of different kinds of discourse (*Dhammasaṅgaṇī-aṭṭhakathā* 21). The *Suttanta*, as Buddhaghosa sees it, "indicates what is good [*su* in *sutta*] for self and others, and it is expressed in a way suitable for the dispositions of those who are teachable" (*Dhammasaṅgaṇī-aṭṭhakathā* 19). To understand and interpret texts claimed to be *sutta*s is to grasp how they work for the benefit of particular audiences and speak to their immediate needs and inclinations. Because the commentators see the Buddha as omniscient they value how intricately he knows what is appropriate to the contexts in which he is embedded and how he speaks directly to them. The role of the commentator is not to *abstract* a teaching from its original context to attempt to show how it may point beyond it, but to show how it is inherently informed and inspired by that context.

This is why, as apparently awkward as his account of Khujjuttarā's role may be in having to channel the transmission of *sutta*s through a slave woman to Ānanda, Dhammapāla insists on locating a hearer for the *Itivuttaka sutta*s. Without a narrative of who heard them and how, the *Itivuttaka*'s *sutta*s would dangle out there decontextualized and, in some sense, *unheard*. Of course the context Khujjuttarā provides for any given *sutta* in the *Itivuttaka* is still slight—we do not get the same intimate treatment of the narrative particulars of each *sutta* that Ānanda's *evam me sutam* often provides for *sutta*s in the four *nikāya*s. Indeed the efforts of Dhammapāla to ground the *sutta*s in her narrative may be largely the reflexes of this formality of authorizing *sutta*s by reference to a specific and named audience. Nevertheless, her presence at Kosambī and her being designated, like Ānanda, as "one who heard much," signal that these texts were heard by a reliable listener.

As we come to see how the Pali commentators thought systematically about canon and context, several features become evident. First, Buddhaghosa and Dhammapāla were highly sensitive to different types of teaching and uses of language and argued that the Buddha taught in both decontextualized and narratively situated ways. Suttanta is often contrasted to

Abhidhamma on this point, where Suttanta is said by Buddhaghosa to be "taught according to circumstance (*yathānuloma*) to beings of various dispositions, tendencies, and conduct," while Abhidhamma is "a teaching according to the factors (*dhamma*)," that comprise human experience in the absence of a permanent self (*Dhammasaṅgaṇī-aṭṭhakathā* 21). As a genre the Suttanta is defined as contextual teachings called forth by the needs and inclinations of their original audience, while Abhidhamma teachings analyze human experience generically without explicit reference to context. In the same discussion, Buddhaghosa contrasts Vinaya as teachings primarily about commands or injunctions (*āṇā*), Suttanta as teachings deployed in conventional (transactional and common usages of) language (*vohāra*), and Abhidhamma as teachings in an ultimate or highest sense (*paramattha*) (*Dhammasaṅgaṇī-aṭṭhakathā* 21). This distinction is about different registers of language: some uses of language are injunctions, others are transactional and popular, like the kind used in the market place or everyday life, and still others are technical language for which the hearer should be qualified. That Suttanta discourse is transactional and common is another way of expressing its contextual, give-and-take variability and practicality, like the language of trade (*vohāra*).

The well-known distinction between conventional (*sammuti*) and ultimate (*paramattha*) teachings is another site where the commentators discussed different registers of language as they considered context. As Charles Hallisey (1994: 126–30) has suggested, the way that the Pali commentators interpreted these two uses of language was not hierarchical and at the expense of the conventional, as they might be framed in other systems (see also Jayatillake 1963: 364–65).

Buddhaghosa and Dhammapāla following him tend to discuss this distinction as teachings (*desanā*) or discourse (*kathā*), rather than levels of truth, and say that they are analogous to the use of different regional languages (like Tamil or Andhra) which one uses according to the language one's audience speaks (*Majjhimanikāya-aṭṭhakathā* 1.137–138; *Itivuttaka-aṭṭhakathā* 1.82). In the one instance where Buddhaghosa talks about them as two "truths" (*sacca*), he is at pains to emphasize that whether the Buddha speaks in conventional discourse or in absolute discourse, what he says is "entirely true, entirely real, and entirely not false" (*Dīghanikāya-aṭṭhakathā* 2.383; *Kathāvatthu-aṭṭhakathā* 34). This of course must be so, insofar as this distinction is mapped on to the two registers of language

deployed by the Suttanta and the Abhidhamma; the Suttanta is never considered less true than the Abhidhamma, since nothing the Buddha says could ever be construed in any way as short on truth. The distinction is about speaking the languages appropriate to one's audience.

In the formulation of Abhidhamma as *paramattha* discourse, it is represented as a register of language that requires a certain kind of audience who can know its idiom. Yet in a further distinction—that between contextual (*pariyāya*) and abstract (*nippariyāya*) teachings—the commentators draw a contrast between Suttanta as contextual knowledge and Abhidhamma as abstract or somehow decontextualized from an audience. When teaching a term like suffering (*dukkha*) one can teach it "contextually (*pariyāyena*) according to the inclinations of the one being taught" or more abstractly as a "decontextualized teaching (*nippariyāyadesanā*), making it about the triad of feeling [that is, painful, pleasant, or neutral], and a discourse on its own nature" (*Itivuttaka-aṭṭhakathā* 2.6). In other words, suffering can be treated generically and abstractly, or it can be spoken of according to the particular circumstances of the audience. Else-where Dhammapāla says that *pariyāya* can refer to a "reason," as in the reason (*kāraṇa*) or circumstance prompting a particular utterance (*Itivuttaka-aṭṭhakathā* 1.151).[5] *Nippariyāya*, on the other hand, is a teaching "not by particular instance" (*Aṅguttara-aṭṭhakathā* 4.206); it is the Dhamma when not evoked by "context, reason, or pretext" (*Itivuttaka-aṭṭhakathā* 2.144) and stating the "definitiven und absoluten Zusammenfassung der Lehre des Buddha," as Genjun H. Sasaki puts it (1962: 48). As we might expect, Buddhaghosa associates Suttanta with *pariyāya* and Abhidhamma with *nippariyāya* (*Dhammasaṅgaṇī-aṭṭhakathā* 154, 222). He says, "according to the contextual [method] in the Suttanta something gets its name from its condition of having qualities and from its condition of having a starting point"; the Abhidhamma method is directly contrasted with this, obtaining its naming of experience from neither of these, but rather just from the names of things "arriving" as such, that is, ideas that occur directly, in an unmediated fashion, through practicing the Path and insight. In this formulation, the Suttanta is a method in which content is shaped according to the qualities and promptings of the audience. The Abhidhamma is a more direct use of language and technical terminology which are said not to be mediated by an audience, but rather constitute an immediate naming of experience gleaned from practice and insight. The

content of *nippariyāya* teachings is limited to a set range of topics, which are fundamental technical categories of the Abhidhamma sometimes given as the ninefold supra-mundane Dhamma divided into the paths, fruitions, and *nibbāna* (*Itivuttaka-aṭṭhakathā* 2.144).

However, as Hallisey (1994: 132) points out, the *pariyāya* and *nippariyāya* distinction can break down in that a teaching containing abstract content (the categories of Abhidhamma) will become *pariyāya* if the appropriate context calls it forth. Dhammapāla says that a disciple who puts contextual teachings into practice will gradually become ready to experience *nippariyāya* content; notice here that even *nippariyāya* content is given in reference to the disciple and what he is capable of hearing (*Itivuttaka-aṭṭhakathā* 2.144). Indeed, it is difficult to understand what an entirely decontextualized teaching actually could be, given that teachings are always spoken and heard and are always given to and received by someone, somewhere, for some purpose, and on some occasion. Indeed, Buddhaghosa is most emphatic that even Abhidhamma has a *nidāna* that grounds it in a certain narrative context and was generated by the Buddha's own particular experience (*Dhammasaṅgaṇī-aṭṭhakathā* 29–32). And his way of talking about even the most technical aspects of Abhidhamma mentioned above, that it is teaching "according to factors," still makes reference to the capacity and needs of the audience: one teaches in this way to people who see "I" and "mine" in what is really just a "heap of factors" (*Dhammasaṅgaṇī-aṭṭhakathā* 21).

What we might say to clarify these various distinctions as they characterize Suttanta and Abhidhamma teachings is to suggest that teachings on the side of *vohara*, *sammuti*, and *pariyāya* are configured to the hearer. They emerge on the spot out of the Buddha's deep and compassionate involvement with the community with which he worked, and they respond directly to their needs and dispositions. Teachings of the Abhidhamma, variously characterized as *paramattha* and *nippariyāya*, are, in contrast, teachings to which the hearer must be configured.

Conclusions

The foregoing considerations suggest that a large part of exegesis, as the Pali commentators interpreted it, entails articulating and developing a text's original context, which includes attending to the psychological

dispositions and the intellectual capacities of the particular people whom the Buddha encountered. Theirs was a sort of "historicist" enterprise, if we may call it that, in the specific sense that they deemed a context outside the text to be relevant for interpreting it, and reconstructing that context to be part of the commentarial project. Scholars have sometimes taken this context to be solely about legitimizing a text's authenticity, a matter of simply establishing a text's authentic transmission. While such authorizing strategies are not absent from the commentators' work—which did of course include constructing canon and its criteria—the features outlined here suggest a deeper commitment to theorizing different registers of teaching and language in which context, configured variously, plays a prominent role.

At the same time, the commentators' emphasis on context was not historicist in the sense of limiting the meaning of a text to its original context in a manner that precludes the idea of the text conveying universal truths or ideas that can speak beyond its historical location. Describing the original context in which a *sutta* is placed is not just to communicate its history, but to transmit its meaning and significance to us; in fact, it is by the very work of going through the original context that a text's meaning and significance may become most evident to us. Though uniquely tailored to its original context, a *sutta* speaks beyond it; for how else to account for the great pains the early community was represented as exerting at the First Council and Ānanda's meticulous recitation of the *sutta*s except for their projected impact on future audiences? As much as a *sutta*'s meanings are inflected by its original context, they are universal in that they speak well beyond that to potentially all other contexts, speaking directly to any audience in accord with their dispositions and needs.

The commentarial insistence on context and audience suggests that future interpreters—us—will also encounter *sutta*s in a manner conditioned and mediated through our particular dispositions and capacities. This suggests an awareness of reflexivity, a principle implied by the foregoing considerations, though not enacted by either Buddhaghosa or Dhammapāla. That is, they do not represent their own grasp of the Buddha's meanings and phrasings as in any way mediated by particulars of their own contexts, and they themselves assume an unmediated and universalist voice. Be that as it may, they may yet have much to tell us about how to read them if we can learn how to listen.

Notes

1. This paper, about beginnings, is prompted in part by reflections on my own beginnings in this field as an undergraduate at Reed College studying under Professor Edwin Gerow in the late 1980s and early 1990s. I am grateful for the opportunity provided by the context of a *festschrift* to think with complexity and gratitude about the enduring impact reading texts with him had on me at that time and since.

2. I am inspired in this paper by Sheldon Pollock's urging that we turn to commentaries for more than just help with interpreting root texts and that we come to appreciate how they might be read for their theories of textuality; that is, what they can teach us about what texts are and what they can do. Pollock calls for a new philology that encompasses (among other things) "the nature and function of commentaries and the history of reading practices that commentaries reveal" and "the origins and development of local conceptions of language, meaning, genre, and discourse" (2009: 934).

3. All translations from the editions of the *Chaṭṭha Saṅgāyana Tipiṭaka* (Vipassana Research Institute, 1995) are mine.

4. The stories are known in various sources, including *Aṅguttara-aṭṭhakathā* 1.418–444 and *Dhammapada-aṭṭhakathā* 208–209.

5. See also Buddhaghosa (*Visuddhimagga* 499, *Vibhaṅga-aṭṭhakathā* 93) for a similar point; and Hallisey (1994: 132–33).

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MARIA HEIM is Professor of Religion at Amherst College, Massachusetts.

mrheim@amherst.edu