

Editorial

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As most of our readers know, Pali is the language of a large body of ancient Indian texts, known as the Pali Canon. Followers of one Buddhist tradition, the Theravada, equate these texts with “the word of the Buddha”. They accept information given in one of these texts that the Buddha, a man called Gotama, died at the age of 80 (or thereabouts); most of them hold that he died in about 483 BC, but those who care about such matters mostly accept modern scholarship when it says that he died in about 400 BC. They also accept information from the same source that the Canon was established at a Council of Buddhist monks soon after the Buddha’s death, and has been successfully transmitted by monks and nuns ever since. They assume that Pali must therefore be the language in which the Buddha preached. The texts, they believe, were composed orally and for the first few centuries were presumably preserved orally.

Other Buddhist traditions take different views. For various reasons they propose a very diverse range of dates for the lifetime of the Buddha. They also note that several other versions of the same texts, composed in different Indian languages, are known to have existed; some are lost, but several fairly full versions have survived in Chinese translations. These other traditions mostly propose that the First Council took place much as described by the Pali tradition, but the texts then established were the versions proposed in their own traditions. Though the Chinese translations are mostly dated (within the Christian era), we have no solid clues to the dates of the composition of their Indian originals.

On the basis that they consider the dating of the Buddha to have no credible basis, in recent years many scholars, particularly in America, have held the view that there may never have been such an individual as Gotama Buddha, and if there was, we know virtually nothing about him. I begin the final chapter of my book *What the Buddha Thought* by citing a professor at Chicago University

who says that Pali sources are “centered around the literary conceit of Gotama ‘preaching’”; he sneers at my believing this conceit, but offers no view of how, when, where, by whom or in what language this huge body of texts was composed. The scepticism of these scholars concerning the Buddha’s date extends to the dating of all the canonical texts, first and foremost their Pali versions. However, they seem to have no proposal how we should imagine that the Pali texts (or any others) were composed or preserved.

I have written a short book called *Buddhism and Pali*, which is about to be published by Tony Morris in his series *Mudpie Books*. In this book I describe the Pali language and its place in history, and discuss how texts were composed and preserved in the society in which the Buddha lived, where there was no writing. I use strands of what we know about the language and that society to construct an argument which makes it appear possible, even probable, that Pali is the language that the Buddha used when during a long lifetime he walked to and fro through the villages of northern India, preaching and interacting with the villagers. They must have grown up using local dialects. These dialects must have been related, with no clear boundaries between them, since the institutions of administration and education which create such boundaries were lacking. He needed to understand the users of those dialects and in turn to be understood by them, and this need led him, perhaps unconsciously, to develop a composite dialect containing a great many variants. As he gathered disciples, some of whom moved with him, the language of his preaching became known as the “language for recitation”, which in my opinion is what the word “Pali” means; and it became the private (not secret) language of the religious community which he founded, the Sangha.

My claim that Pali was the language used by the Buddha will surprise no traditional Buddhists, because they have always believed it. They have believed it, however, without any awareness of the difficulties it involves. To give just one example: it is surely remarkable that without writing, let alone any more modern technology for recording speech, all these texts could be accurately preserved for centuries. Western students of Sanskrit have now studied Sanskrit at the feet of traditional teachers and observed how not only their Indian pupils but also the western visitors can acquire mnemonic powers of which we did not know we were capable. Another relevant study is modern linguistics: fieldwork has shown that in other periods too parts of India have evolved common languages (one can call each of them a *lingua franca*) which occupy a middle ground between local dialects and a formalized educated language learnt and used by an elite.

If Pali, or something very much like it, really was the language of the Buddha, this has great implications for the history of Buddhism. Among those early traditions which preserved their texts in languages other than Pali, there began to evolve various new strands of belief and practice which became known as Mahayana.

The Mahayana texts were in Sanskrit, or in what for simplicity's sake we can call deviant forms of Sanskrit containing some of the features of Pali. None of them were in Pali itself: that was too firmly identified with the conservative Theravada. Mahayanists, however, have often claimed that their texts are authentic utterances of the Buddha, which he wanted kept as an esoteric secret teaching reserved for his more advanced disciples. This theory was never probable, and my discovery makes it more improbable still.