

Editorial
The origin of the Pāli language

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The oldest Buddhist texts were composed in northern India in the 5th century before the Christian era in a language which became known as Pali. At that time writing was not in use, so they were orally composed, and then orally preserved for several centuries. Theravada Buddhists believe that these texts contain the Buddha's own words as he pronounced them; but many Buddhists of other traditions doubt this, and modern scholars have long argued how close it can be to the truth.

Pali has rarely been the subject of lively interest, let alone controversy, so I had no expectation that I might soon need to update my book.

I am happy to say that I was wrong.

On the first page of chapter I, "Pali in History", I mention and highly commend a book by two Theravada monks, Bhikkhu Sujato and Bhikkhu Brahmalī, called *The Authenticity of the Early Buddhist Texts*. I write: "It has not been printed, but is available for free download on the website of the Oxford Centre for Buddhist Studies (OCBS)." I learn that this was already out of date when it was written, and according to the Amazon website it has been published in 4 formats and editions. From Karpik's article in this volume I learn that one of them is by the Chroniker Press in Toronto.

Alexander Wynne's article on the Buddha in this volume not only uses this book but adds quite a few significant details to those which Sujato and Brahmalī collected.

Karpik's article has been written in the short time since my book was published and is a fine contribution to the topic. I am of course happy to say that in our main conclusion, that in the Pali texts that have come down to us we have something very close -- and indeed the closest we are ever likely to

get – to the Buddha’s own words, he and I are in agreement. This is particularly remarkable because the arguments that he and I use to reach this conclusion are largely different.

I am no less happy to report that on some matters Karpik has shown me to be wrong, and I shall need to revise my views. And there are also points on which we differ, but it is not yet clear to me where the truth lies. Busy with editing this volume, I have not yet had time to revisit these problems. However, what matters most to my mind is that this journal has shaken off the torpor which besets most of Buddhist studies, in which truly new but also plausible ideas are so rare, and is offering material in which the use of sound evidence and rational argument is advancing our understanding of the history of Buddhism.