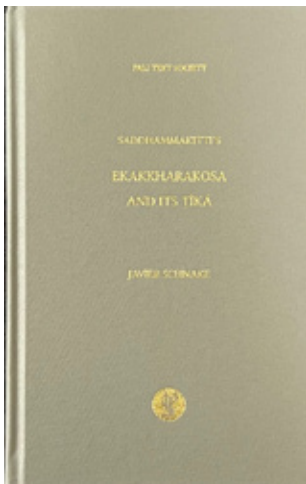


***Saddhammakitti's Ekakkharakosa and its Ṭikā*
edited by Javier Schnake**

Reviewed by Aleix Ruiz-Falqués



The present book by Javier Schnake consists of a critical edition of a short grammatical text called the *Ekakkharakosa* “Treasure of Monosyllables” by the Burmese scholar-monk Saddhammakitti, along with its *ṭikā*, or commentary. The latter provides a detailed exegesis of the main text, elucidating its meaning with examples, making its sources and references explicit, and containing an historical introduction and colophon. The editions of these two texts are presented separately and are preceded by a general introduction touching on the works’ significance and historical background, issues of authorship and dating, a survey of the structure of the texts, and a note on the methodology of the critical edition. This introductory section builds on an earlier paper by Schnake, published in 2021, entitled “Pali *ekakkharas* Revisited” (*Journal of the Pali Text Society* XXXIV 2021, pp. 125–50). The edition is exemplary in its use of a large number of manuscripts and in providing a friendly layout that clearly distinguishes two sections in the critical apparatus: variant readings and references. The effort of the Pali Text Society for improving the presentation of their critical editions, such as the implementation of LaTeX, is commendable and credit must be given to the editorial team for their work.

Saddhammakitti's *Ekakkharakosa* is one of the well-known “Minor Pali Grammars” in Burma—a set of fourteen, or sometimes fifteen, texts belonging to different periods ranging from the 11th to the 15th century CE and dealing with particular aspects of Pali grammar.¹ It was composed around 1525 (p. xxvii), which corresponds to the date given in the *Sāsanavaṃsa*, namely 887 of the Burmese Sakkarāj era (cf. *Sāsanavaṃsa*, ed. Bode, p. 76). A number of scholars had previously proposed a date of 1465, but this no longer seems tenable after Schnake's careful scrutiny of several manuscripts. The author of the *ṭīkā* remains unknown, although presumably it was someone close to the scholarly circle of Saddhammakitti (p. xxvii).

As Schnake explains in his introductory essay, the role of lexicons of monosyllables transcended mere grammatical scholarship and was linked with traditions of numerical and alphabetical symbolism. As I will exemplify subsequently, this is not a mere practical dictionary, but in a sense a structured inventory of syllables of different types, arranged in a manner that, on first appearances, seems artificial and somewhat impractical. However, this organisational rationale can be explained, on the one hand, as a reflection of the elevated, transcendental status of Pali language and grammar as a “scientific” medium to master the sacred word of the Buddha, and, on the other, by the belief that syllables (*akkharas*) are the ultimate constituents of the Buddha's language (see *Kaccāyanavutti* ad Kacc §1). As Schnake explained in his most-informative 2021 article (cited above), a lexicon such as the *Ekakkharakosa* was intended to be both playful and entertaining, at the same time as pedagogical. This subject is one that Schnake had already explored in detail in his PhD thesis entitled “*Le Dhamma par le jeu desprit et de la langue: le Vajirasāratthasaṅgaha, texte pāli du Nord de la Thaïlande (XVI^e siècle)*” (“The Dhamma through wit and word play: the *Vajirasāratthasaṅgaha*, a Pali text from northern Thailand, 16th century”), PhD Thesis, University of Paris, 2018, and his work on such dimensions of language-play speaks to his suitability to present this critical edition.

The body of the *Ekakkharakosa* consists of 130 mnemonic stanzas, written in a typical scholastic style that does not lend itself to easy comprehension, without assistance. For instance, these are the first two stanzas for syllables beginning with *p*- (p. 15):

¹ There are actually many more minor grammatical texts, but they were not “canonized” in the anthology of fifteen minor grammars of the Icchāyasa Press, 1954, published as part of the *Chattṭhasaṅgāyana* (Sixth Council) series.

70. *vātuṇhe paramatthe po roge vise apāyake*
hirikopīnapaṇkesu / pā tu vāte ca pītari.

71. *pi bhattari kalattamhi / pu karīsamhi niraye*
pā tu pānāvane patte pūraṇe / pi tu tappane, etc.

70. The syllable **pa** [is used] in the sense of wind (*vāta*), heat (*uṇha*), ultimate reality (*paramattha*), disease (*roga*), poison (*visa*), misfortune (*apāyaka* = cty. *apāya*), private organs (*hirikopīna*) and mud (*paṇka*). / The syllable **pā** [is used] in the sense of wind (*vāta*), father (*pītā*).

71. The syllable **pi** [is used] in the sense of husband (*bhattā*) and wife (*kalatta*) / The syllable **pu** [is used] in the sense of faeces (*karīsa*) and hell (*niraya*). / Again, **√pā** [cty. “as a verbal root (*dhātu*)”, [is used] in the sense of drinking (*pāna*), protecting (*avana*), obtaining (*patta*), and filling (*pūraṇa*). / In turn, [the verbal root (*dhātu*)] **√pi** [is used] in the sense of warming (*tappana*), etc.²

The commentary is therefore essential for understanding the cryptic style of the verses. The material is arranged alphabetically, beginning with vowels and moving on through the consonants (i.e., *k*, *kh*, etc.). The dictionary includes a wide range of monosyllabic words, from adverbs to verbal roots. It is designed as a resource for grammarians, or at least for those who are familiar with the grammatical system of Kaccāyana and Saddanīti. For instance, in the letter *ch*, we find the monosyllable (*c*)*cha* (spelled in the nom. sg. *ccho*). This is not a conventional word but a *paccaya* (“affix”) taught in Kaccāyana’s grammar (see Kacc §478). Another example: the syllable *gha* used in the sense of feminine *-ā* stems, following the conventional nomenclature of Kaccāyana (see *Ekakkharakosa-ṭīkā* 56,2ff. and Kacc §60 *ā gho*). These suffixes, namely *ccha* and *gha*, are not natural Pali words, but they are used in the Kaccāyana, Saddanīti, and similar systems of classical Pali *byākaraṇa* (“grammar”).

Javier Schnake’s critical edition of the *Ekakkharakosa* with its *ṭīkā* represents a landmark in the philology of medieval Pali texts. His work typifies the efforts of the broader scholarly trend of the past decade, a period that has witnessed a remarkable growth in academic publications about medieval and

² My translation. cty = commentary.

early-modern Pali literature from South and Southeast Asia.³ The edition under review offers an exemplar of editorial practices that other scholars will hopefully adopt. Indeed, despite the relatively wide circulation of Mabel Bode's *Pali Literature of Burma* (1909), the large majority—over 95%—of the Pali texts produced in Burma and mentioned by Bode have not yet been critically edited. Notwithstanding that most of them are now available in local editions—even Guṇasāgara's *Mukhamattasāra*, a text that most Burmese Pali scholars had never seen and for which I myself was preparing a critical edition based on five manuscripts, has now been published in Mandalay by Sayadaw U Kesara—a thorough critical edition of such works, in Roman script, remains a desideratum.

There are likely several reasons for this gap in our access to editions of younger Pali texts, one being the perceived irrelevance, for the modern student, of some of these manuals and commentaries. It is understandable that readers may feel discouraged by the dry scholastic style of composition, which requires some familiarity with the idiosyncratic nomenclature of Pali classical grammars. Even when the system is learnt, its relevance to the study of canonical Pali texts remains unclear and, *prima facie*, the texts do not seem to add any relevant insight regarding the teachings of the Buddha.

But medieval Pali scholars saw things in a different way. They argued that scholastic works are essential in preserving and perpetuating the Teachings of the Buddha. A famous poem by Raṭṭhasāra, a 15th-century Burmese poet-monk, directly links salvation to the mastery of scholastic texts. Describing the spiritual quest of a young monastic, perhaps an ideal one, Raṭṭhasāra states:

He must be familiar with verses in Pali,
Various forms of address and old difficult words,
He must know the meanings and formations,
Of elements, use of metaphors and versification,
Grammatical method and annotation,
And how to reason forwards and backwards.

³ For more information on the mentioned publications, a detailed list of publications is included in the bibliography at the end of the article. See also Trent Walker, "Theravada Literature After 'Roads Taken and Not Taken': Reflections on Recent Textual Studies," *Journal of Global Buddhism* 2021, Vol. 22 (1): 199–209. DOI: [10.5281/zenodo.4727617](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.4727617)

Then if he knows all this he will have recognition.
 He will be celebrated in this life as a man of erudition.
 In future rebirths in this *Samsara*
 He will come near *Buddha Arya Maitreya*.
 Then for him not too far distant will be *Nirvana*.⁴

Beyond personal salvation, the work of the grammarians was also aimed at the salvation of the Buddha's word. This is particularly true with Dhammakitti's *Ekakkharakosa*. As Schnake explains in his introduction:

The end of Buddhist time is here depicted as the driving force underlying the composition of the *Ekakkharakosa*. Buddhaghosa's conceptualizations regarding the end of the *Sāsana* are put in the foreground, notably the trio *paṭivedha-paṭipatti-pariyatti* (penetration of the meaning/practice/study), the last of which plays an essential role in the preservation of the sacred texts. (p. xxx)

Of course, now that we have preserved the sacred texts, one might argue that we could do without the study of grammatical treatises. But what Dhammakitti and his fellow scholars, and poets such as Raṭṭhasāra, meant was that their works were instrumental in the right interpretation and moral assimilation of the texts, not simply to their mechanical replication. To this end, maintaining a system of Pali learning within the monastic institution was crucial. The *Ekakkharakosa*'s commentary offers illustrative historical notes that depict the dramatic context of Dhammakitti's labours and somehow suggests that Dhammakitti had already redirected his focus—away from the wider dissemination of Pali scholarship within his own lifetime, and towards providing resources from which future monastics could retrieve the extensive knowledge that Dhammakitti saw slipping away before his own eyes:

For at this time, because of the fear of the tribe that inhabited the distant kingdom of the Northern part, that plundered, was violent, and had wrong views, and because of the people's fear of famines, thieves and diseases that had arisen in this very Tamba

⁴ Friedrich V. Lustig, *Burmese Classical Poems*, undated, online access: https://www.burmalibrary.org/docs22/Lustig-ed-burmese_classical_poems-bu+en-tu.pdf [accessed 30/10/2024]

country, by means of death and by means of being separated from other regions, the beings—house-holders, monks, and even animals—for the most part encountered great misfortune and misery in this Tamba contry.

[...]

The texts of the canonical and commentarial books encountered great destruction, by virtue of being taken to other countries, and being dispersed, scattered, broken up and being burnt. Few were liberated from the fear mentioned above; and the remaining monks because of the fear arising again as aforementioned, had their mind disturbed and bewildered, completely oppressed by the disorder due to the king's actions. And as it was said regarding the texts, they had the mind unavailable for sustaining and learning their pure words. And at this moment, the master⁵ [thought]: “The tradition of the Sāsana through the study [of texts] (*pariyatti*) developed in this country will be interrupted soon. [...] As I am composing this work, once in a future time, when the aforementioned fears will be appeased, the sons of good families, modest and devoted, confident, will leave the household life for the sake of salvation in the Sāsana. Through the support of this work [i.e. the *Ekakkharakosa*], they will again and again produce effort for hearing, memorizing and learning, etc., of canonical texts, commentaries, etc., and will have the true understanding”. (pp. xxviii–xxix)

Assuming that this report contains an element of truth, it is noteworthy that, among all options to preserve Pali grammatical knowledge, Dhammakitti decided to compose a book on monosyllables. The main sources of the *Ekakkharakosa* are Sanskrit *Ekakṣarakośas* and Pali grammatical texts (for more details, see Schnake 2021), with only relatively little material coming from canonical and commentarial usages of monosyllables—only in the commentary do we find more examples taken from the older Pali literature. However, that is not to imply that the *Ekakkharakosa* and its commentary blindly follow Sanskrit models. For instance, when it comes to the syllable *ña*, older

⁵ This refers to Saddhammakitti, the author of the *Ekkharakosa*.

treatises on monosyllables are acknowledged. The commentary explains that “even though the monosyllable has two meanings in ancient *Ekakkharakosās*, namely ‘The syllable *ṇa* represents Bhairava (a form of Shiva), and it also means desire for sensual objects (*visayappihā*)’, nevertheless, in the *Kaccāyana* and similar Pali grammatical treatises, the syllable is found separately simply expressing its own phonetic form. But because it is not found in the canon and the commentaries that are composed in the original language of Magadha, in this treatise no specific meaning for this syllable is given” (my translation).⁶ This passage from the commentary evinces clear intention to preserve words that are relevant to canonical Pali, referred to here as “the original language of Magadha”.

For the large majority of Pali scholars in pre-modern Burma, the vocabulary of grammar formed the foundation of their Pali knowledge. Hence many suffixes that are monosyllabic, for instance the verbal ending *-ti* of the 3rd person singular of the Present, were considered as Pali monosyllabic words. Likewise, verbal roots (*dhātus*) are often monosyllabic and therefore were incorporated into the *kosa* (“treasure [of words]”, i.e. “dictionary”, see the English word ‘thesaurus’). Thus it would be reductive to dismiss the work as empty scholastic fireworks (2021: 141 n. 21) citing R.O. Franke’s assessment of the *Ekakkh*, a work “without importance for our knowledge of Pali”.

As Schnake has insightfully argued, “the compilation of what best embodies the value of the syllable, because of its range of meanings, is considered [...] as a concentrate of the Buddhist doctrine” (Schnake 2021: 143). Indeed, monosyllables and particles are one of the most fascinating areas of Pali grammar, for, on the one hand and in many cases, they are redundant or inconsequential, but in others, the precise interpretation of a passage hinges on the correct understanding of a single monosyllable. All Pali students are acquainted with ubiquitous particles such as *kho*, *hi*, *pi*, *va*, *nu*, etc., sometimes combined with adverbs, as in *atha kho*, *tena hi*, *tathā pi*, *na nu*, etc. A well-known principle among Pali grammarians is that “particles have many meanings” (*anekatthā nipātā*, cf. *Mukhamattadīpanī*, Burmese

⁶ *Ekakkh-ṭ 57*,₁₆₋₂₀; *ṇākāro pana yadi pi porāṇekakkharakosē ṇākāro Bhedavakhyāto ṇākāro visayappihā ti atthadvaye pavatti vuttā Kaccāyanādīsu ca sarūpavasen’ eva viṣuṃ vuttā sabhāvaniruttimāgadhābhāsāsu pana pāḷiattṭhakathādīsu viṣuṃ avijjāmānattā na-y-idha tass’ atthabhedā vuttā*. The Sanskrit model is quoted in note iii *Ekāk I §11 ṇa-kāro bhairave prokto ṇākāro viṣayasprhā*.

edition of 1933, 27,₂₈). The Devil is in the details, and mastery in such minute and seemingly innocuous words is praised by medieval scholars such as Ariyavaṃsa Dhammasenāpati of Sagaing (also 15th century, Burma). In his *Ganthābharaṇa* “Ornament of the Books”, a monograph devoted to *nipātas*, he writes the following stanzas:

88. If someone studies a book without having mastered indeclinables, his mind, like a bottle gourd on the water, will never reach any depth.

89. Without knowledge of indeclinables, whatever that fool says, even if it is on worldly matters, will sound as disgraceful as the rambling of a mad man.⁷

Ariyavaṃsa was likely Dhammakitti’s teacher or, at least, very close precursor.⁸ However, there are interesting differences between the *Ganthābharaṇa* and the *Ekakkharakosa*. For instance, in the *Ekakkharakosa* particles such as *pi* and *ti* and *va* are not covered, which suggests they were taken as *api*, *iti* and *eva*, not as authentic monosyllables. In contrast, Ariyavaṃsa’s *Ganthābharaṇa* includes them (see stanzas 6 for *api*, 40 for *eva*, 64 for *iti*). Similarly, Ariyavaṃsa seems more grounded in commentarial explanations of adverbs, whereas Dhammakitti exhibits a special interest in completing the alphabet. This formal aspect cannot pass unnoticed. For even when certain monosyllables hold no particular interest or meaning beyond their standard grammatical application, they are included for the sake of comprehensiveness. For instance, the last item of the dictionary is the syllable *aṃ* (*Ekakkh-ṭ* 169,₁₅), the last “letter” of the Pali alphabet. This syllable is explained as meaning Mādhava and Vāsudeva, two explanations clearly borrowed from Sanskrit/Hindu sources and hardly applicable to Pali texts. In addition to that, the author adds usages of *aṃ* in Pali, but they are restricted to grammar: *aṃ* is the *bindu* or the “dot” graphically representing the nasalised vowel; *aṃ* is also taken as the suffix of the accusative singular

⁷ *Ganthābharaṇa* 88–89:

*asikkhitvā nipātānaṃ yo ganthaṃ v’ idha sikkhati
alābu v’ assa toyamhi cittaṃ n’ ādhimutaṃ sadā.
yaṃ yaṃ bhāsati so mando lokiyaṃ pi ca taṃ vinā
ummattakavacanaṃ va asobhaṃ tassa bhāsitaṃ.*

⁸ Mabel Bode, *Pali Literature of Burma*, Royal Asiatic Society, London, 1909, p. 45.

ending *am*; and finally, it is described as a replacement of *m* before a consonant (Kacc §30). In such cases it is clear that the author/s of *Ekakkh* and *Ekakkh-ṭ* follow the general trend of taking the language of grammar as part of the Pali that students need to master. As previously noted, there are cases such as *ṇa* that, strictly speaking, do not warrant inclusion, since they do not function in Pali as monosyllables. But the fact that such “words” are included should be taken as indicative of Dhammakitti’s aim at comprehensiveness.

All in all, the *Ekakkharakosa* and its commentary, presented now in an excellent edition by Javier Schnake, perfectly encapsulate the development of scholastic Pali in the second millennium. The use of Sanskrit sources and the primacy of Grammar as the queen of scholastic sciences are common features of Pali works written in Southeast Asia from the 11th century CE onward. The corpus of philological texts such as the *Ekakkharakosa* is indeed a treasure in helping us understand the systems of thought of those who edited and transmitted the Pali canon for centuries. Schnake’s pioneering edition is not only a precious contribution to our understanding of this fascinating aspect of medieval Theravāda Buddhism, but also an exemplary model for future scholarship to follow.

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