

'Visions of the Buddha': A Critical Reply

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Introduction

This article presents a critical evaluation of the approach to early Buddhist oral tradition proposed by Eviatar Shulman in *Visions of the Buddha: Creative Dimensions of Early Buddhist Scripture* (2021b), extracts of which appeared soon afterwards in an article titled "The Play of Formulas in the Early Buddhist Discourses" (2021a).

The Play of Formulas

The oral nature of the early discourses is a topic that requires more attention than it has received so far. For this reason, it is highly appreciated that recent monograph publications, like Levman (2020), Allon (2021), Shaw (2021), and Shulman (2021b), are dedicated to exploring various dimensions of this topic. Of these four, the last presents an approach to understanding the basic dynamics of early Buddhist orality that substantially departs from scholarly consensus thus far and therefore calls for a detailed evaluation.¹

The central theory proposed by Shulman (2021b: 227), referred to with the phrase "play of formulas," involves the following proposition:

The point here is that the formula, rather than the full discourse, is the main level of textual utterance ... this theory suggests that the main texts of early Buddhism were the formulaic encapsulations of both narrative and doctrinal materials, and that full *suttas* are primarily legitimate combinations of such formulas. This notion allows us to understand how discourses were created from formulas bottom-up.

The term formula here refers to "fixed textual elements that are reproduced mainly across texts, often across many texts" (p. 171). "The shortest formulas are strings of words, a sentence or part of a sentence, that are repeated in the exact same order in more than one text, and often within a single text as well." An example for such a short formula is the standard opening of a discourse with the statement "thus have I heard." Other formulas can be longer, an example being the exposition of the gradual path in the collection of long discourses. In sum: "Formulas are

the units of textual articulation that repeat across texts, and that strictly maintain their form. Scholars often use terms such as *stock phrase*, *pericope*, or *cliché* to describe them” (p. 171).

In support of the proposed model of a play of formulas, Shulman (2021b: 155) adduces a supposed precedent in early European scholarship of Pāli texts. In the course of providing a chronological survey of the development of Buddhist literature, Rhys Davids (1903/1997: 188) considers “simple statements of Buddhist doctrine now found, in identical words, in paragraphs or verses recurring in all books,” as the earliest such level. As already pointed out by Allon (2011: 116), however, “Rhys Davids was referring to formulas concerning doctrine, not formulas in general.” Therefore, the theory of a play of formulas differs substantially from the early stage in textual development envisaged by Rhys Davids.

In fact, a problem with the idea that formulas served as the primary building blocks for the creation of discourses emerges from a detailed study of an attempt by Shulman (2019) to relate the play of formulas to *Majjhima-nikāya* discourses that report aspects of the Buddha’s progress to awakening. As shown in detail in Anālayo (2021), the very first examples chosen by Shulman (2019), presented again in Shulman (2021b: 200) under the heading of offering a “cogent example of the play of formulas,” indicate that the relevant formulas are secondary. It follows that these formulas did not serve as the primary building blocks out of which a discourse was created bottom-up.

Without repeating the detailed discussion already offered in Anālayo (2021), a brief look at another example, introduced by Shulman (2021b: 180) as the “most robust example of the play of formulas,” supports the same point. The discourse in question is the *Brahmāyu-sutta* (MN 91), the perhaps most central part of which takes the form of a detailed examination of the Buddha’s conduct, carried out by a brahmin student. This substantial textual portion is unique to this particular discourse and for this reason could not be considered a formula, the defining characteristic of which is repeated usage. Shulman (2021b: 188) in fact acknowledges that “[t]his material is an original contribution of the *Brahmāyu*, which was not taken from any other text.” Similarly, regarding another central element of the discourse in the form of a versified exchange between the Buddha and Brahmāyu, the teacher of this brahmin student, Shulman (2021b: 189n104) comments that “[t]hese verses are not found in any other source and could, perhaps, be a more archaic element.” In contrast,

the formulas employed in the remainder of the discourse appear to have a secondary role. Yet, to establish the *Brahmāyu-sutta* as a robust case in support of the proposed theory, the formulas employed in it would need to be shown as constituting the primary elements of textual composition.

Even though Shulman (2021b: 191) asserts that “the *Brahmāyu* achieves its goal through specific techniques of composition, which rely on formulas and their combination,” the actual evidence he himself acknowledges shows the formulas and their combination to be secondary to the discourse, whose main message much rather finds expression in textual material that does not conform to the definition of formulas given by Shulman (2021b: 171). In this way, *the case chosen as the supposedly “most robust example of the play of formulas” turns out to provide evidence contrary to the proposed theory.*

An illustrative example of the basic problem would be the standard introduction or else the standard concluding formula, reporting the rejoicing of the listeners. It hardly makes sense to consider such formulas to be “the main level of textual utterance.” This is not to deny the importance of formulas in early Buddhist orality or the fact that at times, alongside their mnemonic function, such formulas can take on a life of their own. But the introduction and concluding formulas could hardly have served as the primary elements out of which a discourse like the *Brahmāyu-sutta* was created bottom-up.

Confirmation of this assessment can be found in the *Madhyama-āgama* parallel to the *Brahmāyu-sutta*, whose formulaic conclusion includes the brahmin Brahmāyu among those who rejoiced.² Yet, before coming to this standard conclusion, all versions report Brahmāyu’s passing away.³ The resultant discrepancy has already been noted by Minh Chau (1964/1991: 207), who points out that the *Madhyama-āgama* discourse reports the brahmin “rejoicing over the Buddha’s speech, when he was reported dead already in the preceding paragraph.” This incoherence points to an application of the formulaic description at the end of the discourse without being properly adjusted to its context. Such a misapplication does not fit the idea that the concluding formula served as a principal block in creating a discourse. During such an act of creation, attention will be on the meaning of what is being said or recited. The present error, however, must result from a lack of attention paid to meaning, as can indeed happen when somewhat automatically applying a formulaic ending to an already existing text.

Evidence supporting the secondary nature of such formulas is not confined to Chinese *Āgama* material and can also be identified among Pāli discourses. A case in point are two otherwise identical discourses addressed to a brahmin and found in the *Samyutta-nikāya* and the *Sutta-nipāta* respectively, which differ in their concluding sections. In the *Samyutta-nikāya* version, the brahmin takes refuge as a lay follower; in the *Sutta-nipāta* version he requests ordination and becomes an arahant.⁴ The two alternative outcomes are articulated with the standard Pāli formulas employed for such descriptions. This is not the outcome of two different formulas serving as building blocks for creating the exact same discourse bottom-up. Instead, the most meaningful and parsimonious explanation is that an already existing discourse was combined with different concluding formulas.⁵

In the remainder of his study, Eviatar Shulman frequently points to the mere presence of formulas in various discourses as if their existence were in itself proof of his theory. This is not the case. *In order to support the proposed theory, the formulas would have to be shown to have functioned as the primary elements out of which the discourse was constructed “bottom-up.”*

The impression that emerges in this way concords with criticism already raised by Allon (2011: 116) of the play of formulas in the following way:

Most formulas do not have much appeal except in the context in which they are found. One cannot imagine members of the early community ... formulating and memorizing such context-bound formulas ... It was the plot and the overarching purpose of the story that generated the production of the bulk of formula.

Another pertinent point made by Allon (2021: 112) is that “[i]t is hard to imagine that the focus was on learning a body of formulas and narrative frames, not actual sutras. To understand how formulas work and are used, one would have to learn them in their context.” The already-mentioned formulaic introduction and conclusion to a discourse provide a good example, as the idea that these came into being and were then learnt on their own, without any relationship to an actual teaching introduced and concluded in this way, is rather implausible. Another problem, already mentioned in Anālayo (2021), is that the proposed theory

does not seem to grant sufficient room to the inherently fluid nature of oral transmission, where formulas evolve alongside and in interaction with the remainder of the text, with neither of the two necessarily having a primary function as the key element in textual composition.

In other words, *the play of formulas is too flat to account for early Buddhist orality*, as it does not take into consideration continuous change and complex interactions among textual elements taking place during centuries of oral transmission. In fact, the proposed model appears to involve the implicit assumption that a onetime creative act of composition, based on pre-existing formulas, can sufficiently explain the situation.

A telling example is the proposal by Shulman (2012: 215) that the composition of the *Mahāsaccaka-sutta* (MN 36) is “a synthesis of the two narrations of enlightenment” found in previous discourses in the *Majjhima-nikāya*, in particular being “a product of the narrative sequence of the *Bhayabherava* model” (MN 4), with the *Mahāsaccaka-sutta* then “reworking” ideas found in the *Bhayabherava-sutta* (p. 217). The underlying assumption is that the *Bhayabherava-sutta* came into existence before the *Mahāsaccaka-sutta*, otherwise the composition of the latter could not be envisaged as being based on the former. Since the actual discourses do not provide any indication regarding the respective primacy of their composition (or content), the proposed scenario must be based on their sequential placing in the *Majjhima-nikāya*. In other words, the reasoning appears to take for granted that the collection in its present order came into existence at the same time when the individual discourses were created.⁶ This ignores the complexity of early Buddhist orality and the continuous impact of change during oral transmission. As a result, *the play of formulas collapses centuries of oral transmission, with all their complex dynamics, into a single act of textual creation.*

Formulas as Independent Textual Elements

Shulman (2021b: 165) reasons that, “to appreciate the play of formulas, we must gain confidence that tradition saw formulas as ‘the text.’” An argument presented by him in support of gaining such confidence concerns two cases in the *Majjhima-nikāya* where discourses are distinguished into a *mahā-* and a *cūḷa-* version. In the first such case, which concerns the *Mahāsāropama-sutta* (MN 29) and the *Cūḷasāropama-sutta* (MN 30), Shulman (2021b: 168) reasons that, given that these two are of similar length and have similar presentations, “the difference cannot be that of length” and also “not be one of importance.” Hence, the proposal is that the reason for qualifying the former as *mahā-* is that it “offers the clearer, more confident and straightforward, application of the formula.” In other words, from the viewpoint of the formula, “the discourse that gives it a better expression is deemed the primary one.”

Yet, a substantial textual portion of the *Cūḷasāropama-sutta*, covering the four *jhānas* and the four immaterial attainments, lacks coherence in its present placing and therefore is probably a later addition.⁷ The strangeness of the resultant presentation has in fact been recognized by Shulman (2021b: 167n44). Since the current length of the *Cūḷasāropama-sutta* is probably the result of textual expansion, the most parsimonious explanation would simply be that this must have happened after the qualification *cūḷa-* had already been applied to it. Before that apparent expansion, the *Cūḷasāropama-sutta* would have been the shorter of the two discourses. Adopting such a straight-forward explanation would be in line with a general pattern of such distinctions to reflect length or importance of a discourse, as already noted by Horner (1953/1980: 194).

The second example mentioned by Shulman (2021b: 168) concerns the *Mahādukkhakkhandha-sutta* (MN 13) and the *Cūḷadukkhakkhandha-sutta* (MN 14). In this case, the *mahā-* version is indeed the longer one, obviating any need to bring in the idea of a supposed importance given to formulas in order to explain the distinction drawn by the reciters between these two discourses.

Another type of evidence, provided in support of the idea that formulas existed as independent textual elements, involves the term *dharmapariyāya*. In reply to my referencing an instance of the Buddha reciting a discourse by himself, Shulman (2021b: 192) argues that

the Buddha is said to recite a text — here deliberately termed “discourse” by Anālayo. Yet the text says that the Buddha was reciting a *dharmapariyāya*, a “formulation of *dharmā*,” which can also relate to a full text, but is more often better interpreted as relating to a formula.

The relevant text reports the Buddha reciting a *dharmapariyāya* on the topic of dependent arising, followed by encouraging a monk who happened to overhear the recitation that he should commit it to memory. The application of the term “discourse” to this instance in Anālayo (2011b: 857) is justified by the circumstance that the exact same *dharmapariyāya* recurs earlier in the collection as a *sutta* in its own right.⁸ The same holds for another reference to a *dharmapariyāya*, found in the *Mahāparinibbāna-sutta*. The actual text also recurs elsewhere, together with the relevant introductory narration, in the form of two individual discourses.⁹

Another text qualified as *dhammapariyāya* is the *Madhupiṇḍika-sutta*, in relation to which Shulman (2021b: 193n119) reasons that here “it is clear that this formulation of doctrine refers to one part of the text, and specifically to the teaching given by both Mahākaccāna and the Buddha.” Now, the term *dhammapariyāya* occurs at the end of the discourse when the Buddha reportedly names it *madhupiṇḍika*.¹⁰ The reciter tradition evidently considered the name given to this *dhammapariyāya* to intend the whole discourse, and not just to one part of the text, as the reciters adopted it for the discourse’s title. The same holds for several other instances when Pāli discourses report the Buddha giving one or several alternative names to a *dhammapariyāya*, one of which then becomes the title of the whole discourse.¹¹

But even apart from the position taken by tradition on the significance of the term *dhammapariyāya* in the *Madhupiṇḍika-sutta*, “the teaching given by both Mahākaccāna and the Buddha” is unique to this discourse. Neither recurs elsewhere in exactly this form. It follows that these teachings are not fit for being considered examples of formulas. The same problem recurs with other examples given by Shulman (2021b: 193n121) in support of his theory. These cover cases when the term *dhammapariyāya* refers to a teaching, a simile, and a phrase, each of which does not occur elsewhere in this exact form.¹² For this reason, these examples do not fit the definition of formulas given by Shulman (2021b: 171) as “units of textual articulation that *repeat across texts*, and that *strictly maintain their form*” (emphasis added).

Shulman (2021b: 165) also argues that the *Vinaya* ruling against teaching those who are not fully ordained word by word intends formulas.¹³ Although the Pāli version of this rule does not spell out what types of text are meant, several parallels do provide such information. According to the Dharmaguptaka *Vinaya*, the rule intends to prevent lay people reciting the Buddha’s discourses in this way.¹⁴ The Mahīśāsaka *Vinaya* relates the promulgation of this rule to lay disciples wanting to learn the recitation of discourses and verses,¹⁵ and the Mahāsāṅghika *Vinaya* reports that the rule was occasioned by teaching the *Pārāyanavagga*.¹⁶ None of these stipulations concerns formulas, making it highly improbable that such a sense is appropriate for their Theravāda counterpart, an impression confirmed by the commentarial understanding of the import of this rule.¹⁷

In relation to another instance of private recitation, in this case involving Anuruddha, Shulman (2021b: 192) admits that this reference concerns “probably verses.”¹⁸ Since verses can be unique, however, they do not

straightforwardly fall under the proposed definition of formulas. This brings to light another problem of the proposed theory, as *the play of formulas automatically relegates textual units that are not repetitive to a secondary level of textual formation*. Yet, there is no reason why the fact of being repeated should make the textual element that is being repeated more primary than textual elements that are not repeated. Primacy in matters of textual composition does not depend on whether the results of such composition are later repeated.

Some of the early Buddhist verses are indubitably early and for this reason need to be taken into account in any attempt at explaining the dynamics of the early Buddhist oral tradition. A case study of the *Udāna* collection, for example, shows that some verses appear to have been transmitted for quite some time on their own, the relevant prose narrations being only added later.¹⁹ Such a scenario does not fit the play of formulas. Another misfit is the monastic code of rules, perhaps the most frequently memorized item in early Buddhist orality, which the play of formulas is unable to explain adequately. Besides, formulas are not even mentioned in the traditional listing of *aṅgas*.²⁰ Had formulas been the primary building blocks of the early text, one could reasonably expect this to be reflected in contexts which refer to the *aṅgas*.

In sum, the textual evidence surveyed above does not provide the support needed to “gain confidence that tradition saw formulas as ‘the text’,” to use the wording by Shulman (2021b: 165).

The Four *Mahāpadesas*

The four *mahāpadesas* present potential sources from whom one may have heard a text and then explain how in each such case the text should be examined in order to decide if it is to be accepted. Shulman (2021b: 199) considers these four *mahāpadesas* to support the idea that the play of formulas was central for the formation of early Buddhist oral texts:

The notion of comparison to accepted materials, which is the key of the *mahāpadesa* doctrine, suggests that tradition knew how to make room for variation within accepted boundaries, allowing new composition according to accepted lines; this is what the play of formulas suggests.

In support of this conclusion, Shulman (2021b: 197) presents a translation of one of these four *mahāpadesas*. Closer inspection shows that he only translates the second part of the relevant text. In the case of the first *mahāpadesa*, the missing part proceeds as follows:²¹

Here, monastics, a monastic might say: "I heard this in the presence of the Blessed One, I learned this in his presence: this is the Dharma, this is the discipline, this is the teacher's teaching."

The other three *mahāpadesas* make similar statements in relation to other authoritative sources of teachings believed to stem from the Buddha, which could be a community of monastics, a group of learned monastics, or just a single learned monastic. This type of formulation makes it clear that the intention is not to allow new composition or personal creativity and experimentation. Instead, the main purpose of the *mahāpadesas* is the evaluation of the authenticity of reports about what the Buddha was believed to have taught himself.

Turning to evaluations provided by other scholars, von Hinüber (1996/1997: 6) introduces the *mahāpadesas* as follows: "To guard the texts against alterations, Buddhists developed at a very early date some means to check their authenticity." Ray (1985: 158) concludes his survey of relevant sources by stating: "On the one hand, the text must be proposed from reliable external authority; on the other, such authority must be further and finally tested against the canons of Buddhist doctrine, not as literal words and phrases, but as living understanding." In what is the classic study of the topic, Lamotte (1947) explains that the *mahāpadesas* would reflect an already established practice of referring to the source from which a particular teaching was obtained,²² to which the added criterion for authenticity is that the text needs to be in accord with the spirit of the discourses, the *Vinaya*, and the general doctrine.²³ It must be based on taking into consideration the full text, rather than only its later part, that these scholars do not envisage the *mahāpadesas* as sanctioning new composition.

The prevalent assessment in Buddhist scholarship of the significance of the *mahāpadesas* thus appears to be quite different from the position taken by Shulman (2021b: 198),²⁴ apparently due to taking into account only part of the relevant text, that "the doctrine of the *mahāpadesas* suggests that there was a degree of creativity and personal experimentation alive and accepted within the textual tradition."²⁵

In line with the astute observation by Lamotte (1947), the function of the *mahāpadesas* can best be appreciated by keeping in mind the oral situation. As pointed out by Davidson (1990/1992: 293) in a context not related to the *mahāpadesas*:

during the more than forty years of the Buddha's teaching career, there were many monks acting as authoritative teachers of the doctrine throughout the kingdom of Magadha and its border areas. They would cross paths with the master from time to time and receive new information as his doctrine and teaching style developed. They would also receive new information from one another during the fortnightly congregations, the summer rains retreats, and whenever they met as their mendicant paths crossed.

Visualizing the situation in this way, there must have been a continuous need for updating the body of texts a particular reciter had memorized. In the resultant fluctuating situation of early Buddhist orality, where any new teaching given by the Buddha or one of his authoritative disciples would only gradually percolate among different monastic reciter communities, the procedure of the *mahāpadesas* is a natural one. As long as the Buddha was alive, he could have been consulted directly to settle any uncertainty, in line with a recurrent pattern in the early discourses of someone approaching him to find out if a certain rumor was correct. With the Buddha's passing away such a stable reference point to assess the authenticity of a particular teaching would be lost. As noted by An (2002: 61) in an article dedicated to exploring the *mahāpadesas*, "after the Buddha's death the settled texts assumed the Buddha's authority."

Comparative Study and Historicism

In support of the model of the play of formulas as a preferable alternative to the established procedures in Buddhist scholarship, Eviatar Shulman attributes a historicist agenda to comparative studies of early Buddhist texts. Under the header of "The Perils of Historicism in Buddhist Studies" (2021: 150), he considers such perils to be evident in the following reference made in Anālayo (2011b: 855): "According to the different *Vinayas*, soon after his awakening the Buddha sent his first monk disciples out to teach others." Now, a proper evaluation of this statement would need to take into account the explanation given in the introductory parts of that work (2011b: xxv):

My research ... presents a comparative study of the legacy of discourse material preserved by the reciters, the *bhāṇakas*. It is their presentation of the teachings that I am investigating, based on considering their legacy as source material for early Buddhist thought that deserves to be taken seriously.

A footnote (13) appended to this statement adds the following clarification:

Thus when using expressions such as, for example, “the Buddha said to Brahmā,” I certainly do not intend to convey that the historical Buddha certainly said so, nor do I postulate the existence of Brahmā. Instead, I only intend to indicate that the reciters of the discourses report the Buddha to have spoken in a certain way to Brahmā. It would become cumbersome reading if in every such instance I were to mention explicitly that *I only represent the point of view of the discourses*. (emphasis added)

At an early stage in the compilation of my comparative study of the *Majjhima-nikāya*, I tried to formulate my summaries of the presentation of the reciters in such a way as to make it clear on every single instance that I was not presenting these as historical facts. However, it soon became evident that such a procedure results in convoluted phrasing and makes for difficult reading. For this reason, I decided to abandon it and simply clarify the situation at the outset of my study. Thus, when I say “according to the different *Vinayas*” such and such a thing happened (e.g., the Buddha sending out his first disciples to teach), I mean precisely what this phrase implies: I report what the texts convey. Based on that, I then draw out the implications of the position taken by the reciters. It must be due to not having read the explicit indication at the outset of my comparative study that Shulman (2021b: 152) comments that “[t]aking these *Vinaya* accounts as plain history is questionable to begin with,”²⁶ followed by adding in a footnote (5):

This first group of students relates to “Yasa and his friends” ... It should be noted that the Yasa episode in the *Mahāvagga* is filled with supernatural elements. The attempt to treat such a text as providing a reliable historical core, which only later was embellished with narrative elements, is suspect.

Shulman (2021b: 235) includes in his bibliography my detailed study of the *Vinaya* narrative related to the first *pārājika* against sexual intercourse, in the course of which I repeatedly draw attention to the need to read the texts as reflecting the concerns of the reciters rather than as historical records. This has led me to the following conclusion in *Anālayo* (2012a: 425):

In order to be able to appreciate the impact of the imagination of the monks responsible for the transmission of the *Vinaya*, then, a comparative study of all extant accounts is an indispensable necessity. As the Sudinna case shows, it is through a comparative study of all extant versions that those parts of the tale can be identified that with high probability reflect how the functioning of this tale in a *Vinaya* teaching setting would have influenced the shape this tale eventually acquired.

In a monograph study of another *Vinaya* narrative, I clarify my position in the following way (Anālayo 2016b: 13):

Throughout this study, my intention is not to reconstruct what actually happened on the ground in ancient India, which in view of the limitations of the source material at our disposal would anyway be a questionable undertaking. Instead, my intention is to reconstruct what happened during the transmission of the texts that report this event. In short, *I am not trying to construct a history, I am trying to study the construction of a story.* (emphasis added)

In the introduction to my comparative study of the *Majjhima-nikāya*, I also discuss the role of the principle of coherence in early Buddhist thought (Anālayo 2011b: xxvi). I argue that the recognition of coherence as a criterion of truth, reflected in the early texts, makes it reasonable to employ the same principle when evaluating a particular textual passage. Such reliance on the principle of coherence does not imply asserting that something actually happened in ancient India. Even a fairy tale, to have its effect, needs to be convincing and hence, from the viewpoint of tradition, be coherent.

An example in case is an incoherence identified by Alsdorf (1957: 36–38) in the *Vessantara-jātaka*, where in the course of a journey the prince first gives away the horses drawing his chariot to begging brahmins and subsequently only the chariot itself. The resultant incoherence of a journey taken in a chariot that has no horses appears to have led to the addition of a prose narration that introduces celestials taking the form of draft animals. Identifying such incoherence and probable textual development does not require a positivistic reading; there is no need to assume that Vessantara actually existed in order to investigate the apparent genesis of the idea of celestials acting as draft animals. The point is simply that for the story to perform its literary function, it needs to be experienced by the audience as coherent. In other words, *the justified interest in literary dimensions should not lead to overlooking the literary requirement of narrative coherence.*²⁷

The misunderstanding of my comparative studies as involving an attempt to establish what truly happened occurs repeatedly in Shulman (2021b), such as when commenting: “Recent, highly optimistic, views of the texts as revealing the events and teaching episodes behind the Buddha’s career are misguided” (p. 226). In support of attributing this assessment to my work, Shulman refers back to a previous footnote of his own (p. 4n4) that mentions “Anālayo (2017), who argues for the historicity of

the early discourses.” The publication referenced is a monograph with collected articles that has over 600 pages. Given the absence of a page reference, it seems that the basic approach adopted for comparative study is mistaken to imply the taking of a definite position on the historicity of the contents of what the early discourses report. This is of course not the case. A related instance of criticism by Shulman (2021b: 13), which offers further clarifications regarding the problem he sees in such comparative studies, takes the following form:

Anālayo (2017: 501) reads Chinese versions in order “to document the contribution Chinese *Āgama* passages can offer for an alternative understanding, or even for a correction, of their Pāli counterparts.” The price Buddhist studies has been paying for following this approach is an implicit acceptance of the traditional idealization of Buddhist scriptures as the true word of the Buddha, with no ability to acknowledge the deep creativity at work within the Buddhist textual project and with fewer resources to understand the meaning of the texts for the people who used them. That is, scholars try to fix the word of the Buddha in a much stronger way than tradition ever did.

Comparative study is the very opposite of “the traditional idealization of Buddhist scriptures as the true word of the Buddha,” as it precisely shows that the true word of the Buddha cannot be reconstructed. By surveying parallel texts, it provides many more “resources to understand the meaning of the texts for the people who used them” than an approach that relies only on the Pāli tradition. The suggestion that “scholars try to fix the word of the Buddha in a much stronger way than tradition ever did” is absurd. *Comparative study runs contrary to the central belief of traditional Theravāda Buddhists that the Pāli canon represents the word of the Buddha.* It is precisely the potential of showing that the Pāli version at times calls for correction that undermines traditional beliefs. The promotion of consulting only the Pāli version, a position taken by Eviatar Shulman, concords with the predilections of traditionalists much better than comparative studies does.

A Proper Appreciation of Comparative Studies

Based on the assumption that comparative studies involve the “historicist fallacy,” Shulman (2021b: 155) takes up my comparative study of the *Cūlagosiṅga-sutta* as a “demonstration of the dead-end to which historicist approaches tend to lead us.” In that study, I noted the similarity between the introductory narrations found in the *Cūlagosiṅga-sutta* (MN 31) and in the *Upakkilesa-sutta* (MN 128), as well as in a

parallel account in the *Mahāvagga* of the *Vinaya*, related to a quarrel that had reportedly broken out among the monks of Kosambī. Even though the two discourses are associated with different locations, they report the same episode of the Buddha being stopped by the park keeper of a grove in which three monks were living together.²⁸ Another difference is that “in the *Upakkilesa-sutta* the three monks have not yet reached the goal, while in the *Cūlagosiṅga-sutta* they are already accomplished arahants” (Anālayo 2011b: 203). Shulman (2021b: 158) takes these assessments to be a “good example of the damage that an overly historicist interpretation can produce.” His argument then takes the following form (p. 159):

The problem comes when Anālayo tries to push back the events in the *Upakkilesa* earlier in time, to a moment *before* the events at Kosambī ... Anālayo is trying to force the texts to relate a reasonable historical narrative. Naturally, the interpretation hinges on an error in transmission, the theoretical backdrop for any puzzling element, since there are no other conceptual moves available when the literary dimensions of the texts are sidelined. Yet here, the error is attributed mainly to the authors/reciters/redactors of the *Upakkilesa*, the discourse that explicitly places its narration of the encounter with the park-keeper and the three monks after the events at Kosambī. In fact, it is clear that the *Upakkilesa* narrative and the *Mahāvagga* narrative are essentially the same, the one offering a more elaborate telling of the other, so that taking the *Upakkilesa* as an account that precedes the Kosambī conflict completely obliterates the logic of this text. The *Upakkilesa* cannot be placed before the events at Kosambī, unless we ignore large parts of the narrative.

This argument involves a misunderstanding of my study, in which I did not take the position that the *Upakkilesa-sutta* should be placed before the events at Kosambī.²⁹ Instead, my position is that, “according to the *Upakkilesa-sutta*, the meeting between the Buddha and the three monks took place *right after* the Buddha had left the quarrelling monks of Kosambī” (Anālayo 2011b: 204; emphasis added).

I then note that the *Ekottarika-āgama* parallel to the *Cūlagosiṅga-sutta* also places the events in this discourse right after the Kosambī episode, a positioning that resonates with some implicit indications in the Pāli version of the *Cūlagosiṅga-sutta*. Yet, from the viewpoint of the content of these two Pāli discourses, the *Upakkilesa-sutta* should precede the *Cūlagosiṅga-sutta*, as in the former the three monks struggle to maintain their concentration whereas in the latter they feature as highly accomplished meditative adepts.

My overview of the indications given by the different versions becomes problematic only when one tries to force it into a historicist reading. But to do so is beside the point. *A comparative study of oral texts transmitted for centuries cannot yield definite historical facts. What it can yield is a better understanding of the texts and their transmission.* In fact, the conclusion I propose is not about what actually happened on the ground but about what appears to have happened during the transmission of these texts. From that viewpoint, it is of considerable interest that two discourses in the same *Majjhima-nikāya* collection, the *Cūlagosīṅga-sutta* and the *Upakkilesa-sutta*, present accounts that conflict with each other.

Shulman (2021b: 160) also criticizes another aspect of the same comparative study as follows:

Anālayo is driven to place the *Upakkilesa* earlier since he sees the *Cūlagosīṅga* as reporting a stage in which the three monks were more advanced in their meditative attainment. In fact, he sees the text as describing them as arahants, in a way that finds little support in the discourse. This is probably the only reason to think that the *Upakkilesa* is earlier.

In support of his assessment that the *Cūlagosīṅga-sutta* does not present the three monks as arahants, he refers to the statement in the discourse “that they have reached the state of cessation (*saññāvedayitanirodha*), for which the MN uses a formula that speaks of inflows (*āsava*) being destroyed, even though this does not necessarily correspond to complete liberation” (p. 160n24). Yet, this does appear to be the implication of the reference to the *āsavas* being destroyed,³⁰ as for indicating that only some of these are destroyed, corresponding to a level or realization falling short of becoming an arahant, the discourses tend to add the qualification “some” (*ekacca*) before the reference to the *āsavas*.³¹

Shulman (2021b: 160n24) also argues, regarding a *yakkha* that appears at the end of the discourse, that “although the Yakkha refers to the Buddha as an arahant, he does not do so in relation to the three monks.” Closer inspection of the relevant passage shows that the reference employs the standard qualification of the Buddha as *araḥaṃ sammāsambuddho*.³² The early discourses use this specifically for the Buddha and not for his disciples, making it unsurprising that the present passage conforms to this pattern. Such usage does not entail that the three monks were not considered to be arahants.

Moreover, the assessment of the relationship between the two discourses is not based just on their attainment of arahant-ship. The *Upakkilesa-sutta* describes the three monks as encountering problems similar to the Buddha's own pre-awakening experience of a series of obstacles to concentration. In contrast, in the *Cūlagosiṅga-sutta* and its parallels the three monks have mastery of the absorptions and immaterial spheres. There can be no doubt that the two discourses present these three monks at different moments in their meditative development. In fact, Shulman (2021b: 160n24) admits that “[i]t is true, however, that the monks’ practice can be considered more advanced in the *Cūlagosiṅga* than in the *Upakkilesa*.” Yet, according to his assessment there is “no need to see one text as relating earlier events than the other, since both are actually placing a different set of meditative attainments within the same literary design” (p. 160). This assessment does not seem to work so well, as it is only in one discourse that they are shown to have “a set of meditative attainments.” In the other discourse, they are reportedly unable to stabilize their concentration and precisely for this reason have not yet reached a set of meditative attainments.

Elsewhere in his study Shulman (2021b: 222n59) in fact reports that in the *Upakkilesa-sutta* “the monks relate their irregular *samādhi* experience ... which they admit they have trouble maintaining.” Given his own assessment, it follows that the two discourses do indeed report encounters with the Buddha that, from the viewpoint of the reciters, are to be allocated to an earlier and a later occasion.

Another criticism by Shulman (2021b: 153n8) proceeds as follows:

Regarding the *Aggivačchagotta-sutta* (2011: 883), Anālayo misunderstands the context of the teaching given in this discourse, so that the ideas introduced by the Chinese text do not result from “commentary,” but are part of the philosophy taught in the discourse ... the “unanswered questions” relate to selflessness to begin with ... For this reason, the reference in the parallel version from the *Samyukta Āgama*, which refers to the destiny of the self of beings, and which Anālayo sees as resulting from the commentary, fits the context perfectly.

The relevant part of the *Aggivačchagotta-sutta* concerns the tetralemma on the destiny of the Tathāgata after death. In this context, the term Tathāgata does not refer to the self in general but more specifically to a fully awakened one. Instead of employing the standard Chinese translation for the term Tathāgata as 如來, found elsewhere in the same *Samyukta-āgama* collection, the usage of 眾生神我 is indeed

perplexing.³³ For this reason, in Anālayo (2011b: 883f) I suggested that “the puzzling reference in the Chinese version could be due to the influence of an ancient Indian commentarial explanation similar to what is now preserved in the Pāli commentaries,” which gloss such references to the Tathāgata as implying a “living being,” similar to the reference to a “living being,” 眾生, in the Chinese phrase under discussion. Since the whole phrase 眾生神我 involves a substantial departure from the translation terminology employed in the same collection elsewhere, it is rather doubtful that Chinese readers would have understood it to reflect the term Tathāgata.³⁴ For this reason, it certainly does not fit the context, let alone fitting it “perfectly.”

Another criticism concerns my comparative study of the *Mahāsīhanāda-sutta*, in the course of which I quote other scholars who pointed out problems with its description of the Buddha’s pre-awakening practices (Anālayo 2011b: 116n89):

Dutoit (1905: 50) notes that the description of the bodhisattva’s solitary dwelling in a forest given in MN 12 at MN I 79,¹ according to which he would hide as soon as he saw a cowherd or shepherd from afar, stands in contrast to the traditional account according to which the bodhisattva was in the company of the five monks during his ascetic practices. Dutoit also points out an inner contradiction, where MN 12 at MN I 78,¹⁹ describes the bodhisattva undertaking the practice of bathing in water three times a day, but then at MN I 78,²³ depicts how dust and dirt had accumulated on his body over the years to the extent that it was falling off in pieces. Freiburger (2006: 238) notes another contradiction between the reference to nakedness at MN I 77,²⁸ and the wearing of different types of ascetic garment described at MN I 78,¹⁰.

I then refer to Hecker (1972: 54), who had proposed a solution to this incoherent presentation by relating it to the *Lomaḥṃsa-jātaka*, which “indicates that the *bodhisattva* undertook these ascetic practices in a former life.”³⁵

Shulman (2021b: 140n61) objects that my presentation is “misleading,” as my treatment of the description of ascetic practices supposedly “tries to explain them away as the product of [a] confusion with the *Lomaḥṃsa-jātaka*” (p. 140). Moreover, according to his assessment my “explanation ignores the fact that the *Mahāsīhanāda* describes these practices far more elaborately than does the *Lomaḥṃsa-jātaka*.” In addition, “[t]here is also no mention of previous lives in this discourse,” that is, in the *Mahāsīhanāda-sutta*.

First of all, there is no attempt to explain the ascetic practices away. My point is much rather to try to understand the presentation in the discourse, in line with the principle of coherence already mentioned. In Anālayo (2011b: 116n88) I point out: “This *Jātaka* tale begins by referring to Sunakkhatta’s disparagement of the Buddha, so that there can be no doubt that it refers to the same occasion as MN 12.” In fact, the main elements of the introductory narration in the *Mahāsīhanāda-sutta* (MN 12) recur as the introductory narration of the *Lomaḥaṃsa-jātaka* (Jā 94).³⁶ The ensuing part of the *Lomaḥaṃsa-jātaka* then summarizes the main ascetic practices of the bodhisattva being naked and covered with dust, living in such seclusion as to flee from the sight of humans, eating cow dung, and subjecting himself deliberately to extremes of cold and hot weather. These correspond to the practices described in more detail in the *Mahāsīhanāda-sutta*. The *Lomaḥaṃsa-jātaka* then presents a poem on the bodhisattva’s asceticism that is also found at this juncture in the *Mahāsīhanāda-sutta*.³⁷ This verse, which in fact constitutes the *jātaka* proper, appears to be specific to these two texts. There can hardly be any doubt that the two texts intend the same ascetic practices believed to have been cultivated by the Buddha before his awakening, and it is difficult to understand how such a suggestion could be classified as “misleading.” In fact, Shulman (2021b: 141) has to admit that “perhaps the reference to a missing *Jātaka*, as suggested by Anālayo, still makes sense” (although my suggestion is not really about a “missing” *jātaka*), followed by presenting the *Lomaḥaṃsa-jātaka* as an example for instances where “*Jātakas* synthesize *suttas*” (note 68). If that is the case, then what is the basis for dismissing the observation of such a relationship between these two texts as “misleading”?

Moreover, the *Mahāsīhanāda-sutta* at a later point does refer to previous lives,³⁸ contrary to the statement by Shulman (2021b: 140) that “[t]here is also no mention of previous lives in this discourse.” In a criticism of those who believe that purification comes about through the cycle of rebirth, the *Mahāsīhanāda-sutta* reports the Buddha pointing out that he had already experienced all kinds of rebirth (except for the Pure Abodes), thereby proving to himself that rebirths are not in themselves purificatory. The same type of argument would make good sense for the description of asceticism, in that with his own experiences of these ascetic practices he had similarly proven to himself that such practices are not in themselves purificatory. The suggestion here is in fact not that a “confusion” has happened. Instead, the point is only that the idea of a past life, although not articulated explicitly, may well stand in the background of the presentation of asceticism in the *Mahāsīhanāda-sutta*, given that another

and later text, the *Lomahaṃsa-jātaka*, explicitly relates these practices to a former life of the Buddha many aeons ago. Taking into account the perspective afforded by the *Lomahaṃsa-jātaka* in this way enables a coherent reading of the *Mahāsīhanāda-sutta*'s presentation and offers a solution to the problems correctly identified by previous scholarship.

The principle of coherence also stands in the background of my comparative study of the *Ariyapariyesanā-sutta*. In relation to the episode of the Buddha's encounter with Upaka, who could have become his first convert, Shulman (2021b: 212n39) argues that my "discussion of the different versions of the Upaka episode exemplifies some of the problems that inhere in the attempt to identify a 'correct' version of the text." He adds that "it is hopeless to try to see what the 'true' version was." Yet, the terms "correct" or "true" do not occur in my discussion of this episode, nor do I express value judgements that reflect such ideas. I simply survey the parallels from the viewpoint of their inner coherence and as instances testifying to the dynamics of oral transmission.

In relation to my comparative study of the final part of the *Ariyapariyesanā-sutta*, Shulman (2021b: 213) repeats his view of my work as involving a search "for the 'correct version'," arguing that:

The attempt to change the sequence of the text is frustrating, ever again assuming that there is a mistake in "transmission," as if there necessarily was a clear text to be transmitted. Rather than succumbing to such temptations to explain the problem away and to make the discourse ostensibly more coherent, we can again see how the literary approach takes us further.

The supposedly preferable literary approach then takes the form of proposing that the allocation to the chapter on similes is responsible for the incoherent presentation (p. 214): "To be included in this collection, a text must give prominence to a simile, which the editors of the *Ariyapariyesanā* achieved" with the help of the part that does not fit its context particularly well.³⁹ Now, had the allocation to the chapter on similes indeed been responsible for this part of the discourse, the question remains why it was placed at a juncture of the text where it does not fit. In fact, Shulman (2021b: 213) acknowledges this misfit: "The last section of the text does not fit very well with what came before." The proposed solution does not solve this problem. The purpose of finding inclusion in the chapter on similes could have been achieved by placing the simile earlier, where it fits better. This goes to show that the proposed "literary approach" does not really take us further.

It is also not clear why the suggestion of an error in sequence is “frustrating,” given that there is ample evidence for precisely such errors to occur during oral transmission.⁴⁰ Note that I present this just as a possible explanation, speaking of “the assumption that the sequence of the narration might have suffered from a misplacing of this passage during the process of transmission of the discourse” (Anālayo 2011b: 187). Based on evidence that a particular error tends to occur in oral transmission, I offer the suggestion that this may apply to the present case, without taking the position that this must have been the case and thus without actually attempting “to change the sequence of the text.” Here and elsewhere, there is a *tendency for criticism raised by Eviatar Shulman to be the result of careless reading.*

Another point made in the above criticism takes the form of problematizing that “there necessarily was a clear text to be transmitted.” What else but a text (as long as we use that term to include what is not written) could have been transmitted during the centuries of oral tradition? At some point some form of an oral teaching must have come into existence whose transmission over centuries led to what we can now access in the form of the *Ariyapariyesanā-sutta* and its parallel extant in Chinese.

Comparative Studies and Literary Dimensions of the Texts

An argument employed repeatedly by Eviatar Shulman in support of his play of formulas is to present his approach as finally doing justice to the literary dimensions of the texts:⁴¹ “Without acknowledging the literary dimensions of the texts, any historical analysis is plainly fantastic; the understanding of the historical must follow upon the appreciation of the literary” (2021: 226). Yet, “scholars insist that the main driving impulse of early Buddhist scripture is to preserve the teacher’s words” (p. 25). Such criticism also targets my work, evident in the reference to “Anālayo’s strong emphasis on verbatim repetition as the sole performative practice of the texts” (p. 154). Yet, as the previous part of the present article would have shown, I offered a series of suggestions about material of a commentarial type becoming part of the discourse itself, something that implies a performative setting that is not restricted to verbatim repetition. In fact, in Anālayo (2011b: 859) I made a point of noting that “oral transmission was perceived not only as a means of preserving texts.”

The performative dimension of the early discourses and their literary dimension have for quite some time been recognized and studied, including by myself.⁴² In relation to the specific case of formulas, as noted in Anālayo (2021):

The general tendency in current scholarship to highlight the mnemonic function of such formulas is surely not meant to imply that these do not also have literary and poetic functions. The suggestion is only that, during the prolonged period of oral transmission, passages and descriptions tended to become increasingly stereotyped and formalized as aids in memorization and rehearsal. The resultant formulas obviously still have content, which can convey a range of meanings and serve literary and poetic functions.

Comparative study offers a particularly powerful tool for advancing our understanding of precisely the literary dimensions of the early discourses. This holds, for example, for appreciating the literary roles of the celestials Brahmā, Sakka, and Māra in early Buddhist narrative (studied in Anālayo 2011a, 2011d, and 2014b; summarized in Anālayo 2018). It is precisely the consultation of parallel versions that helps to bring out more clearly the rich literary dimensions of the portraits of each of these celestial denizens of early Buddhist texts. Of particular interest is also the role of such celestials in a narrative that serves as an authentication strategy for attributing the delivery of Abhidharma teachings to the Buddha himself (studied in Anālayo 2012f).

Another fascinating literary dimension evident in some early discourses is debate (studied in Anālayo 2010d), appreciation of which requires a proper understanding of debating strategies precisely in order to avoid literalist and historicist interpretations (see Anālayo 2012c and 2013). An intriguing narrative motif is also the Paccekabuddha/Pratyekabuddha (examined in Anālayo 2010c and 2015d), where a comparative study and exploration of relevant material in the Chinese *Āgamas* helps to develop a perspective on the apparent attraction of this notion in the early period after the Buddha's demise. Yet another narrative motif of similar interest is the wheel-turning king, in which case once again comparative study shows its literary dimensions and in what ways this motif was deployed (explored in Anālayo 2011e and 2012e). Conversion is another motif that easily shows the impact of narrative agendas, in particular when it comes to the conversion of a brahmin (see Anālayo 2011c). A particularly fascinating narrative of this type involves the transformation of the

killer Aṅgulimāla into a saint, where comparative study showcases the different literary trajectories that have impacted reports of this episode (studied in Anālayo 2008a).

Another and perhaps even more remarkable narrative appears to reveal the probable beginning of the motif of spontaneous auto-combustion (examined in Anālayo 2012b). Although clearly arising from literary concerns, in the course of Buddhist history this particular motif has inspired actual instances of setting parts or the whole of one's body on fire. This is not the only narrative trope related to fire imagery (on which see Anālayo 2015a), which stands in relation to the literary function of depictions of miracles (see Anālayo 2015c and 2016c). Each of these literary topics can greatly benefit from comparative studies.

Needless to say, a study of literary aspects can hardly overlook the *jātakas*, whose development from folk tales to becoming stories of the Buddha's past lives is particularly intriguing (studied in Anālayo 2009a and 2010b: 55–71). Even in relation to what is perhaps the most famous *jātaka* in the Theravāda tradition, the *Vessantara-jātaka*, comparative study can provide important indications regarding its apparent literary function (see Anālayo 2016e). In view of the androcentric tendencies in much of early Buddhist literature, a comparative study of a narrative involving a past life of the Buddha as a female is of considerable interest (see Anālayo 2014a). Of similar benefit are comparative studies of other narratives concerning female rebirth (see Anālayo 2014c), attitudes toward nuns (see Anālayo 2010a), and of course of the narrative of the founding of the order of nuns (see Anālayo 2016b).

Comparative study of *Vinaya* narratives can draw on quite a variety of parallel versions, which help to clarify the literary purposes of the stories purporting to report the convocation of the first communal recitation, *saṅgīti* (surveyed in Anālayo 2015b), and the circumstances of the promulgation of the rules against sexual intercourse and homicide (see Anālayo 2012a and 2012d).

In view of the above range of publications related in one way or another to literary dimensions of the texts, it is rather astonishing that Shulman (2021b: 59) singles me out as “a salient example” for modern scholarship that ignores the narrative and literal dimensions of the early discourses.⁴³ Here as well as elsewhere, his assessments tend to reflect a failure to ascertain a particular situation *before* voicing an evaluation.

The Notion of Parallelism

According to Shulman (2021b: 29), in my comparative studies I tend “to speak of ‘parallels’ of texts, rather than of versions, suggesting that a text is a clearly defined entity that underwent changes.” Actually, I use “version” quite often and interchangeably with “parallel.” However, Shulman (2021b: 7) intends the term “version” in a special way:⁴⁴

The idea of texts as versions combats the common philological approach that assumes that “parallel” texts, i.e., different versions of a text preserved in distinct canons and languages, can be compared to each other in order to identify more reliable, authentic, or “earlier” versions, and then to mark processes of change and development.

An example for what this implies is his suggestion that the *Bhayabherava-sutta* (MN 4) and the *Dvedhāvitakka-sutta* (MN 19) “are versions of each other” (p. 206). In Anālayo (2021) I already examined this proposal in detail, showing that these two discourses are substantially different and thus are not versions of each other. The attempt to combat the common philological approach appears to rest on a failure to appreciate the notion of discourse parallelism. This notion rests on the impression that the texts identified as parallel versions report the same instance of teaching. This is not the case for the *Bhayabherava-sutta* and the *Dvedhāvitakka-sutta*.

When defining formulas, Shulman (2021b: 171) notes that some of these can be quite short, commenting: “A simple example of this type of formula is the opening phrase of all discourses in the MN and DN—*evaṃ me sutam*, ‘Thus have I heard.’” Taking this type of formula as an example, are all discourses in these two collections versions of each other, just because they share this formula? Clearly, the idea of shared formulas is insufficient in itself for determining parallelism. More is required, and this is precisely what the common philological approach has been relying on for over a century of Buddhist scholarship, since the (for the English-speaking world) ground-breaking publications by Anesaki (1908) and Akanuma (1929/1990). The notion of discourse parallelism has shown its worth and forms the basis not only for comparative studies of the Chinese *Āgamas* but also for research on Sanskrit and Gāndhārī fragments (or discourse material extant in other languages). The play of formulas is not a convincing alternative to this approach.

The unconvincing nature of the proposed revision of the notion of parallelism can perhaps best be illustrated with an example. Suppose police investigating a particular crime compare different eyewitness

accounts. Given the limitations of human memory, these can at times be quite different from each other, even though the individual witnesses may sincerely believe they are reporting what they actually saw. Despite such differences, the investigating police officers will only be concerned with eyewitnesses of this particular crime. It would make no sense for them to consult eyewitness reports of another crime that took place at a different time and in a different place, however much these other reports may have some superficial similarity to those that concern the crime under investigation.

The same principle holds for comparative study. In order to improve our understanding of a particular discourse, in the way it has been transmitted, parallels ostensibly reporting the same teaching are of direct relevance. The qualification “ostensibly” here is meant to note a difference compared to the crime investigation example, insofar as comparative study does not require affirming that the teaching was indeed given by the speaker(s) at the reported location. It only requires ascertaining that, from the viewpoint of the reciters, the relevant texts appear to have been seen as reporting the same episode. Other discourses that ostensibly report some different episode, even if they share some superficial similarity due to the employment of particular formulas, are not of comparable relevance.

Shulman (2021b: 14) proposes that, “[b]efore scholarship continues to compare texts, it should ask where comparison is meant to lead us and acknowledge the creative vectors that were active within the tradition, rather than seeing them as mistakes or corruptions.” The introduction of value judgements, evident here, recurs also when Shulman (2021b: 144) portrays the approach he wishes to dismiss as involving attributing a particular textual development to “the hand of cunning redactors who altered some sort of original, pristine text.” Another example is the reference to “remaining suspicious of innovation as a corruption of a core text” (p. 36). The same recurs in a criticism directly aimed at my work: “Anālayo’s views ... are based on similar assumptions regarding an original ‘text’ that underwent lamentable changes during transmission” (p. 30).

The attempt to dismiss comparative study by associating it with value-laden terminology seems to reflect Eviatar Shulman’s own ways of thinking. Shulman (2021b: 42) in fact uses the term “lamentably” to qualify the supposed absence of interest in literary dimensions among

other scholars. In contrast, a digital search of the PDF versions of my over 400 publications has not led me to a single occurrence of an instance of change being qualified as “lamentable.” There is in fact nothing at all to be lamented, as instances of change are much rather highly interesting. My most significant discoveries through comparative study are precisely based on acknowledging “the creative vectors that were active within the tradition,” whereby instances of “innovation” become particularly revealing.

Moreover, the appeal in the quote given above that comparative study should be preceded by reflection on its functions and goals ignores that such reflections have already been made and published. As has become evident above in relation to the unfounded accusation of historicism, the repeated criticism of various aspects of my *Comparative Study of the Majjhima-nikāya* has evidently not been based on reading the first part of the work, in which I clarify, as the title of the relevant section indicates, the “research scope and purpose” of my study. In an article published previously (Anālayo 2008b), which is freely available on the internet, I already took up the following points, as summarized in the abstract:

The present paper offers a few methodological reflections on comparative studies between the discourses found in the Chinese *Āgamas* and their parallels in Pāli, Sanskrit and Tibetan. The issues taken up are: the impact of oral transmission on this material; the notion of a parallel and difficulties in applying this notion; the advantage of approaching the category of a parallel with the help of the Buddhist four-fold logic; and the potential of comparative studies.

Although neither of these two presentations was meant to be the final word on the issue and the continuity of research will offer new perspectives that help to improve these presentations, there is no basis for Shulman (2021b: 144) to call for a halt to comparative studies and request reflection on what it entails and intends to achieve. In line with the instances already surveyed above, *Eviatar Shulman tends to problematize issues due to a lack of paying attention to, or a careless reading of, the relevant sources.*

A dismissal of the potential of comparative studies to understand the evolution of Buddhist thought also becomes evident when Shulman (2021b: 14n26) argues that “judgments on early and late are ultimately speculative.” Notably, this evaluation is meant to apply to comparative studies in particular, as he reserves for himself the right to make such

distinctions when studying Pāli texts in isolation. An example is when Shulman (2021b: 229n3) identifies Pāli discourses as pertaining to what “is probably not one of the earliest textual strata in the Nikāyas,” where “some of these categories are younger than others,” which “suggests that these concepts are a late addition.” In the case of a study based on consulting parallels extant in Chinese, however, Shulman (2021b: 35) argues that “in a comparative analysis, it is dangerous to imagine earlier versions that were ostensibly behind the ones we read today.”

A comparable tactic can be seen when Shulman (2021b: 66) finds a particular formula “does not really connect with the logic of the text.” Even though elsewhere he argues against parallelism, when it comes to defending the play of formulas, he seems to have no qualms about quoting the parallel versions extant in Sanskrit and Chinese in support of his position, arguing that these parallels show that “all versions of the text include the formula” (66n86).

Study Confined to Pāli Texts

Shulman (2021b: 9f) justifies his approach of consulting only Pāli material by reasoning that, “when each text is a viable version, the voice of each tradition can and should be analyzed on its own.” In this way, “we come to realize that there is much room for analyzing each tradition — in the present study, the Pāli one — on its own, in order to achieve a richer understanding of its idiosyncratic perspective and compositional practices” (p. 14).⁴⁵ He further dismisses the potential of comparative study with the assessment that parallels extant in different languages from distinct reciter transmissions should be seen “as versions of a similar story — as different ‘tellings’ — rather than as culminations of different lines of transmission that ultimately refer back to one original text” (p. 121). This assessment is based on a brief foray into comparative study in reliance on an assistant who read the Chinese text on his behalf (p. 30n73).

It is difficult to avoid the impression that a central agenda in the promotion of the play of formulas — and the polemics concerning the supposed historicist fallacy and the alleged lack of attention to literary dimensions in comparative studies — would be an attempt to authenticate research that only relies on Pāli texts. Debunking comparative study in these various ways can then serve as a convenient excuse for not consulting Chinese *Āgama* or Tibetan parallels. In fact, Shulman (2021b: 150) explicitly distances himself from current scholarship in Buddhist studies

that operates under “too strict a philological paradigm. Most salient among these voices today is Venerable Anālayo.” Yet, the in itself understandable frustration of *being unable to consult the primary sources directly is not sufficient ground for dismissing summarily what is beyond one’s personal reach.*

Aside from the fact that the idiosyncrasies of a Pāli discourse can only be appreciated fully based on a consultation of the parallels, even just studying Pāli texts on their own requires some philological expertise. It is not clear if this requirement is in place, as the presentation in Shulman (2021b) involves errors that one would not expect to occur when the Pāli language has been properly learned. An example is the proposal that Sunakkhatta must have been a novice monk, as he is referred to as a *samaṇa* (p. 126n23). This proposal is unexpected because Shulman (2021b: 16n33, 21n48, 135n48, 138n56, 181n77) elsewhere repeatedly quotes Pāli passages that refer to the Buddha with the phrase *samaṇa Gotama*, which obviously does not imply that the Buddha was a novice.⁴⁶ He even states explicitly: “I translate *samaṇa* (Skt śramaṇa) as ‘renunciate’” (p. 15n29), showing awareness of the fact that *samaṇa* does not mean “novice” but much rather “renunciate” or “recluse.” In spite of this, Shulman (2021b: 126n23) still reasons:

Sunakkhatta is referred to twice as a novice monk (*samaṇa*), once by the narrator of the first episode with the naked ascetic (see later discussion), where he is said to be the attendant who follows the Buddha on his alms-round (*pacchā-samaṇa*), and a second time by the Buddha in the second episode in which the Buddha calls him a “Sakyan novice” (*samaṇo sakyaputtiyo*). Rhys Davids (1899: 199) supports this view but does not offer a detailed account.

In line with the procedure adopted to authenticate the play of formula, in the present context again a reference to Rhys Davids serves to support the supposed finding. Following up this reference brings to light that Rhys Davids (1899: 199) does not in any way support the view that Sunakkhatta was a novice.⁴⁷

A lack of familiarity with basic Pāli terms appears to be also evident when Shulman (2021b: 145) refers to the final part of the *Pāṭika-sutta* as taking up the “joyful deliverance (*subhaṃ vimokhaṃ* [sic]).” This appears to conflate *subha*, “beautiful,” with *sukha*, “happy” (or “joyful”). In addition, this reference also involves a misspelling of Pāli terminology, here in the form of a doubling of the *m* whereby the term *vimokha/vimokkha* becomes *vimmokha*.⁴⁸

Shulman (2021b: 15n30) explains his general procedure as follows: “Pāli quotes are taken from the VRI (Vipassanā Research Institute) edition, compared and adapted according to the PTS (Pāli Text Society), and slightly edited.” Yet, incorrect word separations found in the digital VRI edition have repeatedly been kept without being corrected during the process of comparison, adaption and slight edition: *paññāpetu’nti* (p. 62n72), *bhūtabhabyāna’nti* (p. 70n93), *sayampañibhāna’nti* (p. 138n56) twice *sāra’nti* (p. 167n43), *pariyosāna’nti* (p. 168n46), *nissaraṇa’nti* (p. 169n49), *pasanna’nti* (p. 189n107), and *duggahita’nti* (p. 198n131).

Whereas these errors are just brought over when copying text from the digital VRI edition without rectification, other instances involve errors that are not found in either the VRI or PTS editions. One example takes the form of a meaningless duplication of the sentence *sabbaṃ dhammaṃ abhijānāti; sabbaṃ dhammaṃ abhiññāya sabbaṃ dhammaṃ pari jānāti* (p. 50n34), apparently the result of a copy-and-paste error. At times the grammatical form is incorrect, such as when the inquiry *kacci pana vo* requires *viharathā ti* but the form given is *viharantīti* (p. 156n14). Or else, the two members of a compound are given in the opposite order, such as when the term *āgatāgamā* is changed to *āgamāgatā* (p. 197n129). In addition, a number of spelling errors occur, which are not found in the two editions consulted and thus presumably are the result of the process of comparison, adaption and slight edition (the following list leaves out errors involving just a lack of diacritical marks).⁴⁹ The editorial process, if it can be called such, has resulted in the following:

diṭṭhiyā has become *diṭṭhoyā* (p. 8n14),
accantaniṭṭho has become *accantniṭṭho* (p. 50n34),
seyyathīdaṃ/seyyathidaṃ has become *seyatthīdaṃ* (p. 94n36),
tī has become *to* (p. 95n38),
Ambalaṭṭhikā has become *Ambaliṭṭhikā* (p. 95n38),
pacchābhattaṃ has become *pacchābattaṃ* (p. 101n55),
devamanussānan has become *devamanssānam* (p. 102n58) or
devamanussāyan (p. 204n15),
ito tiṇṇaṃ has become *itiṇṇaṃ* (p. 102n61),
vihariṣṣāma has become *vihariṣṣām* (p. 110n88),
sakkato has become *sakcto* (p. 110n88),
imasmim has become *iamsmim* (p. 117n101),
bhikkhu has become *bhukkhu* (p. 117n101),
Cūlamaluṅkyaputta- has become *Cūlamaluṅkhyaputta-* (p. 127n26 and
p. 174n61),
tividhā has become *tividhāa* (p. 161n27),
aññāna has become *anaññā* (p. 179),
sammāsambuddhassa has become *samāsambudhassa* (p. 188),

aparissuddhakāyakkammantā has become *aparissuddhakānyakkammantā* (p. 202n10),
sukkhāya has become *sukhyāya* (p. 204n15),
vivekajaṃ has become *vivekaajaṃ* (p. 217n51),
sukham has become *saukham* (p. 217n52),
iddhipādaṃ has become *iddipādaṃ* (p. 229n4),
sammāpaddhāna has become *sammāpaddhāna* (p. 232).

Needless to say, we all make errors. But the frequency of at times gross mistakes in the 'editing' of what is after all a limited amount of Pāli text given mostly in annotations and copied from a digital edition conveys an impression of a degree of carelessness and lack of philological rigor that is shocking for a scholarly publication.

Conclusion

Based on the above exploration, it seems fair to conclude that the play of formulas does not offer a reliable approach for a better understanding of the early Buddhist texts. Whatever prima facie appeal it may have had, on closer inspection the proposed model turns out to be based on a careless reading of the primary sources and relevant scholarship, being to all appearances driven by the agenda of wanting to bypass the philological training needed to do research on early Buddhism.

At least as far as early Buddhist thought is concerned, it is decidedly not the case, as assumed by Shulman (2021b, ix), that “[i]f we are to understand religious scripture, we must shake away the remnants of an intellectual heritage that distinguishes ... between true and false.” Although such phrasing may resonate with postmodern sensitivities, it misses the mark when it comes to scholarly research of early (and later) Buddhism.

Nevertheless, it needs to be acknowledged that Eviatar Shulman is correct in emphasizing the importance of the literary dimensions of the texts. However, this should not lead to ignoring other dimensions and, more importantly, the most promising tool for studying such literary dimensions is comparative study of parallels extant from different transmission lineages.

Abbreviations

AN	<i>Āṅguttara-nikāya</i>
DN	<i>Dīgha-nikāya</i>
Jā	<i>Jātaka-aṭṭhakathā</i>
MĀ	<i>Madhyama-āgama</i>
MN	<i>Majjhima-nikāya</i>
PTS	Pali Text Society
SĀ	<i>Samyukta-āgama</i> (T 99)
SĀ ²	<i>Samyukta-āgama</i> (T 100)
SN	<i>Samyutta-nikāya</i>
Sn	<i>Sutta-nipāta</i>
T	Taishō
Vin	<i>Vinaya</i>
VRI	Vipassanā Research Institute

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Notes

- 1 The present article does not provide a comprehensive survey of all of the positions taken in Shulman 2021a and 2021b that call for a critical reply, some of which will be taken up on a subsequent occasion.
- 2 MĀ 161 at T I 690a4: 梵志梵摩及諸比丘, 聞佛所說, 歡喜奉行.
- 3 MN 91 at MN II 146,8, MĀ 161 at T I 689c23, and T 76 at T I 886a16.
- 4 SN 7.11 at SN I 173,22 and Sn 1.4 at Sn 16,3 (the last reference is to the page, as the formula under discussion occurs in a prose portion of the discourse).
- 5 Pace the assertion by Shulman 2021a: 2 that “formulas, and not full-discourses, are the true texts of early (or earlier) Buddhism.”
- 6 The impact of this type of reasoning can also be seen in the suggestion by Shulman 2021a: 3 that the texts to which we have access nowadays “are not ‘collections’ in a simple and straightforward manner, as if editors neatly placed ready-made texts in the right category—‘Long,’ ‘Middle-length,’ ‘Connected,’ or ‘Numerical.’ Rather, they—the ‘editors,’ which were themselves in important senses ‘authors’ and ‘reciters’ (*bhānaka*) responsible from [sic] ‘transmission’—were creating texts as they went along to fit their visions of the collections” (emphasis added).
- 7 See Pande 1957: 122f and Anālayo 2011b: 201f.
- 8 SN 12.45 at SN II 74,15 reports the Buddha’s recitation of the *dharmmapariyāya*, which occurs earlier in the collection as a discourse in its own right in the form of SN 12.43 at SN II 72,4, with the only difference being that it is framed by a statement on the arising and cessation of *dukkha*; the same holds for a recurrence of SN 12.45 in the form of SN 35.113 at SN IV 90,13, in which case the actual discourse is the preceding SN 35.106 at SN IV 86,18.
- 9 DN 16 at DN I 93,14, repeated in SN 55.8 to 55.10 at SN V 357 to 360.
- 10 MN 18 at MN I 114,15, preceded by two references by Ānanda to the same term at MN I 114,12+14.
- 11 Examples are DN 1 at DN I 46,22, DN 29 at DN III 141,22, and MN 115 at MN 67,28; see also MN 12 at MN I 83,24, where the title mentioned in the Pāli discourse serves for naming the Chinese and Sanskrit fragment parallels and the discourse in some Pāli editions (see Anālayo 2011b: 106), and MN 117 at MN III 77,25, which reports the Buddha qualifying the *dharmmapariyāya* just given with the title that is then employed by the reciters for the whole discourse.
- 12 In MN 5 at MN I 32,24 the *dharmmapariyāya* is a teaching given by Sāriputta, which in this form does not recur elsewhere. In MN 65 at MN I 445,27 the *dharmmapariyāya* is a simile, only the beginning part of which recurs in MN 107 at MN III 2,3. In MN 114 at MN III 45,13 the *dharmmapariyāya* is qualified to be on the topic of *sevitabbāsevitabbaṃ*, which in this exact form appears to be specific to the present instance (parts of the actual exposition recur in AN 9.6 at AN IV 365,24 and AN 10.54 at AN V 100,10). Moreover, in the case of MN 114 the reciters take the phrase *sevitabbāsevitabbaṃ dharmmapariyāyaṃ* to refer to the whole discourse, evident in their choice of the discourse’s title. This is thus contrary to the suggestion by Shulman 2021b: 193n121 that here “the *dharmmapariyāya* clearly relates to the short formulaic utterance that the Buddha provides early in the discourse.”
- 13 The ruling is found in Vin IV 14,30.
- 14 T 1428 at T XXII 638c21: 與諸長者共在講堂誦佛經語。
- 15 T 1421 at T XXII 39c11: 學誦經偈。
- 16 T 1425 at T XXII 336c5: 教眾多童子句句說波羅耶那; see also Lévi 1915: 422.
- 17 See Norman, Kieffer-Pülz, and Pruitt 2018: 285.
- 18 The parallels give a long list of the texts he was believed to have recited, which clearly are not just formulas; see SĀ 1321 at T II 362c10: 誦憂陀那, 波羅延那, 見真諦, 諸上座所說偈, 比丘尼所說偈, 尸路偈, 義品, 牟尼偈, 修多羅, 悉皆廣誦 and SĀ² 320 at T II 480c22: 誦法句偈, 及波羅延大德之偈, 又復高聲誦習其義, 及修多羅等。
- 19 See Anālayo 2009b.
- 20 On the *āṅgas* as probably being a list of textual types see Anālayo 2016a.

- 21 DN 16 at DN II 124,2: *idha, bhikkhave, bhikkhu evaṃ vadeyya: sammukhā me taṃ, āvuso, bhagavato suttaṃ sammukhā paṭiggahūtaṃ, ayaṃ dhammo ayaṃ vinayo idaṃ sattuṣāsanaṃ ti*; see also AN 4.180 at AN II 168,5.
- 22 Lamotte 1947: 220: "Le Buddha constate d'abord un usage établi chez les religieux: lorsqu'un bhikṣu voulait faire admettre un texte quelconque par la communauté des moines, il re réclamait d'une des quatre 'Grandes autorités.'"
- 23 Lamotte 1947: 222: "Ainsi donc, pour que le texte proposé sur l'une des quatre Grandes autorités soit garanti, il n'est pas nécessaire que la lettre en soit reproduite dans les Écritures, il suffit que sa teneur générale soit en harmonie avec l'esprit des Sūtra, du Vinaya et de la doctrine bouddhique en général."
- 24 An exception appears to be Cousins 1983: 2–3; for a refutation of which see Wynne 2004: 99–104.
- 25 Shulman 2021b: 198n135 adds "see also Shaw (2015: 433–437)." The referenced article does not even mention the *mahāpadesas*, so that it would at most only support the idea of creativity in general.
- 26 Even though Shulman 2021b: 153 is clearly aware that my research in Anālayo 2011b is about the changing nature of the texts and how to explain this, he nevertheless characterizes my approach to imply that the first disciples "carried with them ... texts that basically correspond to the discourses we find today" and that for me "the texts prove to be, at their heart, original instructions of the Buddha" (p. 152). My position is rather that the texts we presently have access to cannot take us back to whatever teachings the first disciples may have known or transmitted and that it is impossible to gain access to the original instructions of the Buddha.
- 27 Shulman 2021b:140n62 argues that "one of the marks of an oral tradition of storytelling is that it tends to defy coherence, working in divergent vectors of interpretation; see Valk (2017)." The reference is to a study of myths told by different brahmins regarding a goddess to which a temple established in the 18th century is dedicated. Note that even though the different versions of this myth show considerable divergence, the individual versions are not internally incoherent. That is, this case does not imply that coherence (in the way this operates in this particular religious setting) is not a requirement for narratives to function. In fact, Shulman 2021b: 167n44 adopts my reasoning in Anālayo 2011b: 201 (without acknowledgement) regarding the strangeness of the presentation in MN 30, showing that he also relies on coherence as a criterion of evaluation.
- 28 In my comparative study (Anālayo 2011b: 203f) I just note: "Although one may well imagine that the park keeper did not recognize the Buddha on meeting him for the first time, it seems more difficult to imagine the same happening again." This is simply an observation regarding narrative coherence and does not carry the exaggerated implications that Shulman 2021a: 17 reads into it: "Anālayo ... becomes troubled and wonders how it could be that the park-keeper failed to recognize the Buddha on their second meeting. For Anālayo, this is troubling since the harmony-formula is not a literary device used to frame good stories about monks and meditation, but a mnemonic method employed to preserve history. For the philology most commonly practiced in Buddhist studies, formulas are only a technology used to preserve the teachings in an age before writing; according to this approach, there is no need to pay attention to aesthetics or to issues of the heart, which for some reason are thought to remain outside the scope of what moved authors and audiences." There is no being troubled on my side by this narrative repetition, nor an intention to present the episode as historical, nor a disregarding of aesthetic aspects of the texts and their impact on the audience, which I have studied in several of my publications. Most importantly, the functions of the texts have never been reduced to only a mnemonic purpose except by Eviatar Shulman as part of his agenda to promote his theory of the play of formulas.
- 29 A repetition of the same misunderstanding can be found in Shulman 2021a: 18: "Anālayo tries to force the text to express events that happened *before* the conflict at Kosambī, thereby completely obliterating the logic of this discourse."
- 30 MN 31 at MN I 209,23: *paññāya ca no disvā āsavā parikkhūṇā honti*.

- 31 An example is MN 70 at MN I 478,6: *paññāya c'assa disvā ekacce āsavā parikkhūā honti.*
 32 MN 31 at MN I 210,17.
 33 SĀ² 196 at T II 445a18.
 34 See Anālayo 2017, 13.
 35 Hecker 1972: 54 states: “hier beginnt, wie aus J[ā] 94 hervorgeht, ein Bericht aus einem früheren Leben des Buddha, und zwar im 91. Aon.”
 36 Compare the text beginning at MN I 68,8 with its counterpart at Jā I 389,20.
 37 MN 12 at MN I 79,29 and Jā 94 at Jā I 390,31.
 38 MN 12 at MN I 81,36.
 39 A repetition of the same assessment in Shulman 2021a: 21 takes the following form: “I suggest that the simile was added to the narrative for the quite prosaic purpose of making it fit the ‘chapter on similes.’”
 40 See in particular the survey in Anālayo 2011b: 873–876.
 41 See also below note 42.
 42 The selected works acknowledged in Shulman 2021b: 42n7 do not include any of my publications relevant to literary dimensions of the early discourses, even though his bibliography shows awareness of at least one relevant article, Anālayo 2012a.
 43 For a reply to this criticism see also Anālayo 2021.
 44 A similar formulation occurs in Shulman 2021a: 1, according to which the proposed model of the play of formulas “combats the commonly accepted views that texts are mainly an attempt to record and preserve the Buddha’s teachings and life events, and that the best way to understand their history is to compare parallel versions of them.”
 45 An additional argument presented in Shulman 2021a: 5 is that “there is also reason to assume that Pāli versions tend to be (but need not necessarily be) earlier.” I already presented a substantial body of evidence in Anālayo 2016d to show that Pāli discourses were as much affected by later change as the discourses of other reciter traditions. There is simply no sound reason for taking Pāli versions to be earlier, as they result from the same complex processes of oral transmission as their parallels.
 46 See also the comment in Shulman 2021b: 188n101 that “Uttara calls the Buddha ‘recluse’ (*samaṇo*).”
 47 The reference to “Rhys Davids (1899: 199)” leads to a page of his translation of DN 6. Since Shulman 2021b elsewhere refers to discourse content by way of the Pāli title and not by way of any English translation, the reference given by him here must be intending an annotation to the translation. In fact, in this part of DN 6 Sunakkhatta is just referred to by name for the first time, without any qualification of his monastic status. In a footnote appended to this reference, Rhys Davids 1899: 199n1 provides the following information, as a way of introducing him: “This young man became the Buddha’s personal attendant; but afterwards, when the Buddha was in extreme old age (M. I, 82), he went over to the creed of Kora the Kshatriya, and left the Buddhist Order. Kora’s doctrine was the efficacy of asceticism, of rigid self-mortification. And it was to show how wrong this doctrine, as put forth by Sunakkhatta, was, that the Buddha told the story (Gāt. I, 398) of the uselessness of the efforts he himself had made when: ‘Now scorched, now frozen, lone in fearsome woods, Naked, without a fire, a fire within, He, as a hermit, sought the crown of faith.’ But we do not hear that Sunakkhatta ever came back to the fold.” Nothing in this note (or on this page) “supports” the view that Sunakkhatta was a novice.
 48 The PTS edition of DN 24 at DN III 35,2 speaks of *subhaṃ vimokkhaṃ*, the VRI edition has *subhaṃ vimokkhaṃ*.
 49 Examples would be *abhijanāmi* (p. 139n60) or *pajanāmi* (p. 144n77).