Buddhism and Literature in South Asia
Week 2:
Indian Buddhist *Sūtra* Literature

Illustrated palm leaf manuscript from the *Mahāprajñāpāramitā Sūtra* (Brooklyn Museum)

Overview of Syllabus

Week 1: Introduction to Buddhist Literature, Jātaka Tales

Week 2: Indian Buddhist Sūtra Literature

Week 3: Life story of the Buddha in Indian poetry

Week 4: Indian Buddhist Poetry and Drama

Week 5: Tibetan Buddhist Inspirational poetry

Week 6: Buddhist Biography and Hagiography in Tibet

Week 7: Modern Buddhist Biographies: the 14th Dalai Lama's Autobiography

Week 8: Buddhist-inspired fiction in the 20th century

Recap from Week 1:

Introduction to Buddhist Literature, Jātaka Tales

Jataka-s are stories that have captured Buddhist's imagination throughout the world

The mythological white hare making the elixir of immortality on the Moon, from Chinese mythology. Embroidered onto 18th-century Imperial Chinese robes.
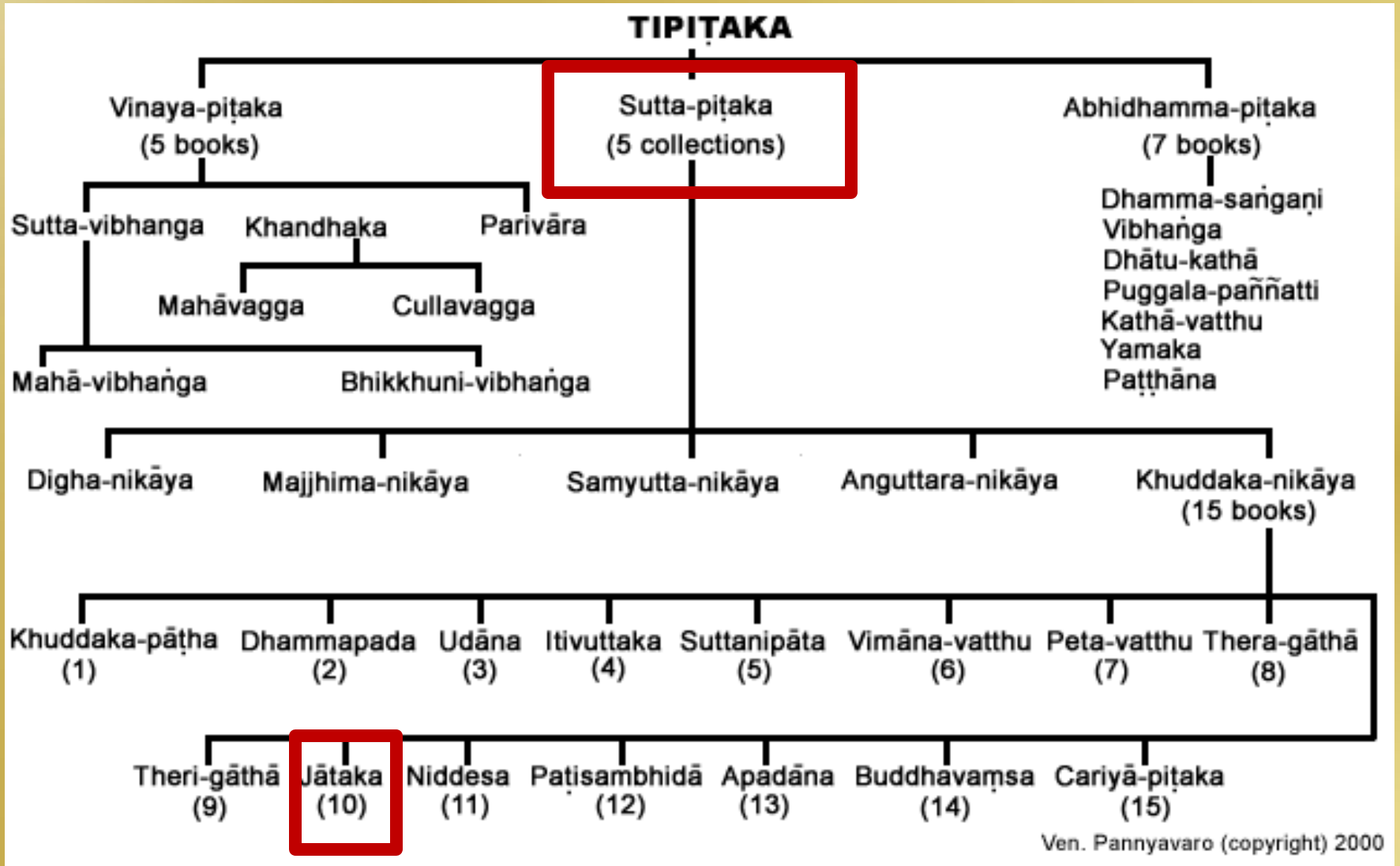

Thai - Vessantara Jataka, Chapter 9
between circa 1920 and circa 1940 (Bangkok)

Examining *sūtra*-s and *sutta*-s : Stories of the Buddha and his teachings

The Pali 'Canon'

TIPIṬAKA

- **Vinaya-piṭaka** (5 books)
- **Sutta-piṭaka** (5 collections)
- **Abhidhamma-piṭaka** (7 books)

Vinaya-piṭaka
- Sutta-vibhanga
- Khandhaka
  - Mahāvagga
  - Cullavagga
- Parivāra
- Mahā-vibhanga
- Bhikkhuni-vibhanga

Abhidhamma-piṭaka
- Dhamma-sangaṇi
- Vibhanga
- Dhātu-kathā
- Puggala-paññatti
- Kathā-vatthu
- Yamaka
- Paṭṭhāna

Sutta-piṭaka
- Digha-nikāya
- Majjhima-nikāya
- Samyutta-nikāya
- Anguttara-nikāya
- Khuddaka-nikāya (15 books)

Khuddaka-nikāya
- Khuddaka-pāṭha (1)
- Dhammapada (2)
- Udāna (3)
- Itivuttaka (4)
- Suttanipāta (5)
- Vimāna-vatthu (6)
- Peta-vatthu (7)
- Thera-gāthā (8)
- Theri-gāthā (9)
- Jātaka (10)
- Niddesa (11)
- Patisambhidā (12)
- Apadāna (13)
- Buddhavamsa (14)
- Cariyā-piṭaka (15)

Ven. Pannyavaro (copyright) 2000

638 x 398 | 17.3KB
www.buddhist-elibrary.org

Sutta or *sūtra*?

Linguistic peculiarities:

- *sūtra* is Sanskrit and *sutta* Pali

- *Sutta*-s preserved in the Pali canon; (Mahayana) *sūtra*-s preserved mostly in Tibetan or Chinese translation within their canons

- *Sūtra* is related to the Sanskrit word for "to sew" (where we get the English word 'suture')

Sūtra as a genre in India

- Indian *sūtra*-s tend to be short pithy texts on technical ideas.

- Buddhist *sūtra-s* tend to be more elaborate narrative pieces that envelope Buddhist doctrinal and philosophical ideas.

Why the difference between Buddhist and non-Buddhist sutra-s?

Why the difference between Buddhist and non-Buddhist sutra-s?

→ **Likely an early linguistic mistake!**

Sūtra as the Sanskrit term for Buddhist texts mostlikely came from a misrendering of *sutta* (Pali) into Sanskrit. Sutta can be rendered in Sanskrit either as *sūtra* (suture) or *sūkta* ("well-spoken")

So, is there a difference between *sutta-s* and *sūtra-s*?

<u>On one level, yes!</u>

- Geography/doctrinal origin: sutta-s (but generally not *sūtra-s*) are accepted as authoritative by Theravāda Buddhists

- Mahāyāna (Northern Schools) tend to consider both *sutta*-s and *sūtra-s* as authoritative "words of the Buddha" (*buddha-vacana*)

Why would this matter?

Sutta and *Sūtra* as literature

Narrative framing:
•Opening phrase:"Thus have I heard at one time"
(Pali: *Eva me suta eka samaya*
 Sanskrit: *Eva mayā śrutam ekasmin samaye)*

•Setting: Specific geographical locations 'permitted'
(Śrāvastī, Rājagṛha, etc.)

Status of text within Buddhism:
Buddha-vacana ("words of the Buddha")

What is *buddha-vacana*?

<u>Determined by (minimum) two sets of criteria:</u>

(1) The text is known to come from an authoritative
<u>source</u> : (known as the four *mahāpadeśa*), listed in the
Dīghanikāya (II.23) and in Prajñākaramati's
commentary on the *Bodhicāryavatāra* as:

a.   The Buddha
b.   the *saṅgha* (community of elders),
c.   a smaller group of learned elders,
d.   4) a single learned monk.

(2) The <u>content</u> must be potentially authoritative: it
must fit into the *sūtras* (*sutte oranti*) and it must be
in agreement with the *Vinaya* (*vinaye sandissanti*).

Mahāyāna *buddha-vacana*?

- The Sanskrit versions, both Hīnayāna and Mahāyāna add a **third criterion**, which is that it must not contradict the *dharmatā*, that is the way things are (*dharmatām na vilomayati*).

- Granting authority to the Mahāyāna *sūtras* was a historical process.

- The Mahāyāna *sūtras* first had to be argued to be a part of the *suttapiṭaka*, and once admitted as a possibility, the proponents of these texts had to refute arguments aimed at establishing that they conflict *dharmatā (*"the way things are") , and thus cannot be considered *buddhavacana* regardless

What kinds of *sūtra/sutta* are there?

- We have *sutta-s* that do not resemble any Sanskrit *sūtra-s* and vice-versa;

- We have also examples of *sutta*-s and *sūtra-s* whose content is so remarkably similar, they can be usefully understood as "pairs".

Example of "pairs":

Mahātahāsankhaya Sutta and
Śālistambha Sūtra

Two versions of the same kind of piece: Pali and Sanskrit (Theravāda and Mahāyāna) versions of similar content

Doctrinal differences: Dependent arising (*Pratītyasamutpāda*)

Mahātaṇhāsankhaya Sutta	*Śālistamba Sūtra*
The quote that initiates the *sutta* is an **incorrect view**: "As I understand the Dhamma taught by the Blessed One, it is this same consciousness that runs and wanders through the round of rebirth, not another Understanding Dependent Origination results in removal of doubt concerning that matter! List of 8-fold chain of sources from craving to ignorance List of 12-fold chain on conditions of arising from ignorance to old age and death (**SS 3**) Reverse of 12-fold chain of conditions	The quote that initiates the dialogue of the sutra is a **correct teaching**: "Bhiksus, he who sees [1]dependent arising see the [2]Dharma, He who sees the Dharma see the [3]Buddha . [1]Arising of conditions: 12-fold chain of conditions (**MTS 17**) [1]Cessation of conditions: 12-fold chain (**MTS 20**) [2]Dharma = the 8-fold path 4-fold analysis: *hetu* (cause), *pratyaya* (condition), *draṣṭavya* (inner or internal), *bāhya* (outer or external)

"Dependent Origination"

- Pali: *paṭiccasamuppāda;* Sanskrit: *Pratītyasamutpāda*

- On a general level, it refers to one of the central concepts in the Buddhist tradition—that all things arise in dependence upon multiple causes and conditions.

- On a specific level, the term is also used to refer to a specific application of this general principle—namely the twelve links of dependent origination.

Doctrinal differences

- Generally speaking, in the Mahāyāna tradition, *pratityasamutpada* (Sanskrit) is used to refer to the general principle of interdependent causation,

- In the Theravāda tradition, *paticcasamuppāda* (Pali) is used to refer to the twelve links.

Specific conditionality or this/that conditionality

Pali: *idappaccayatā*; Skt: *idaṃpratyayatā*

When this is, that is.
From the arising of this comes the arising of that.

When this isn't, that isn't.
From the cessation of this comes the cessation of that.

Causality in the Four Noble Truths

1. There is suffering, i.e. *dukkha* (pain, anxiety, unsatisfaction, etc.)
2. **Suffering has a cause**
3. **Since suffering has a cause, there must be a cessation of suffering**
4. There is the path leading to the cessation of suffering (the Eightfold Path)

Causes and conditions?

- A 'cause' (Skt, Pali: *hetu*) is understood generally to be a ***sufficient*** cause (i.e. without it, the result could not happen)
- A 'condition' (Skt *pratyaya*, Pali *paccaya*) is a factor that may contribute to, but alone ***is not sufficient*** to produce a result.

Example: A seed, for example, is a direct cause (*hetu*) of a plant, while sunshine, water, and earth are auxiliary causes (*pratyaya*) of a plant.

12-fold Chain of Dependent Originations

*Ignorance - (*Avijjā*)*

Fabrications (volitional Formations/volitional activities)-
*(*Saṅkhāra*)*

*Consciousness (rebirth consciousness) - (*Viññāṇa*)*

*Name-and-Form (mentality and corporeality) - (*Nāmarūpa*)*

*Six-fold sense bases - (*Saḷāyatana*)*

*Contact - (*Phassa*)*

*Feeling (Sensation) - (*Vedanā*)*

*Craving - (*Taṇhā*)*

*Clinging (attachment) - (*Upādāna*)*

*Becoming (Karmic force (*Bhava* (KammaBhava))*

*Birth - (*Jāti*)*

Dependent Origination and 'No- Self'

The concept of *no-self* or *anatman* or *emptiness of self* is that it is not possible to identify an independent, inherently existing self; that the self only exists in dependence upon causes and conditions.

How does it work?

- If you look for the self within the body, you can not find it there, since the body itself is dependent upon its parts.
- If you look for the self within the mind, you can not find it there, since the mind can only be said to exist in relation to external objects; therefore the mind is also dependent upon causes and conditions outside of itself.
- Hence, since the self can not be said to exist within the body or mind, it is said to be "empty of inherent existence".

Dependent Origination and 'Emptiness'

- In the Mahāyāna tradition, *pratītyasamutpāda* is said to complement the concept of *emptiness* (*sunyata*). It is said that because all things arise in dependence upon causes and conditions, they are *empty* of inherent existence.

- What this means is that because nothing that exists is independent of causes and conditions, nothing is **permanent**. 'Inherent existence' simply means that something could exist inherently (on it's own by it's own nature without the aid of some cause or condition

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prat%C4%ABtyasamutp%C4%81da

Heart Sūtra background

- One sutra from what is known as the collection of "Perfection of Wisdom" *Sūtra*-s (Sanskrit, *Prajñā-pāramitā*)

- Popular within Mahāyāna Buddhism, especially in Tibet, China,

- The only *Prajñā-pāramitā Sūtra* in which the figure Avalokiteśvara (Bodhisattva of Compassion) is prominent—replaces the Elder Subhuti as the one delivering main exposition!

Heart Sūtra structure and content

- **Narrative framing**: "Thus have I heard"; Rajagrha
- **Setting**: The Buddha is in deep *samādhi* (meditation); the disciple Śāriputra asks the Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara how one should practice the "Great Perfection of Wisdom"
- **Exposition**:
  - The five aggregates are empty of inherent existence;
  - Emptiness is form; form is emptiness; Emptiness is not other than form, form is not other than emptiness;
  - Likewise feeling, discrimination, etc. are empty of inherent existence
  - One should also use the mantra of the perfection of wisdom to help train [the mind]!
- **End framing**: The Buddha arises from his deep meditative state and commends Avalokiteśvara for his assessment

Five Aggregates in Buddhist thought

- *skandha*-s (Sanskrit), or *khandha*-s (Pāḷi)
- **The five functions or aspects that constitute the sentient being.**
- In Theravada tradition, suffering arises when one clings to an 'aggregate'. In Mahayana traditions, one is encouraged to investigate the nature of all aggregates as empty
- For both traditions, it is asserted that what people mistakenly call the "self" or "soul" is often one or more of those factors, when according to Buddhist thought is is the collective workings of all 5 which constitute the changing entity that is the 'self'.

List of the Five Aggregates

1. **"form" or "matter"**[e] (Skt., Pāli *rūpa*; Tib. *gzugs*): external and internal matter. Externally, *rupa* is the physical world. Internally, *rupa* includes the material body and the physical sense organs.

2. **"sensation" or "feeling"** (Skt., Pāli *vedanā*; Tib. *tshor-ba*): sensing an object as either pleasant, unpleasant or neutral.

3. **"perception", "conception", "apperception", "cognition", or "discrimination"** (Skt. *samjñā*, Pāli *saññā*, Tib. *'du-shes*): registers whether an object is recognized or not (for instance, the sound of a bell or the shape of a tree).

4. **"mental formations", "impulses", "volition", or "compositional factors"** (Skt. *samskāra*, Pāli *saṅkhāra*, Tib. *'du-byed*): all types of mental habits, thoughts, ideas, opinions, prejudices, compulsions, and decisions triggered by an object.

5. **"consciousness" or "discernment"** (Skt. *vijñāna*, Pāli *viññāṇa*, Tib. *rnam-par-shes-pa*):
    –   *In the Nikayas/Āgamas:* cognizance, that which discerns
    –   *In the Abhidhamma:* a series of rapidly changing interconnected discrete acts of cognizance.
    –   *In some Mahayana sources:* the base that supports all experience.
    (See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Skandha)

Emptiness in the Heart Sutra?

– Emptiness is **form** (first aggregate); **form** is emptiness; Emptiness is not other than **form**, **form** is not other than emptiness;

– Likewise feeling, discrimination, etc. (the remaining aggregates) are empty of inherent existence

The figure of Vimalakīrti

Vimalakirti, 8th century wall painting, Dunhuang

- **Vimalakīrti**: *vimala* "stainless, undefiled" + *kīrti* "fame, glory, reputation")

- Considered to be the ideal Mahayana Buddhist *upāsaka* ("lay practitioner") and a contemporary of the Buddha(6th to 5th century BCE

- Unlike many other figures of the Mahayana literature, such as Avalokiteśvara, he is generally taken to be a historic, rather than mythic, figure and is not commonly venerated on altars nor in tantric rituals.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vimalakirti

The Holy Teaching of Vimalakīrti Ch. 2

- **Narrative framing** : "Thus have I heard"; Vaishali
- **Setting**:
  - Descriptions of Vimalakīrti, a lay Buddhist practioner, was considered to be eloquent, virtuous, wise, liberated through transcendence of wisdom (*Prajñā-pāramitā*).
  - Vimalakīrti manifested himself *as if* sick to motivate people to come visit. Then he taught the Dharma to them!
- **Teaching**:
  - This body is impermanent, fragile, etc. It is a vessel of sicknesses. Like natural elements, it is constantly changing, unreal, inert, inanimate. Therefore one should be repulsed by this body!
  - The Tathagata body (the Buddha's 'body') by contrast is born out of great wisdom, the unification of merit and insight; morality, meditation, wisdom, love, compassion, joy, impartiality (the divine abidings), etc.

The Holy Teaching of Vimalakīrti Ch. 3

- **Setting**:
  - Vimalakīrti lying in bed 'sick', wonders to himself why the Buddha himself does not send someone to check on him?
  - At the same time, the Buddha asks his disciple in turn to check on him.
  - One by one, each (of the 500!) refuse, citing reluctance due to Vimalakīrti's wisdom and accomplishments as demonstrated through teachings he had given them previously on different occasions.

The Holy Teaching of Vimalakīrti Ch. 4,5

- **Ch. 4 Setting**:
  - The Buddha now asks the Bodhisattvas (already fully enlightened ones) present to visit Vimalakīrti
  - Likewise, one by one, each refuse, citing reluctance due to Vimalakīrti's wisdom and accomplishments as demonstrated through teachings he had given them previously on different occasions.
- *Ch. 5 Setting*
  - The Buddha now asks the Manjushri (the 'crown prince') to visit Vimalakīrti, who agrees. All follow to hear Vimalakīrti give a teaching
  - Vimalakīrti gives teaching
  - All in attendance attain perfect, complete enlightenment

Vimalakīrti's Teaching in Ch. 5

- **Sickness as an allegory; Empty house as an allegory**
    - Sickness comes from ignorance and the thirst for existence
    - Since sentient beings are sick (due to suffering) the sickness of bodhisattvas comes from their compassion for sentient beings!
    - Vimalakīrti's empty house symbolizing the 'emptiness' of everything
    - Sickness is a mental state or condition independent of the body;
    - One should encourage empathy for all living beings an account of one's own individual sickness.
    - A sick bodhisattva should be encouraged to continue stirving to perfect oneself to become the "king of healers" to cure pothers of their sicknesses
    - A sick bodhisattva should analyze, assess, and be aware of their own 'sickness'

What roles to sutta-s and sutra-s as texts play in Buddhism around the world?

Sutta-s and *sūtra-s* in Buddhist practice

- They are read or referred to for doctrinal or monastic-related content (by monks and nuns)
- Recited (by both monastic and laity) as liturgy, especially for special occasions
- The physical texts themselves held to be sacred!

A Rizong monk seated at a special sutra stool reading Mahayana sutras outside the main prayer hall.

Examples of Recitations of Sutta-s and *sūtra*

- *Karaniya metta sutta* (Discourse on Loving Kindness) chanted in Pali in the Thai style of chanting by Theravada pracitioners

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=igHQVc1FP0o

- The *Heart Sūtra* (chanted in Tibetan) by Mahāyāna monks in Tibetan style

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dL7OYF0MiTo

Sutta-s and *sūtra-s are* used as relics in *stupa*-s such as the Damekh Stupa….

[Dhamekh Stupa, Sarnath, (India) originally built by Ashoka in 249 BC](#)

…And the Bodhanath Stupa in Nepal, as well as in smaller *stupa*-s throughout South Asia

Boudhanath Stupa, Kathmandu, Nepal

Small *stupa*-s at Shanti Stupa Ladakh, India

Next Week in Buddhism and Literature in South Asia:

Life story of the Buddha in Indian poetry

(Through Aśvaghoṣa's *Life of the Buddha)*