

*Full Paper*

## **The Value of Pāli Commentaries as Source Material for the Study of Buddhism**

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There are many sources we must necessarily associate and be thorough with when we engage ourselves in studying Buddhism. The chief source is the '*Tipiaka*' which comes in two forms-namely '*Buddha Bhāshita*' or the Buddha's direct preaching and '*Shrāvaka Bhāshita*' the preaching of his disciples. The commentaries which are known as '*Aṭṭvā*' and '*Ṭikā*' written on the above, which clearly explain some areas in detail are also highly respected as very special sources of information by the learned community of both bhikkhūs and laymen. Why is it so? Because they are considered almost equal to the facts stated in Tipiṭaka canons. For example, the statement. '*Vinayo nāma sāsanaṣṣāyū.*'

At the event of the First Council, the question arisen which of the two, the '*Vinaya*' or the '*Dhamma*' should be expounded first. They had decided that '*Vinaya*' should be expounded first; on the basis that the life spans of the Buddha *sāsana* depends on discipline. Although this information comes through commentaries, this statement has become

famous as equivalent to a declaration of the Buddha. Books such as '*Rasavāhini*' written during the ancient period of Sri Lanka and the '*Vaṃsakathās*' such as *Mahavaṃsa*, *Buddhavaṃsa*, *Dīpavaṃsa* and *Jinavaṃsa* too can be named as additional sources for studying Buddhism.

Commentaries (*Aṭṭvā*) can be mentioned as the main source of qualitative set of books which can be used to get the clarifications of the meanings, the deep ideas and expressions and concepts of *Tipiaka* (*Dhamma*, *Vinaya* and *Abhidhamma*) as well as sources for gathering information regarding the history of Buddhism. The term '*Aṭṭvā*' is referred to as '*Arthakathā*' in Sanskrit, '*Aṭṭhakathā*' in Pāli and changed as '*Aṭṭvā*' in Sinhala. It comes as, "*Attho kathiyati etāyāti atthakathā, sāyeca aṭṭhakathā thakārassa ṭhakāraṃ katvā.*" In '*Sāratthadīpani*' it is stated that they are named as *aṭṭhakathā* as giving the meaning 'this gives the meaning'. It is said that the term '*atthakathā*' is also used with the same meaning and explains how the letter 'tha' has been used as 'ṭha'. These commentaries, as mentioned above can be basically divided in to four groups as,

- Commentaries of the Buddha period
- Commentaries brought to Sri Lanka
- Sri Lankan commentaries (*Heḷaṭṭvā*).
- Sri Lankan commentaries translated in to Pali.

This description comes on the basis of the meaning of the word '*Aṭṭvā*' taken as 'It expresses the meaning' Based on this meaning, the Teachings of the Buddha, namely *Sutta*, *Vinaya* and *Abhidhamma* come as commentaries to various sub divisions of Suttas (*Suttanta*). But, in the minds of the reader the word '*Aṭṭvā*' commonly gives the idea that they

are the books and commentaries written by bhikkhūs such as Ven. Buddhadatta, Buddhaghosa, Dhammapāla, Upasena and Mahānāma giving detailed meanings and explanations about the Dhamma, the doctrine proclaimed by the Buddha. The commentaries brought to Sri Lanka by Arahant Mahinda during the 5<sup>th</sup> century are described here. The commentaries written based on these are named as ‘*Lakdiva Aṭṭvā*’ or ‘*Heḷaṭṭvā*’. Ven. Prof. Vegama Piyaratana in his book ‘The Tradition of Grammar reflected in Pali commentaries’, mentions about 3 such principal commentaries and many other additional commentaries namely,

1. *Mahāthakathāva (Sīhaḷaṭṭhathā)*
2. *Mahapaccari Aṭṭhathā (Māha pasuru aṭṭvā)*
3. *Kurundi Aṭṭhathā*

According to G. D. Wijayawardana, the commentaries written in the Sinhala language which existed at that time, with the influence of the commentaries brought from India were referred to as ‘*Heḷaṭṭvā*’. Wijayawardana further states that the Pāli commentaries written by Ven. Buddhagosa several centuries ago, too were based on these ‘*Heḷaṭṭvā*’. The commentaries translated into Pāli with the influence of ‘*Heḷaṭṭvā*’ had later spread widely. The commentaries made by Ven. Buddhadatta, Ven. Buddhagosa, Ven. Dhammapāla, Ven. Upasena and Ven. Mahānāma are considered as translations of these Pāli commentaries. They are,

**Ven. Buddhagosa, :** *Visuddhimagga, Samanthapāsādika, Kankhavitāraṇi, Sumangalavilāsini, Papancaśudani, Sarathappakāsini,*

*Manorathapākāraṇi,*  
*Paramatthajōtika,*  
*Dhammapadatthakathā,*  
*Paramatthajōtikā (Suttanipāta),*  
*Jātakatthakathā, Atthaasālini,*  
*Sammohavinodani,*  
*pañcappakaranatthakathā*

**Ven. Buddhadatta:** *Madhuratthavilāsini*

**Ven. Dhammapala:** *Paramatthadīpani for Udāna,*  
*Itivuttka, Vimānavatthu, Petavatthu,*  
*Theragāthā, Therīgāthā ,*  
*Cariyāpiṭaka*

**Ven. Upasena:** *Saddhammapajjōtikā (Niddesa)*

**Ven. Mahanama :** *Saddhammapākāṣiṇi*  
*(Paṭisambhidāmagga)<sup>2</sup>*

When we pay attention to the importance of commentaries, the fact that becomes most obvious is that they have presented the deep and complicated areas in the *Tipiṭaka*, which are difficult for the ordinary people to understand, simply and in detail. Ven. Baddegama Vimalavansa in his book 'Buddhist Literature' has explained that commentaries consist of 5 characteristics as follows.

1. Stating the meanings of letters.
2. Stating the meanings of words.
3. *Nidāna* – bases (reasons that led to the suttas)
4. The story
5. Analysis (Presenting the context)

When we examine the importance of these (*aṭṭva*) commentaries, it can be observed that they stand out on their own as a separate entity of literature. Ven. Labuhengoda Chandaratana in his '*Pāli Aṭṭakathā Sāhitya*' states that the Pāli commentaries are more important than the Sanskrit Bhāshya literature in India. The stories that appear in Bhāshya literature do not reveal their context as to when, where or how it occurred. But in the commentaries, such information is clearly presented according to the above article by Ven. Chandaratana. For and example, "*Kathāvattu aṭṭhakathā* presents 216 principles as well as the period they belong to, along with details regarding Buddhist traditions."<sup>3</sup>

The Buddha has made many sermons very precisely. There were special theras like Sāriputta, Mahā Koṭṭhita and Mahā Kaccāna to present them again in detail if need arose. On some occasions, the Buddha Himself had given descriptions. Even in the Tipiṭaka Texts there are many features of commentaries. Summarizing and presenting has been done in *Sangīti* and *Dasuttara sutta*. '*Mahā Niddesa*' and '*Culla Niddesa*' are considered as the older commentaries. The verses that come in *Aṭṭaka vagga* of the *Sutta Nipāta* have been described in '*Mahā Niddesa*' while verses of the '*Parāyana Vagga*' of the *Sutta Nipāta* have been described in '*Culla Niddesa*'. Both books, '*Pārajika Pāli*' and '*Pacittiya Pāli*' can be considered as commentaries of '*Prātimokkha Sutta*'. Ven. Bellana Nanavimala in his article '*Methods of analyzing observed in Pāli aṭṭakathā*' mentions that these 2 books are included in Tipiṭaka as commentaries. Furthermore, Description and criticism too are considered as two main features of commentaries. There are books written analyzing the Abhidhamma. They are considered as post *Tipiṭaka* canons. The introductory verse

of *Nettipakaraṇa aṭṭhakathā* mentions that *Nettipakaraṇa* is a clarification of the meaning of the *Nava'oga Satthu Sāsana'*. *Petakopadesa* too is helpful in clarifying the meanings in *Tipiṭaka* canons. The two books '*Visuddhimagga*' and '*Vimuttimagga*' are named as commentaries. But, '*Vimuttimagga*' has followed methods of Abhidhamma. "Ven. Labuhengoda Chandratana in his article discusses about 3 periods of commentaries as, commentaries of Suttas found in the texts, books like *Mahā Niddesa* and *Culla Niddesa* found within the *Tipiṭaka* and commentaries named *Pāli Muttaka*."<sup>4</sup>

The social, political and historical background existed during the Buddha period upto the 1<sup>st</sup> century is presented in detail in the commentaries. There are instances where the ideas and attitudes of the commentators were added to the information given in the '*Tipiṭaka*'. For example, in some commentaries to *Nikāyas* such as "*Dīgha Nikāya*, at the attempt of describing the Buddha as an extra ordinary (Personality) human being, the Buddha has been described as a super natural character."<sup>5</sup>

Paying attention to the importance of commentaries, as sources of learning Buddhism, we come across a lot of historical information. Among them, '*Manorathapākāraṇi*' mentions about a narration of *Doṇagajjita* consisting of 12000 phrases, by the Brahmin Dona who performed a major task at the event of distributing the relics of the Buddha. '*Manorathapākāraṇi*' mentions about a narration of *Done Gajjita* consisting of 12000 phrases the 'Book of Merits' (*Pinpota*) of king Dutugamuṇu, about the Buddha, and also about the *Cakkavatti* kings. The commentaries mention information regarding many books and suttas which have

not been included in the ‘*Tipiṭaka Literature*’ as they have not been entered into a ‘*Dhammasangāyanā*. ”*Kulumbha Sutta, Rajovāda Sutta, Tikkhindriya Sutta, Ca Parivatta Sutta, Nandopananda Sutta, Kathā Vatthu Pañcakaya*”<sup>6</sup> are some of them. It can be seen that as commentators considered ‘*Milinda Pañha*’ as an important book. Extracts from that are included in their commentaries. But, *Nettipakaraṇa* and *Petakopadesa* have not gained that opportunity.

Furthermore, in commentaries (*Aṭṭvā*) selected words, phrases and sentences from the *Tipiṭaka* are described in detail to explain the meanings they give. For example, attempts are made to explain what the Buddha meant by the word ‘*Dhamma*’. “*Dhamma saddo pañāyaṃ pariyatti, sacca, Samādhī, paññā, pakati, sabhāva, suññatā, puññā, āpatti, geyyādisu, dissati*” as it comes in *Tipiṭaka*, as given above the word ‘*Dhamma*’ is explained thus:

- i) “*idha bhikkave dhammaṃ pariyāpuṇāti suttaṃ geyyaṃ veyyākaraṇam*” – Here, the word ‘*Dhamma*’ is stated as ‘*pariyatti*’
- ii) “*Diṭṭha dhammo patta dhammo*” – Here it is given as the Truth
- iii) “*Evaṃ dhammā te bhagavanto*” – Here it is expressed as “*Samādhī*”
- iv) “*Yassete caturo dhammā vānarinda yathā tava. Saccaṃ dhammo dhitī cāgo dithiṃ so ativattati*” states *Dhamma* as *pragñā* (wisdom)
- v) “*Jāti dhammā jarā dhammā*”, is meant to be ‘*prakurṭi*’ (Reality)
- vi) “*Kusalā dhammā akusalā dhammā*” as nature or state of existence.

- vii) “*Tasmiṃ kho pana samaya dhammā honti*” – Here dhamma is expressed as *Suññita* or non existence.
- viii) “*Dhammo Sucinno Sukhamāvahāti*” expresses dhamma as merit.
- ix) “*Dve aiyathā dhammā*” – as giving the meaning to be ‘*āpatti*’
- x) “*Sabbe dhammā Sabbākarena Buddhassa Bhagavato āpātham āgacchanthi*” meaning ‘What should be known’<sup>7</sup>

Similarly, even though the word ‘*pariāya*’ means. ‘The method’ commentaries state that it is used to express three meanings. In, “*Madhupiṇḍika pariyātoti naṃ dhārehi*” it is taken to give the meaning ‘*Desanā*’ or preachings. Ven. Bellana Ñānavimala shows that in, “*Atthi kho brāhmaṇa pariyāto yena maṃ pariyāyena sammā vadamāno vadeyya akiriya vādo samaṇo Gotamo*” it is explained as reason and in, “*kassa nu kho ānanda ajja pariyayo bhikkhuṇiyo avandituṃ*” as ‘turn’ (*vāra*). Further, as stated in *Dīgha Nikāyaṭṭhakathā* as, “*Maṇikā nāma vijjāti cintāmaṇi evam laddhanāmā loke ekā vijjā atthi. Yāya paresaṃ cittaṃ vijjānantīti dipeti.*” ‘*Maṇikā*’ is explained as to give the meaning as a field of study existed at the time, developing the ability to know other people’s minds.

The importance of commentaries as a source of information is finally reflected when we pay attention to the commentary ‘*Samantapāsādikā*’ written by Ven. Buddhaghosa. It reveals information regarding the origin and the development of *Vinaya Pitaka*, about the first and the second Councils, how the classification of *Tipiṭaka* is made and also about facts regarding the status received by the



“*Vinaya Piṭaka*” in *Theravāda* tradition. This gives facts on various topics and they are presented in summary form as well as in detailed form. Facts stated here about the First Council have been presented with the influence of ‘*Cullavagga Pāli*.’ ‘*Samantapāsādikā*’ gives a more detailed description about the 3<sup>rd</sup> Council than that of the first and the second Councils. It also gives information about the reigning period of king Devanampiyatissa, about ‘*Sri Mahā Bodhi*’ and historical information about the bringing of Buddha *sāsana* to Sri Lanka.

In ‘*Samyutta Nikāya*’ the word ‘*Phassa*’ is explained in six ways but in ‘*Mahā Niddesa*’ it is explained in greater detail; as, “*Phassoti cakkhusamphasso sotasamphasso... kāyasamphasso pañḥasamphasso sukhavedaniyo phasso dukkhavedaniyo phasso adukkhamasukha vedaniyo phasso kusalo phasso akusalo phasso...*” *Samantapāsādikā* also mentions the fact that Ven. Mahinda, had learnt *Tiṭṭaka* including the commentaries from his teacher and after coming to Sri Lanka, had got them to be written in Sri Lanka.

Further, *Vibhaga Aṭṭhakathā* states that 10 principles were followed to overcome the difficulties in translating the commentaries into Pali namely.

“*Vibhajjavādi maṇḍalaṃ otāretvā, Acariye anabbhācikkhantena, Sakasamayaṃ avokkamantena, Parasamayam anāykāhantena, Suttaṃ appatibāhantena, Vinayaṃ anulomentena, Mahāpaese olokontena, Dhammaṃ dīpentena, Atthaṃ saṅgahantena, Tameva attthaṃ punnarāvattetvā aparehipi pariyāyehi niddisantena ca*”

Moreover, the *Visuddhimagga* written by the commentator Ven. Buddhaghosa, is like a summarized presentation of the whole of *Tipiṭaka* in the form of a commentary. In the *Visuddhi-Magga*, Ven. Buddhaghosa has included all the facts related to Dhamma, basically fewer than three chapters on *Niddesa* namely, *Sīla Niddesa*, *Samādhi Niddesa* and *Paññā Niddesa*. Here, he has finally presented how a person should move ahead towards the Path of *Nibbāna*, fulfilling the principles and precepts of *Sīla* such as *dhutaṅga*. Next, he has stated facts in detail about *Samatha* Meditation describing how one should gradually proceed towards *Samāpatti abhiññā* and the other states. Later, he describes the path leading to the journey towards unworldly states, exceeding the worldly states. He has very clearly explained how to achieve the bliss of *Nibbāna* through achieving nine fold great wisdoms of *Vidarshanā*. For example in *Paññābhāvanānisansa Niddesa* as, “*Katame dasa gotrabhikā dhammā vipassanāvasena uppajjanti? Sotāpatti maggapaṭilābhatthāya uppādampavattam... upāyāsaṃ bahiddhā saṅkhāra nimittaṃ abhibhuyyati gotrabhu, sotāpatti phala samāpattatthāya, sakadāgāmi...*”<sup>8</sup> a fine description about the states has been presented. One can obtain a considerable amount information to discuss about the importance of commentaries as a source of information in the study of Buddhism, by discussing facts gained even only from ‘*Visuddhi Magga*’ which was written based specially on ‘*Tisikkhā*’ (*s+āla*, *Samādhi* and *paññā*) a major teaching of Buddhism. According to the, following, “*Kim s+ālam, kenathena s+ālam, kātassa lakkhaṇa rasa paccupaṭṭhāna padaṭṭhānāni, kimānisaṃsaṃ s+ālaṃ, katividhaṃ cetam sīlam, kocassa saṅkilesa, kim vodānanti*”<sup>9</sup>, a very board and clear description is given about *Sīla* in the form of providing answers to questions. Similarly, a complete

description is given about 'Samādhi' too, as. "*Ko Samādhi, kenatthena Samādhi, kātassa lakkhaṇa raṣa paccupaṭṭhāna padaṭṭhānāni, katividho Samādhi, kocassa saṅkilesa, kim vodānaṃ, kathaṃ bhāvetabbo, Samādhi bhāvanāya ko anisaṃso'ti*"<sup>10</sup> A description about wisdom (*paññā*) too is clearly given as follows:- "*kā paññā? Kenatthena paññā? Kathaṃ bhāvetabbā? Paññā bhāvanāya ko ānisaṃso'ti*"<sup>11</sup> Apart from this, 'Atthasālini' the commentary written for *Dhammasaṅgani*, the first book of Abhidhamma written by Ven. Buddhaghosa is also an important book as source information. Here, 'Atthasālini' has provided descriptive answers to 10 questions regarding Abhidhamma. "*Ayaṃ abhidammo nāma kena pabbāvito? Kattha paripācīto? Kattha adhigato? Kadā adhigato? Kena adhigato? Kattha vicīto? Kadū vicīto? Kena vācīto? Kattha desīto? Kassatthāya desīto? Kimatthaṃ desīto? Kehi paṭiggaḥito? Ke sikkhanti? Ke dhārenti? Kessa vacanaṃ? Kenābhato?*"<sup>12</sup> As *Atthasālini* had been written providing answers to questions such as 'By whom was Abhidhamma preached? One can think that the idea Abhidhamma was not a preaching of the Buddha must have highly arisen at the time. Therefore, it is obvious that Ven. Buddhaghosa has made a great attempt to confirm that Abhidhamma was a preaching of the Buddha. Commentaries to Abhidhamma have made it easy to clarify facts regarding 'Tipiṭaka Dhamma'. *Atthasālini* also describes about 8 chief factors which need to have been completed by a 'Bosā' expecting to obtain *Niyata Vivaraṇa*. They are:- *Manussattaṃ liṅgasampattiṃ hetu satthāra dassanaṃ, pabbajjā guṇasampattiṃ adhikāro ca chandatā. Atthadhammā samodhānā abhinīhāro saṃijjhat+ū*.<sup>13</sup> They are, Being born as a human being a male, meeting (the Buddha alive) a living Buddha, ordination, obtaining the trances of live fold abhiññā.

Further, 'Apadāna Aṭṭvā' of 'Sutta Nipāta Aṭṭvā' mentions about 18 places where a Boast does not gain birth. Thus, when we pay attention to the value as important sources of information, we come across an article translated by Prof. Endo, where facts are forwarded according to a very clear division, as,

- i) Value for philological studies and Translations
- ii) Value for Doctrinal and Philosophical studies
- iii) Value for Linguistic studies
- iv) Value for Historical, Geographical, Social and Cultural Studies.

When we consider all these factors, how important the commentaries are as source material for the study of Buddhism becomes quite clear.

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### **End Note**

- 2 Adikarama, E. W. Early History of Buddhism in Ceylon, The Buddhist Cultural Centre, Dehiwala, Second Impression, 1994, page 1,2

- 3 Ven. Prof. Siri Sivali, B. (Editor), Praganasara Felicitation Volume, Vidyalankara University press, Kelaniya, 1966, page 126.
- 4 Ibid... page 127.
- 5 Ibid... page 128.
- 6 Ibid... page 133.
- 7 Ratnapala, G. E. (Editor), "Sambhasha" 10-1999, Government press in Ceylon page 434.
- 8 Visuddhimaggo, The Saddhamaparakasa Press, Alutgama, 1914, page 550.
- 9 Ibid... page 5
- 10 Ibid... page 5
- 11 Ibid... page 339
- 12 Ibid... page 133
- 13 Ibid... page 56.