The Doctrinal Canonization of the *Kathāvatthu*

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**Introduction**

To date, research into the problem of identifying the doctrinal basis for vesting authority in texts as "the word of the Buddha," and their acknowledgement as canon—even when they are authored by Buddhist priests many generations removed from the historical Buddha—has been advanced primarily in connection with Mahāyāna Buddhism and the works of the Sarvāstivāda, which is a Buddhist school that was once active in the Indian subcontinent.

An identical phenomenon can also be seen in connection with the Theravāda school that flourished in Sri Lanka, for the Theravāda canon includes the *Kathāvatthu*, which is a Buddhist scripture composed by Tissa, a monk who lived more than two centuries after the death of the Buddha. However, there has not yet been sufficient investigation of the doctrinal basis for the inclusion of the *Kathāvatthu* in the canon. Therefore, this paper considers the doctrine behind the canonization of the *Kathāvatthu*.

1. **Karmic Tail of the *Kathāvatthu***

First, let us examine the tradition of the *Kathāvatthu*’s creation. We have been left with the tradition, as written in the *Kathāvatthu-Atṭhakathā* (N. A. Jayawickrama, ed. [London: Pali Text Society, 1979]), that "while the direct author of the *Kathāvatthu* was Tissa, a figure who lived more than two centuries after the death of the Buddha, the subject of discourse (mātikā, i.e., the core elements of the text) that serve as the substance of the *Kathāvatthu* is the teaching of the Buddha himself." In response to this tradition, an interlocutor appears in the *Dhammasaṅgani-Atṭhakathā* who argues that the *Kathāvatthu* should be removed from the canon:

But the Vitāṇḍa school say: "Why bring in the *Kathāvatthu*? Was it not settled by Tissa, Moggali’s"
son, two hundred and eighteen years after the Buddha's Parinibbāna? Hence it is [merely] the word of his disciples. Reject it.” (Dhammasaṅgani-Atthakathā, Edward Müller, ed. [London: Pali Text Society, 1979], p. 3.25-29) ¹)

In response to this controversy, the Theravāda school offers the following reason for the text's inclusion in the canon.

Now when he laid down the table of contents he foresaw that, two hundred and eighteen years after his death, Tissa, Moggali's son, seated in the midst of one thousand bhikkhus, would elaborate the Kathavatthu to the extent of the Dīgha Nikāya, bringing together five hundred orthodox and five hundred heterodox Suttas. So Tissa, Moggali's son, expounded the book not by his own knowledge but according to the subject of discourse (mātikā) laid down, as well as by the method given, by the Teacher. Hence the entire book became the word of the Buddha, (Dhammasaṅgani-Atthakathā, p. 4.24-34) ²)

In other words, this explanation holds that “the Kathavatthu was not written independently by Tissa on the basis of his own knowledge, but rather, because it was written on the foundation of the subject of discourse (mātikā) left behind by the Buddha himself, the Kathavatthu was also ‘the word of the Buddha.’” Such debates identify the traditions preached by the Kathavatthu-Atthakathā as an important hint for understanding the canonization of the Kathavatthu.

2. Doctrinal Canonization

In the previous section, we examined the debate with an interlocutor who claimed that “the Kathavatthu is simply a text composed by a disciple of the Buddha, and should be removed from the canon.” In response to the indications of such interlocutors, the Theravāda school develops a doctrine that vests authority in texts written by disciples as “the word of the Buddha.” In the Dhammasaṅgani-Atthakathā, Buddhaghosa, citing a description in the Madhupindika Suttanta (Majjhima-Nikāya, Sutta no. 18, Vilhelm Trenckner, ed. [London: Pali Text Society, 1888], vol. I, pp. 108.13–114.19), claims that the Kathavatthu is also “the word of the Buddha.” The Madhupindika Suttanta cited here develops along the following lines.

(1) The Buddha preaches cryptic teachings to his disciples.
(2) Mystified, the disciples call on Mahākaccāna to expound the teaching. He then explains the true meaning of the teachings.
(3) The disciples then ask the Buddha to confirm the truth of Mahākaccāna's explana-
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(4) The Buddha answers, "If you had asked me the meaning of this, I would have explained it to you in the same way that Mahākaccāna has explained it. Such is the meaning of this, and so you should remember it."

Toward this, Buddhaghosa provides the following explanation, while interpolating his own supplementary commentary.

After which precedent? After the Madhupindika Suttanta and others. In that Suttanta the Blessed one, after laying down a subject of discourse (mātikā), ended thus: "Bhikkhu, owing to such causes the factors of prolonged rebirth beset a man. Here if there be nothing to be pleased withal, proud of, or assimilated, then it is the end of the latent bias of lust," etc.—and then rose from his seat and entered the monastery. The bhikkhus, who received the doctrine, approached Mahākaccāna and questioned him as to the meaning of the subject (mātikā) laid down by the Buddha of the Ten Powers...

After thus praising the Teacher he, at the repeated request of the bhikkhus, expounded in great detail the meaning of the subject of discourse (mātikā) laid down by the Buddha and sent them away saying: "Sirs, if you are willing, approach the Buddha and ask him the meaning. And you should accept what he explains to you, so that if my explanation harmonizes with omniscience (sabbaññutaññāna) you should take it; if not, reject it." They approached the Buddha and asked him. The Teacher, without referring to any [possibly] ill-spoken words of Kaccāna, raised his neck aloft like a golden drum and filling with breath his noble mouth, graceful as the full-blown lotus, emitted the Brahmā voice, and saying, "Well done, well done!" to the Elder, added: "Bhikkhus, learned is Mahākaccāna, profoundly wise is Mahākaccāna. If you had asked me the same question, I would have answered exactly as he has done." Thus since the time when the Teacher gave his approval (anumodita), the whole Suttanta became the word of the Buddha. And it is the same with the Suttas expounded by Ānanda and others. (Dhammasangani-Āthakathā, pp. 4.34–5.34) 3

According to this explanation, in order that the word of the Buddha’s disciples also be vested with authority as “the word of the Buddha,” it is necessary that they comprise the following three elements,

(α) Their content is based on the subject of discourse (mātikā) demonstrated by the Buddha
(β) That content is consistent with omniscience (sabbaññutaññāna)
(γ) Furthermore, the truth of that content is retroactively acknowledged through the Buddha’s approval (anumodita/anumodanā)

Out of these three, the tradition in the Kathāvatthu that “the Buddha left only the subject of discourse (mātikā) in the Kathāvatthu to the realm of devas, and Tissa’s commentary was faithfully given on the basis of that subject of discourse” appears to satisfy the condi-
tions with regard to $\alpha$. As for $\beta$, the Buddha himself predicted that “Tissa, the author of the Kathāvatthu, is a man of great larning (mahāpañña)” in the tradition described in the Kathāvatthu-Atṭhakathā (p. 1.20), which is considered to satisfy this condition.\(^4\)

The final element $\gamma$ is also important. In the case of Theravāda, the word of Buddha's disciples will not be accepted as “the word of the Buddha” without obtaining their retrospective acknowledgement through the approval (anumodanā) of the Buddha himself.\(^5\) Nevertheless, this gives rise to the problem that “since the Kathāvatthu is a text that was written more than two centuries after the death of the Buddha, it could not have obtained his retrospective approval (anumodanā).” In fact, since there is no apparent description of such retrospective approval (anumodanā) in the tradition of the Kathāvatthu’s compilation expounded in the Kathāvatthu-Atṭhakathā, the third of the above conditions $\gamma$ is not effective for vesting authority in the Kathāvatthu as “the word of the Buddha.” This problem is also taken up in the Dhammasaṅgaṇī-Mūlaṭikā, where the commentator, Ānanda, circumvents this difficulty by reinterpreting as follows.\(^6\)

Thus since the time when the teacher gave his approval (anumodita), the whole Suttanta became the word of the Buddha” seems to point to the conferral of “approval” (anumodanā) as the basis for becoming “the word of the Buddha.” In this way, because [it] is not approved (anumodita), the Kathāvatthu does not seem to be “the word of the Buddha.” Here, we should understanding the meaning as follows. That is, he said “Thus since the time when the teacher gave his approval (anumodita), the whole Suttanta became the word of the Buddha” in the sense that “Deciding that “Mahākaccāna will probably explain [the teachings] in this way,” the Blessed One left behind the subject of discourse (mātikā) and entered the monastery. Then, since the Venerable One [Mahākaccāna] faithfully explained on the basis of the subject of discourse (mātikā) left behind by the Blessed One, [Mahākaccāna’s words also] became the “word of the Buddha.” Then, [the Blessed One] showed this [the fact that Mahākaccāna’s words had also become the “word of the Buddha”] through his approval (anumodanā). (Dhammasaṅgaṇī-Mūlaṭikā, Dhammagiri-Pāli-granthamālā edition, vol. 130 [Igatapurī: Vīpāsyanā Viśodhana Vīṇāsā, 1998], p. 16.10–15)\(^7\)

In other words, while the process of the conferral of approval (anumodanā) transforming X into “the word of the Buddha” is expounded in the Dhammasaṅgaṇī-Atṭhakathā as a transformation that follows retrospective acknowledgment through the approval (anumodanā) of the Buddha, this cannot canonize the Kathāvatthu, written after the death of the Buddha. Accordingly, in the Dhammasaṅgaṇī-Mūlaṭikā the conditionality of approval (anumodanā) is removed, and approval (anumodanā) is granted to the fact of transformation into “the word of the Buddha,” in a process understood as “the transformation of X into ‘the
word of the Buddha’ becomes the object of approval (anumodanā).” Understood in this manner, the Kathāvatthu can be canonized by being vested with the authority of “the word of the Buddha” even without retrospective acknowledgement of the Buddha’s approval (anumodanā).

Conclusion

The foregoing has discussed the doctrine that is used to canonize the Kathāvatthu. In the Theravāda school, there are three elements that seem to be important for the “words of the disciples of Buddha” to acquire authority as “the word of the Buddha”: (a) the former must be based on the subject of discourse (mātikā) demonstrated by the Buddha, (β) their content must be consistent with omniscience (sabbāññutaññāna), and (γ) their truth must be retroactively acknowledged through the Buddha’s approval (anumodanā).

Because the Kathāvatthu is a work written after the death of Buddha, it cannot satisfy conditions α or γ as they are currently stated. Accordingly, the Theravāda school achieves the condition α by appending a karmic tale, which holds that the subject of discourse (mātikā) of the Kathāvatthu is something that was put in place by the Buddha himself during his lifetime. Then, concerning condition γ, we note the removal of retroactive acknowledgement by “approval” (anumodanā) as a necessary condition for canonization in the commentary by Ānanda, who reinterprets the process of “approval leading to transformation into ‘the word of the Buddha’” as “approval of transformation into ‘the word of the Buddha.’” We can summarize the conditions for canonization in each of the commentaries as follows:

| Commentary                  | (a) mātikā | (β) sabbāññutaññāna | (γ) anumodanā |
|-----------------------------|------------|---------------------|--------------|
| Dhammasaṅgaṇi-Atṭhakathā,   | ○          | ○                   | ○            |
| by Buddhaghosa (5th)        |            |                     |              |
| Dhammasaṅgaṇi-Mūlaṭikā,     | ○          |                     | ○            |
| by Ānanda (5th–6th?)        |            |                     |              |

When we compare these various conditions with those of the Sarvāstivāda school, the necessary conditions for canonization are more strict in the Theravāda school. In the Sarvāstivāda school, so long as one insists on a consistency with the dharma-nature (dhammatā), the canonization of even an arbitrary personal opinion would seem to be possible. How-
ever, for the Theravāda school, simply claiming the consistency of a personal opinion with omniscience (sabbaññutaññāna) is not enough; canonization is not possible unless it is an explanation based on a subject of discourse (mātikā) preached by the Buddha; and furthermore, it is necessary to come up with the tradition that it has received retrospective approval (anumodanā) from the Buddha himself. In this way, the closed nature, fixity, and exclusivity of the Theravāda canon² can also be ascertained from the doctrinal canonization of the Kathāvatthu.

1) Vītuṇḍavādi panāha: kathāvatthu kasmā gahitam? Nanu sammāsambuddhassa parinibbānato aṭṭhārasavassādhikāni dve vassasatāni atikkamitvā Moggaliputatissattheren’ etam ṣhapitam? Tasmā sāvakabhāsitattā chaḍđetha nan ti.

The English translation of the Dhammasaṅgani-Atthakhāthā is based on that of Pe Maung Tin (The Expositor [London: Pali text Society, 1921]), which is partially modified to suit this paper.

2) Taṃ pan’ etam mātikām ṣhapento imaṃ disvā ṣhapesi: mama parinibbānato aṭṭhārasavassādhikāni dvināṃ vassasatānaṃ maṭṭhake Moggaliputatissatthero nāma bhikkhu bhikkhusahasamaṃ jje nisinnā sakāvade pañca suttasatāṇi paravāde pañcā ti suttasahasamā samodhānetvā dighanikāyapamāṇaṃ kathāvattheppakaraṇaṃ bhājessati ti. Moggaliputatissatthero pi imaṃ pakaraṇaṃ desento na attano ṣāṇena desesi, satthārā pana dinnanayena ṣhapitamātikāya desesi. Iti satthārā dinnanayena ṣhapitamātikāya desetattā sakalam p’ etam pakaraṇaṃ buddhabhāsitam eva nāma jātām.

3) Yathā kiṃ? Yathā Madhupinḍikasuttantādī. Madhupinḍikasuttantasmīṃ hi bhagava: yatonidānaṃ bhikkhu purisaṃ papañcasaññaśaṅkhaṃ samudācaranti, ettha ce n’t atthi abhinanditaṃ bhivamaditaṃ ajjhositaṃ, as’e ev’ anto rāgānusayanān ti mātikāṃ ṣhapetvā uttāhyasannā vighāraṃ pāvīsi. Dhammapatīggaṅgāhā bhikkhū Mahākaccānatttheraṃ upasāṅkanītuvā dasabalenā ṣhapitamātikāya atthaṃ pucchimus. . . punappunam therehi yāciyo satthārā ṣhapitamātikāya atthaṃ vibhajitvā ākanikkhānaṃ ca pana tumhe bhavavantam yeva upasāṅkanītuvā etam attathā paṭipuccheyyātha: sace sabbaññutaññaṇena saddhiṃ samāndiyamānaṃ sameti ganheyyātha, no ce mā gahvitthā ti iminā adhippāyena yathā vo bhagavaṃ byākaroti tathā nam dхāreyyātha ti vatvā uyyojesi. Te satthārām upasāṅkanītuvā pucchimus. Satthā dukkathitam Kaccānena ti avatvā suvanṇālīṅgām ussāpento yevo givam unnāmetvā supupphitasattapattassassirikāṃ mahāmukhaṃ pūrento brahmāssaramā nicchāretvā sādu sādhū ti therassa sādhukāraṃ datvā: pañ̄quito, bhikkhave, Mahākaccāno, mahāpañño bhikkhave Mahākaccāno, maṃ ce pi tumhe, bhikkhave, etam attathā paṭipuccheyyātha, ahām pi tam evaṃ evaṃ byākareyyām yathā tam Mahākaccānena byākatan ti āha. Evām satthārā anumoditakālato paṭṭhāya ca pana sakalam suttantāṃ buddhabhāsitam nāma jātām. Ånandattherāidihi vitthāritisuttesu pi es’e eva nayo.

4) The same kind of argument is observed within the Sarvāstivāda school, in which words of the Buddha’s disciples are acknowledged as “the word of the Buddha” if these words are consistent with the dharma-nature (dharmaṭa). This dharma-nature can be understood by only a person who is omniscient. Cf. Mahāvibhāṣāstra, vol. 1 (Taisho, vol. 27, p. 1a8–9), and Honjō Yoshifumi 本庄良文,
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“Abidaruma Bukkyō to Daijō Bukkyō” アビダルマ仏教と大乗仏教 [Abhidharma Buddhism and Mahāyāna Buddhism], in Daijō Bukkyō no tanjō 大乗仏教の誕生 [Birth of the Mahāyāna Buddhism], ed. Katsura Shōryū 桂紹隆, Saitō Akira 嶋藤明, Shimoeda Masahiro 下田正弘, and Sueki Fumihiro 末木文美士, Shirizu Daijō Bukkyō シリーズ大乗仏教, vol. 2 (Tokyo: Shunjūsha, 2011).

5) It can also be said that only the Buddha himself is capable of judging whether it is consistent with omniscience.

6) In the Dhammasaṅgaṇī-Anuṭikā, commentator Dhammapāla does not make any explanation on this problem.

7) Anumoditālātato paṭṭhāya...pe... buddhabhāsitam nāma jātan ti etena anumodanā budhhabhāsitabhāvassa kāraṇan ti ayamattho vutto viya dissi, evaṁ ca sati kathāvatthussa buddhabhāsitabhāvo na siyā anumoditattā, tasmā evamettha atttho datthabbo: “mahākaccāyano evaṁ vibhajissati” ti disvā bhagavā mātikāṁ nikkhipitvā vihāram paviṭṭho, tattheva ca theru bhagavatā dinnanayena ṭhapitamatiṃkāya vibhājī ti buddhabhāsitam nāma jātan, taṁ pana anumodanāya pākaṭam jātan ti etam attthaṃ sandhāya “evaṁ satthārā...pe... nāma jātan” ti vuttanti.

8) Honjō Yoshifumi, “Abidatsuma bussetsu-ron to Daijō bussetsu-ron” 阿毘達磨仏說論と大乗仏説論 [The theroy that Abhidharma was expounded by the Buddha and the theory that Mahāyāna was expounded by the Buddha], Indogaku Bukkyōgaku kenkyū 印度学仏教学研究 [Journal of Indian and Buddhist studies] 38, no. 1 (1989), p. 62.13–17.

9) Cf. Steaven Collins, “On the Very Idea of the Pali Canon,” Journal of the Pali Text Society XV (1990), Kenneth Roy Norman, A Philological Approach to Buddhism: The Bukkyō Dendō Kyōkai Lectures 1994 (London: School of Oriental & African Studies, 1997), pp. 131–148, and Baba Norihisa 馬場紀寿, Jōzabu Bukkyō no shisō keisei 上座部仏教の思想形成 [The development of Theravāda Buddhist philosophy] (Tokyo: Shunjūsha, 2008), pp. 155–253.

(Key words) Theravāda Abhidhamma, mātikā, 論母, sabbaññutaññāṇa, 一切智性智, anumodanā, 随喜, 阿毘達磨仏説論

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