

What a Buddhist *Sūtra* is in India

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Etymological Considerations

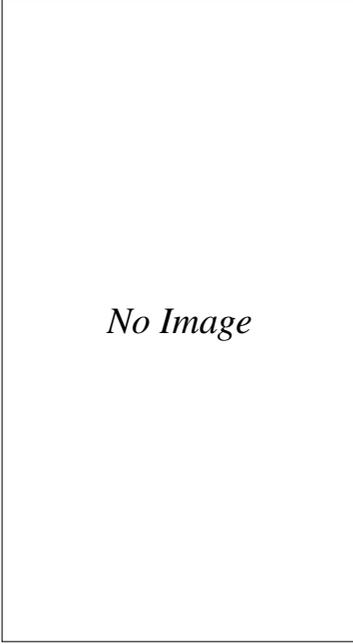
IN classical Hindu usage, the Sanskrit word *sūtra* refers to concise, pithy aphorisms from the founding texts in a field of study, whether it is about grammar, yoga (the *Yoga Sūtra*) or eroticism (*Kāma Sūtra*). Etymologically, the word *sūtra* means ‘thread’: in the Hindu context, it is said, for example, that ‘hymns are strung like pearls on a thread, or like a thread through a bead.’¹ A related image borrowed from the world of weaving is likewise the basis of the word ‘text’.

In the languages of Indian Buddhism, Pāli for Theravāda, Gāndhārī Prakrit and Sanskrit for other schools, the meanings of the word are specific and have evolved. It is generally agreed that the Pāli word *sutta* corresponds to the Sanskrit term *sūtra*, but it has sometimes been suggested that the more accurate equivalent would be the Sanskrit word *sūkta*—‘a well said thing’, the term applied to the words of Vedic sages. This hypothesis, which is not unanimously accepted, deserves attention: in many cases, Pāli texts use Vedic words to give them a new interpretation.

Usage and Style

In the most ancient Pāli sources, *Sutta*, which appears in a list of four components (*aṅga*), means the *Pātimokkhasutta*,² that is to say all the monastic rules that define a community and are recited periodically. The concise style of these rules refers to the basic meaning of the word *sūtra* mentioned above. The other terms in the list designate the verse (*geyya*), prophecies (*veyyākaraṇa*) and the legend of the Buddha (*abbhuta-dhamma*).

At this stage, the concept of a speech or sermon by the Buddha is conveyed by words such as *veyyākaraṇa* or *dharmapariyāya*—‘expounding of the Law.’ It was commentators such as Buddhaghosa (5th century C.E.) who contributed to the spread in the accepted lexicon



Gāndhārī manuscript of the *Dharmapada*. Near Khotan; 1st–2nd centuries. Birch bark, linen thread, black ink. Institute of Oriental Manuscripts, Russian Academy of Sciences, Saint Petersburg

of words such as *sutta* or *suttanta* (roughly the same meaning) to indicate a speech attributed to Buddha in a story where another person is addressing him. Furthermore, the scenario of a dialogue that introduces a mentor and disciple or another person to be persuaded is reminiscent of the *Upaniṣad* in the Brahmanical tradition and thus anchors the Buddhist *suttas* in the intellectual environment of ancient India.

According to tradition, *Suttas* were originally transmitted orally and, strictly speaking, bring together teachings directly from the mouth of the Buddha (*buddhavacana*). Memorised by Ānanda, his faithful disciple, they were documented at the first collective recitation (*saṅgīti*) held shortly after the Buddha's

death. The texts, written down in Sri Lanka in the 1st century C.E., carry traces of this origin in their initial formula “Thus have I heard” (in Pāli *evam me sutam* or in Sanskrit *evam mayā śrutam*), where “I” denotes Ānanda.

A *Sutta* is therefore first and foremost an act of speech and narration, an interview, standing alone, and is mainly written in prose. It is recognisable by its distinctive style, marked by the constant use of standardised formulas: the same narrative sequence (for example, the introduction) is conveyed in the same words. But the stock of episodes is used with discrimination by the redactors and subjected to sophisticated variations depending on the characters of the stories.³ Stylistic devices encourage frequent formulaic language, and repetition takes place on a large scale. Many of these techniques have a mnemonic function, just like the lists of *suttas*.

Diverse Meanings and Interpretations

Each *sūtra/sutta* does however have its own individuality and they are of widely varying lengths. We know the *sūtras* by their names, and in different versions for those that were transmitted in several schools or languages of Buddhism: ‘the text of Brahma’s net’ (*Brahmajālasūtra/Brahmajālasutta*) sets the fundamentals of the Law (*dhamma*) against the traps of heterodoxy, the famous ‘*sūtra* of the great extinction’ (*Mahāparinirvāṇasūtra/Mahāparinibbānasutta*) depicts the last part of the Buddha’s life, death and distribution of relics like a huge screenplay, ‘the *sūtra* of exhortations to Sigāla’ contains lessons intended for followers to use, the ‘big sermon on the establishment of attention’ (*Mahāsatipaṭṭhānasutta*) is a fundamental text on meditation, etc.

The form of the *sūtra* is also attested in surprising textual environments, such as the *Vinaya* (monastic discipline book); a significant portion of its *Suttavibhaṅga* contextualises the rules of *Pātimokkha*. It is a narrative moment specifying the circumstances that led the Buddha to decree a particular rule as a result of misconduct by evil monks, often the group of six, about which he had come to know through monks or virtuous followers keen to protect the Sangha’s reputation. Some of these stories are found in other parts of the Buddhist canon.

In any case, the *Suttavibhaṅga* exemplifies in its own way the typical approach of the Buddha, whose teachings, rather than being abstract revelations, are rooted in time and place, taking into account the participants involved and the world around them.

While, strictly speaking, the prosaic form is a characteristic of *sūtras*, it does not represent a defining constraint. Entitled *Suttapiṭaka*, the second of the three divisions of the Pāli canon (the three Baskets) includes five groups (*nikāyas* or *āgamas*). It is only available in its complete form in the Pāli tradition; whereas in other Indian languages of Buddhism, only some *suttas* have survived, usually as individual texts. A large majority of the texts in the first four groups (*Dīghanikāya*, *Majjhimanikāya*, *Samyuttanikāya*, *Aṅguttaranikāya*) conform to the pattern described above.

This does not apply to the fifth group, the *Khuddakanikāya*, which is characterised by its great heterogeneity. Only the *Udāna*, the *Itivuttaka* and parts of the *Suttanipāta* contain *suttantas* in the strict sense of the word, without, for all that, excluding the verses (*gāthā*). Elsewhere, the verse form clearly dominates, for example, the ‘Rhinoceros Sūtra’ (*Khaḍgaviṣānasūtra/Khaggaviṣānasutta*) that exalts the perfect solitude of the sage; stanzas are only used in the famous *Dhammapada*, which

nevertheless is part of the *Suttapiṭaka*. The number and type of *sūtras* included in each group differ according to the version; as for the individual *sūtra* texts, some are close to each other and others are more distant. These observations indicate a common source followed by a long period of separate transmissions involving specific editorial decisions.

Regardless of the collections to which they belong, the *sūtras* lend themselves to being transmitted individually, or in selections made for specific religious purposes, around a certain theme, for example. Thus each of the Mahāyāna's *Samādhi-sūtras* is about using meditation to achieve a profound state of consciousness. It is usually in this form that they play a role in the lives of Buddhists. From the 5th century until today, from Buddhaghosa to S. N. Goenka or other masters, commentators explain their riches to successive generations of practitioners or readers. A *sūtra* is also defined by the different potential meanings and interpretations it contains.

So we can see how the word *sūtra*, beyond its formal constraints, can come to mean, in the perception of its followers, any text at all, as long as it is considered as being imbued with the sanctity conferred by the word of Buddha and the Law: the *Jambūpatīsūtra* of Thailand is not strictly 'canonical' but exhibits the approach of a classic *sutta*, chronicling the Buddha's conversion of an arrogant king, while the *Mahāsūtras* bring together basic texts, especially in verse.

Notes

¹ Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa 12.3,4,2 quoted by L. Renou, Sur le genre du *sūtra* dans la littérature sanskrite, *Journal Asiatique* 1963, p. 200 (reproduced in L. Renou's *Choix d'études indiennes*, Paris, EFEO, 1997, p. 604).

² See O. von Hinüber, Die neun Aṅgas. Ein früher Versuch zur Einteilung buddhistischer Texte, *WZKS* 38, 1994, 121-135, reprinted in O. von Hinüber, *Kleine Schriften*, ed. H. Falk & W. Slaje, Harrassowitz Verlag, Wiesbaden, 2009, pp. 159–173.

³ See on these points M. Allon, *Style and Function. A study of the dominant stylistic features of the prose portions of Pāli canonical sutta texts and their mnemonic function*. Tokyo, The International Institute for Buddhist Studies of the International College for Advanced Buddhist Studies, 1997.

Author Biography

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