

When and Where was The Tipitaka First Written



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When and Where was the Tipitaka First Written?

In an article I wrote for *The Island* and which was published on 21st April 2017 I highlighted several well-known details about the life of the Buddha, which most Buddhists assume come from the Tipitaka, but which in fact cannot be found there. I went on to suggest that some of these stories may well have been created centuries after the Buddha. Several people have responded to this article including Dr. Chandre Dharmawardana of Canada. In his response the doctor mentions that the Tipitaka was first committed to writing in the 1st century BCE at Alu Vihara in Sri Lanka. In saying this Dr. Dharmawardana is of course repeating something that is in complete accordance with generally accepted and oft repeated ‘fact’. However, it is a ‘fact’ that I would like reassess.

Firstly, where does this piece of information come from? It comes from the *Dipavamsa* and is, I think, repeated in the *Mahavamsa* also. Both these great chronicles were composed in circa 3rd-4th century CE and 5th century CE respectively, that is, they are reporting an event that took place at least 500 years earlier. This is in itself no reason to doubt this information but it is good to keep it in mind. A lot of events can be forgotten or ‘created’ in 500 years. But far more important than this is that the chronicles are doing nothing more than reporting an event that took place in Sri Lanka; the committing of the Tipitaka to writing. For reasons that are not clear, it is widely assumed that therefore this was the first time this had ever been done anywhere. But was it? Might it not have been written down in India some time before this? Quite possible, indeed quite likely!

I will be arguing from silence here but nonetheless I think there is good reason to assume that the Buddhist scriptures were first committed to writing in India during the Mauryan period, in particular, during the reign of King Asoka (268-232). Consider this – Asoka was a devout Buddhist and very clearly he wanted the Dhamma to be as widely known as possible. To this end he sent religious delegations throughout India, to the West, to Suvannabhumi (probably southern Burma), and of course to Sri Lanka. Tradition says he built numerous stupas, a tradition backed up by archaeology which has shown that many Indian stupas were first built during the Mauryan period. Tradition also says that Asoka convened a council to try to reform the Sangha, something hinted at in his Allahabad and Sarnath edicts. But even more significant, Asoka made wide use of writing in his public policy, in fact, his edicts are the oldest decipherable writing from India.

As far as writing is concerned Asoka was an innovator. Further, in his edict of 256 BCE he urged monks and nuns “to listen to and remember” certain *suttas* from the Tipitaka, which he also named. In asking them “to listen to” certain *suttas* he may have been referring to listening to them being chanted, but he also may have meant listening to them being read out from a palm leaf book. In short, is it not an improbable jump from all this to saying that the Tipitaka was written during the reign of King Asoka.

But there is more. The so-called British Museum scrolls, extracts from the Tipitaka recently discovered in Afghanistan, have been shown to date from about 100 BCE. This is conclusive proof that Indian Buddhists had already written down at least parts of the *suttas* by that time. And of course the task of doing this may well have begun even earlier.

But there is yet more. In a Buddhist text called the *Manjusrimulakalpa* it makes the startling claim that the Tipitaka was first written during the reign of Udayibhadda, the son of King Ajatasattu. If this is correct, it would mean that the writing down of the Tipitaka took place only some 30 years after the Buddha. The *Manjusrimulakalpa* dates from about the 8th century CE, although there is little doubt that parts of it draw on much older material.

One big difference between ancient Sri Lankans and ancient Indians is that the former were fairly good record-keepers and the Indians were not. Further, vast amounts of information about ancient India that may have once existed has simply not survived; records written on palm leaf easily fall prey to termites, mould and damp. Perhaps some Indian monks did write the Tipitaka and recorded the fact but the record of it has not survived. The *Dipavamsa*, etc. did survive and it tells us of an event of enormous importance that took place in Sri Lanka in the 1st century BCE. But it tells us almost nothing about

events that happened or might have happened in India. It was recording Sri Lankan history, not the history of India, of which its authors probably knew little. But even if the Tipitaka was committed to writing in India before it was done in Sri Lanka, it is to the credit of Sri Lanka's Sangha that they managed to preserve the Tipitaka down the centuries while it disappeared from India. And for this Buddhists the world over owe a great debt to the Sri Lankan Sangha.