Richard Salomon on “In Search of the Words of the Buddha” (2006 Katz Distinguished Lecture)

Caitlin Palo:

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This episode is part of a special series for 2023-2024 featuring some of our popular talks from our annual Katz Distinguished Lecture series. This month’s episode features Richard Salomon’s talk from 2006 titled “In Search of the Words of the Buddha.” Richard Salomon is William P. and Ruth Gerberding University Professor Emeritus of Sanskrit in the Department of Asian Languages & Literature at the University of Washington. He is the former president of the International Association of Buddhist Studies and of the American Oriental Society, and since 1996 the director of the Early Buddhist Manuscripts Project, a joint venture of the British Library and the University of Washington, which is charged with the study and publication of the oldest surviving Buddhist manuscripts, dating back to the first century BCE. He has published seven books and over 150 articles in these and other fields.

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Richard Salomon:

Buddhism, as many of you know, originated in or around the 5th century BC in Northeastern India with the teachings of a young nobleman whose personal name was Siddhartha Gautama, and who later on came to be known as the Buddha. That is to say, the enlightened one. And here we have one of any of thousands or perhaps millions of images of the Buddha that I could show you. I picked this one because it's representative of the traditions of northwestern part of India, which I'll be focusing on later on in my talk.

At about the age of 35, the Buddha attained enlightenment. That is to say, he became the Buddha through his own individual meditative insights. And this is another example from the Gandharan or Northwestern School of sculpture, showing the moment of enlightenment of the Buddha sitting in undisturbed, calm contemplation even as the--

[HORN]

--of evil are trying to distract him. But he remains undisturbed. I'm not sure I could do that. The Buddha spent the remaining years of his life approximately 45 years teaching the wisdom and the insights he had attained through his meditations. That is to say, he was preaching the Dharma. That is the Buddhist doctrine.

During these 45 years, his many followers tried to retain by their memories every word that he spoke. And this is the massive corpus of teaching, the words of the Buddha, buddhavacana in Sanskrit, in its entirety that constitutes the scriptural canon, or rather canons, of Buddhism.

This scriptural canon, as again many of you will know, is typically referred to by the term Tripitaka, the three baskets of scripture, the three main categories consisting of Sutras, discourses of the Buddha, which I'll show you some examples of later, second, the Vinaya, or monastic law, and third, the Abhidharma, or the analytic and scholastic treatises.

Now, for the first few centuries in the history of Buddhism, that is to say, in the BC period approximately, this buddhavacana collection of the Buddha's words was preserved entirely in oral form through communal recitation and memorization. It was only in probably the first century BC that Buddhist communities began to set down the buddhavacana in writing.

In the two millennia since then, this canon has been assembled in diverse forms in many different lands, in many different languages, including particularly importantly, the Pali, Sanskrit, Gandhari, Chinese, and Tibetan. And here we have a map of the extent of the Buddhist world in antiquity. And if you look up at the right hand here, we have an item from a Buddhist temple near Beijing called Yunju si. And I'll show you now in larger form that is an example of the material that is found there at this temple in China.

We have a large collection of Buddhist scriptures which I'll describe for you in a minute. You'll notice that the corpus of scripture is very voluminous, especially written on stone slabs. But even in book form, a complete Buddhist tripitaka, or Buddhist canon, typically ranged depending on which one you're talking about, from somewhere in the form of printed volumes somewhere between 50 to 100 printed volumes, dwarfing the comparatively minuscule canons of one or two volumes of religious traditions of the West, such as Islam, Judaism, and Christianity.

So this is an example of just a small selection of an enormous collection of Buddhist texts carved on stone slabs and buried at the Yunju si temple in China in order to preserve them and guard the survival of the Sutras for posterity.

Now, when you have a tradition with such an enormous corpus, you have almost automatically a problem. Very few people, if anyone, if any, even the most dedicated monks or diligent scholars, could ever hope to master this entire corpus of texts. It was therefore inevitable that all sorts of summaries, anthologies, abridgements, and epitomes developed in the tradition.

And by way of example, I'd like to show you a particularly curious example of one of these summaries of Buddhist lore. This is an object, a terracotta plaque from a place called Merv in Turkmenistan. And you see in this plaque, in the center the Buddha, on the right a worshipper, on the left a stupa or Buddhist sacred structure.

And what's most interesting for us, we see around the edge an inscription in Sanskrit written from probably about the 5th century AD. The content of this inscription is again something that will be very familiar to people who've studied Buddhist history and tradition. It is a very well known widespread verse, which is usually referred to a bit inaccurately but conventionally, I'll use the term, the Buddhist creed.

The Buddhist creed is a single verse, which is said to summarize the entire essence of the Buddhist teaching. And here you have it in its Sanskrit form with the translation, which I suppose I don't need to read to you. You have it all there.

So this is the essence of the Buddhist teaching. And of course, it can be interpreted in different ways and without going into the controversies. I'll just introduce you to one of the possible traditional interpretations, according to which this is a summary of the Four Noble Truths of Buddhism. And this, again, is the most basic essence of Buddhist tradition. And I expect many of you are familiar with this, Buddhism 101 as it were.

First noble truth-- life, death, and rebirth inevitably consist of suffering. The suffering is caused by desire. The suffering can be eliminated by eliminating the desire. And the way to eliminate the desire is by following the Eightfold Noble Path, which is essentially the Buddhist-- a summary of the Buddhist methods of promoting good conduct, practicing meditation, and attaining wisdom. That is achieved through the Eightfold Path.

This plaque I mentioned is from a place called Merv, which is probably not a household name for most of you. Even those of you who are familiar with the more mainstream development of Buddhism may well not be familiar with Merv. Merv, as I showed you before, is in Turkmenistan, which also may not be a particularly familiar place to most of you. But in ancient times, it was a part of or at least on the edge of the Buddhist world.

Turkmenistan is up here, and this is the miniature of the plaque that I showed you. Turkmenistan is, of course, one of the former Soviet republics, now an independent state with a rather peculiar political situation. If any of you are familiar with the place, you'll know.

The leader of this country got a high position in the list of the world's worst dictators in last Sunday's Parade Magazine. So they have some problems there. But that's not our problem right now.

So my point here in terms of the ancient Buddhist world is that Turkmenistan is at the very northwestern edge of the Buddhist world at the time in question, about the 5th century BC-- I'm sorry, AD. I'd like to turn now all the way to the other side, to the far southeastern edge of the Buddhist world. That is to say, in Southern Vietnam.

And here in Southern Vietnam, at a place called [VIETNAMESE] was found this object, which I will now show you in full size. And this is an inscribed gold plaque found at a Buddhist archaeological site at this place. And the text inscribed on this plaque is, as you might guess, exactly the same text as we had from far away in Merv. It is the Buddhist creed, the same text that I showed you before.

There is an important difference, which is that this is in a different language. This one is in Pali; the other is in Sanskrit. But the text and the meaning and the message is the same.

I've shown you examples of this very important text from the far extremes of the Buddhist world. You probably won't be surprised to know that this same text, this epitome of Buddhist doctrine or Buddhist creed, as it's known, is found in many other places, including particularly the heartland and homeland of Buddhism, in India itself. And we're now turning to Southeastern India, an area not at all far from the original homeland of India of Buddhism, which would be somewhere up here.

Here we are in Orissa, in Southeastern India. And here once again, we find not one but in this picture 20 examples of the same text written in extremely minute, illegible letters in Sanskrit language on little terracotta plaques, which were probably mass produced by a mold. And this is just a small fraction of the number of these objects, which are found at this one site in Orissa, a place called Ratnagiri.

There were probably hundreds of these. And at many other places, Buddhist sites in India, you find these things by the hundreds and the thousands. I'll show you now just this is the source of these, the Ratnagiri stupa number one. And just to give you an idea of the locale, this is the stupa or Buddhist sacred mound from which those terracotta plaques were found. I think probably they were found inside one of these smaller what are called miniature stupas flanking the big stupa. I think probably from this one or somewhere in that area.

So this single verse, I'll show you again for review purposes, serves as a sort of universal summary of the Buddha's words of the buddhavacana, and would have been familiar to Buddhists living in far distant, far flung regions and diverse cultures of the Buddhist world. I'd like to tell you a little more about this verse. There are some interesting and perhaps a little surprising features about it.

First of all, this essence of the Buddha's teaching, this epitome of the Buddha's words, it was actually, according to tradition, not the words of the Buddha himself. These were not spoken by the Buddha. And we know that from a story which is preserved in the Vinaya literature. That is the books of monastic rules and regulations.

And this story occurs in connection with a historical account of the very early history of the formation of the Buddhist community. And there we learn, as I said, that this verse was not spoken by the Buddha himself, but by one of his early disciples, a monk named Asvasjit, or Assaji as he's known in Pali, maybe more familiar to some of you in that form.

The story of the origin of this famous verse, so-called Buddhist creed, is as follows. One day, in the course of his daily round of begging for alms, the monk Asvajit was observed by another man, a Brahmin named Sariputra. This Sariputra was very impressed by Asvajit's calm, peaceful, and decorous demeanor. And so he asked him who his religious teacher was.

Asvajit told Sariputra that his teacher was the Buddha. And Sariputra was already immediately very curious about this person called the Buddha whom he'd never heard of before. And he asked Asvajit to explain the teachings of the Buddha. Asvajit modestly replied that he was only a newcomer to the Buddhist community, and did not consider himself competent to accurately or completely explain the Buddhist Dharma, the Buddhist teachings, in all their volume and complexity.

Sariputra, who was perhaps a little bit impatient, said never mind. Just tell me the essential meaning in detail or in brief. I only care about the meaning, never mind about the words themselves. Please keep that quotation in mind because I'll be discussing it later. It's quite important.

Asvajit responded simply by spontaneously uttering this verse, this extremely brief summary of the essence of Buddhist teachings as he understood it. As soon as he heard this single verse, Sariputra, who was also famed for his intelligence, immediately understood the meaning and the truth of the Buddha's teaching. He joined the newly formed Buddhist order as a monk, and rapidly became known, recognized as the foremost of all of the disciples, the wisest among the wise, second in wisdom only to the Buddha himself. So what Sariputra says is important.

This story not only describes a critical moment in the success of the then new Buddhist religion, it also reveals two important points about the nature of buddhavacana, the words of the Buddha. First point-- it shows that the buddhavacana does not literally have to be understood in its strictest sense of words spoken by the Buddha. It can also be used in a broader but fully legitimate sense, a secondary sense meaning words spoken under the model of or under the inspiration of the Buddha but actually spoken by others, typically of course by his disciples.

There is in fact a Buddhist proverb which says whatever is well spoken is spoken by the Buddha. And that essentially makes the same point in a nutshell. The second important point about this story that it tells us about the buddhavacana is that there is another way as well in which the notion of buddhavacana should not be taken overly literally. As Sariputra said, it is the meaning, not the words that matter.

As he said, I care only about the meaning, never mind about the words themselves. That is to say, broadly speaking, Buddhists tend to value the spirit of the Buddhist law, that is the Dharma, over the letter. And once again, I stress this point because I'll refer to it later on in connection with my main points.

So we are now at a point in very early history of the development of Buddhism. And we find a situation involving first a massive body of sacred scriptures, second a relatively flexible and liberal attitude towards the preservation and presentation of those sacred scriptures, and third, a rapidly spreading Buddhist religious movement and institution.

This sets the stage for the further growth of Buddhism over the following centuries, first into a very widespread and influential religious movement covering almost all of the Indian subcontinent, and thereafter in the second stage of expansion into the dominant religion of the majority of the entire Asian continent.

The shape which this rapid and wide expansion took place was further conditioned by another fundamentally important principle of Buddhist scripture. And with regard to this once again, I am quoting or paraphrasing a passage from the Vinaya talking about the history of the development of the Buddhist community. And here we have an explicit statement by the Buddha himself on a fundamental issue as follows.

One day, two of his Buddhist disciples, who were Brahmins by birth, asked the Buddha whether he would allow them to render his teachings, his words, his vacana into the literary language of the brahmanical elite, namely Sanskrit. But the Buddha, who habitually avoided Sanskrit and always preached in the local vernacular dialects which were of lower social status, but which were more widely understood by the ordinary folk of his region of India, he replied that, no, these Brahmin, these Sanskrit-speaking Brahmins, must not adopt such a single hegemonic standard language for the preservation and transmission of his words. Rather, he commanded that the Dharma should always be preached to people, quote, "in their own dialect," unquote.

As a result of this principle pronounced by the Buddha himself, Buddhism became somewhat comparable to Christianity, what I call a religion of translation. This in contrast to other important world religions such as Judaism or Islam, which hold or feel that the sacred character of their scriptures is inherently linked to the original languages of those scriptures, Hebrew and Arabic respectively.

On the contrary in the Buddhist case, as in Christianity, translation was not only permitted but encouraged. And I think this could be considered another facet of the principle that I mentioned earlier, that Buddhist tradition values, broadly speaking, the spirit over the letter of the law.

What's really important in the Buddhist message is that the buddhavacana, the words of the Buddha, the Dharma, the truth of Buddhism, be made most easily accessible to audiences anywhere and everywhere, not that it be preserved in exactly the same words and the same language in which the Buddha originally uttered it.

This, of course, had, however, an inevitable result, which is that separate canons of the buddhavacana arose in different languages in different parts of the Buddhist world. At first, these separate canons were in different Indian languages, most of which were fairly closely related linguistically and often fairly easily mutually intelligible.

Later on, in the second stage of Buddhist expansion, when Buddhism spread beyond its homeland into India and to other parts of Asia, this beginning in the early centuries of the Christian era, at this point, the scriptures began to be rendered into entirely unrelated non-Indian languages such as Chinese and Tibetan.

So the problem, if it is really a problem, is that these various local canons, first in Indian and then in non-Indian languages, inevitably became gradually more and more different and divergent, even to the point that some of them, for instance, if we compare two very well known and important canons, the Pali and the Tibetan canons, these are in fact and admittedly vastly different in content and even in their essential conception, to the point that it could even be said that they have more differences than commonality.

To sum up what I've said until now, when you look at the big picture of the Buddhist world and of Buddhist scriptures, one finds a somewhat confusing mixture of unity and diversity. On the one hand, we find broad commonalities such as the Buddhist creed, that brief verse epitomizing the Buddhist doctrine, which as we've seen, is found in virtually identical form in different languages over vast regions of the Buddhist world. On the other hand, we see enormous corpora of texts, complete canons embodying the scriptures and doctrines of various Buddhist schools, which vary from each other in a significant and sometimes to a rather disturbing degree.

So a question must inevitably arise, and this finally is the central question, which I intend to address-- not necessarily answer but at least address-- this evening. And that question is, what did the Buddha really say? What are the true-- what are the true buddhavacana words of the Buddha? Specifically, which of these several very significantly divergent versions of the Buddhist scriptures represents the true original buddhavacana? Which one of them preserves the most accurate model of the words which the Buddha spoke 2 and 1/2 millennia ago?

This question came to the fore particularly in modern times when Western scholars began in the 19th century to become aware of Buddhism in its various geographical and doctrinal manifestations, and began to compare these different geographical manifestations of Buddhism, and try to understand their historical relationships.

In particular, this question became controversial and acute a little bit later, around the end of the 19th century, when scholars began to study in detail and compare the Buddhist scriptures in the various languages, particularly Pali, Sanskrit, Chinese, and Tibetan, and began to wonder and worry about their relative authority and authenticity. Early on, it was widely assumed, and in some circles it still is assumed, that the scriptures of the Pali canon, belonging to the Theravadan School of Buddhism, that is to say the canon of Buddhism which is still in effect in Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia, were considered by many to be the most original form of the Buddhist canon or of the buddhavacana.

The Pali canon was privileged in this way partly because it is the only canon that survives completely intact in an original Indian language. But it also had another circumstantial advantage, which is that it was the canon of the variety of Buddhism and the regions of Buddhism which first came to the attention of European scholars, and particularly of English-speaking scholars.

However, as study went on, and I must say continues to go on, of the other canons, the Sanskrit, the Chinese, et cetera, the assumption of the originality or primacy of the Pali canon more and more came into question and into doubt. And it began to be argued by many influential experts that the variant versions of the buddhavacana, which are recorded in the several canons, had at least an equal claim to authenticity to that of the Pali.

But that still leaves the question unanswered. Well, then, what did the Buddha really say? Well, to this point, I've really mostly been talking about old matters. That is, scholarly controversies that have been kicked around for many years, in fact, over a century. Now I'd like to turn to recent discoveries which have shown a new light on the entire issue of the relationships and authenticity of the various Buddhist canons. Though I hasten to warn you that it sheds light on this matter not perhaps in the way that you'll expect, or I should also say not perhaps in the way that I expected when these things first came to my attention.

I'm referring to the discovery within only the past 10 years of a large number of manuscripts and manuscript fragments from yet another canon of Buddhist scriptures, one which until now had been virtually completely lost and forgotten. This material is the remnants of a corpus of Buddhist literature, we can say in a certain sense, a canon, of the region which in antiquity was known as Gandhara, and which corresponds in modern geographical terms to the area around Northern Pakistan and adjoining areas of Eastern Afghanistan.

The area around Peshawar here in Pakistan is the center of Gandhara, and these outlying areas were part of the same cultural zone that I will now be focusing on. Next, I'd like to zoom out to the big map of the Buddhist world that I showed you before, just to give you a sense of the location in the bigger picture. So Gandhara is approximately up here.

It has long been known from archaeological data that Gandhara was in ancient times a major center of Buddhism. That is nothing new. It has also been hypothesized in the past, and I think as it turns out quite correctly, that Gandhara played a particularly crucial role in the history of Buddhism in that it served as what I call the jumping off point from which Buddhism first began to spread outside of its Indian homeland into Central Asia and China.

And its location explains why that should be the case. From Gandhara, the Buddhist message and Buddhist scriptures spread north through the high mountain passes of the Silk Road and the side routes of the Silk Road up into Central Asia, into Eastern Central Asia, and thence into China, and eventually throughout East and Northeast Asia.

So this we knew or at least suspected about Buddhism in Gandhara. What was not very clear until very recently was the nature of Buddhism in Gandhara and particularly the nature of the scriptures or canons which were studied and felt as authoritative there. That has now changed quite drastically with the discovery of the aforementioned specimens of what now is clearly part of what was once a very extensive body of Buddhist literature in the language called Gandhari, which is the local language of the Gandhara region, and which is an Indic language fairly closely related to Sanskrit and Pali.

Let's take a closer look now at this object up here. You might not be able to tell what it is, but now you do. It's a big clay pot. And what's important about this clay pot is that inside it was found a collection of 29 scrolls rolled up, written on birchbark in the Gandhari language, and in the writing or script called Kharosthi.

And this is the collection of manuscripts which Bill mentioned, which opened up this whole new subject, which was acquired by the British Library a little over 10 years ago. The manuscripts were inside this pot. The next image that I'll show you is another view of this pot, looking at it from above, looking down into the mouth. And you can see the manuscripts as they were originally disposed inside of it.

I'll ask you to keep your eye on this manuscript lying on top. And then I'll show you how that looked when it was taken out here on the left in its original form, and then after unrolling. This is what the text actually looked like. This is actually only about one quarter of the entire text, but it's all that I could fit on screen for you.

Yes. Among the features, several features of the manuscripts which make them particularly interesting and important is their antiquity. The group of manuscripts that I'm talking about here, which is now one of only several groups of manuscripts that we know about, but this is the earliest group. And it is dated, as you see up here, to probably around the middle of the 1st century BC-- I'm sorry, 1st century AD, or possibly at the very latest early 2nd century AD.

This is in striking contrast to the texts of all the other Buddhist canons that I've mentioned, which are based on manuscript materials, which in nearly every case are many centuries later than these new Gandharan manuscripts. In other words, the new material that we have is by far the earliest actual physical surviving attestation of the buddhavacana.

Moreover, it's one which comes quite close to the time at which, as far as we know, the buddhavacana was first set down in writing, namely probably the 1st century BC. In other words, what this means is these manuscripts provide us with the earliest direct record that we can ever realistically hope to have of the original buddhavacana words of the Buddha.

Once again, this naturally inevitably will give rise to an expectation that these new discoveries will at a single stroke solve the age old problem of what the Buddha actually said. Well, I have to tell you right now that's not exactly the case. And as professors can never avoid saying, the matter isn't nearly that simple.

I like to think the reason we always say that is because it's true. I think it is true in this case, and I'll try to explain why. Since these materials were discovered slightly over 10 years ago, a group of scholars and professors and students here at UW have been studying under the auspices of the British Library University of Washington early Buddhist manuscripts project, have been studying and analyzing these manuscripts and many other from this newly discovered Buddhist literature of Gandhara.

And here is our happy little group hard at work last week, squinting at these manuscripts, which we spend many hours doing every week. So what have we found as a result of all this squinting? Well, we found a pattern that is, in a certain sense or I should say was rather unexpected, although as usual in retrospect, it should have been expected, and it makes perfect sense.

Let me try to summarize briefly this somewhat complicated situation. This new corpus of Gandharan Buddhist texts has considerable similarities in some respects and in some instances to each of the other early known previously known canons of Buddhism, particularly those in Pali, Sanskrit, and Chinese. But on the other hand, it cannot be specifically specially linked to any one of them in preference to the others.

The Gandhari literature as we know it so far contains texts which have fairly close parallels sometimes in the one, sometimes in the other, and in some cases, even in all three of the other canons that I'm comparing it to. That is, the Pali, the Sanskrit, and the Chinese. But the Gandhari literature also contains a large number of textual material that is unique and unparalleled anywhere else in previously known Buddhist literature.

Let me now zero in on a couple of specific examples to illustrate that point that I'm making about the complex interaction between these texts and these different canons. One of the very interesting texts among that first collection, what we call the British Library collection, was a version of a well-known Buddhist poem which also exists in Sanskrit and Pali versions, which celebrates the spiritual advantages of the solitary life of the homeless monk, who is told to wander alone like the rhinoceros.

Here you have just as an example of how we work with these things on the left hand, we have the manuscript as it originally was, with all the bits and pieces jumbled up, and upside-down, and in the wrong place, and all in a mess. After many, many months of work, this is the reconstructed form in which all these bits are restored to what I'm fairly confident were their correct original position, so that we can make pretty good sense out of the text, despite all the gaps.

And by way of example, this is one typical verse from the text, telling us that sensory pleasures are attractive, sweet, and captivating. With manifold forms, they distract the mind. Seeing the danger in all varieties of pleasures, one should wander alone like the rhinoceros.

So this is a classic invocation of what I would call the traditional or perhaps conservative view of Buddhism, that you simply have to separate yourself from all the attractive things of the world, which in the long run only cause you trouble. And you shouldn't waste time chit-chatting with friends or having romance and that sort of thing. You should be like a rhinoceros, a solitary creature.

Now, let's turn back to textual comparisons. As I mentioned, this text was previously known in Pali and Sanskrit. Now we have this newly discovered Gandhari version. And what happens when we can compare this new version to the previously known versions? Well, I summarize the results as follows.

In terms of its overall structure, that is sequence of verses and arrangement and so forth, the Gandhari version is similar to the Pali text. But in respect to the specific wording of the individual verses, it was considerably more similar to the Sanskrit version. So this is what I mean by a complex relationship.

Let me illustrate that with one more example. This is part of a long-- what was originally a long manuscript. This is all we have of it-- of a collection of Sutras of the numerically arranged category. This is what is called in Pali the Anguttara-- equivalent of what is called in Pali the Anguttara Nikaya, for those of you who are familiar with that terminology.

This refers to collections of texts that have some numerical features in common. They're arranged sequentially. And these Sutras are from what's called in English the Book of Fours, the Sutras having to do with the number 4. And let me very briefly tell you what's in this text, and I think you'll see why it's there.

This text contains a dialogue between a Brahmin named Dona. Here we have a close-up of this particular section of text. I just thought you might be interested to see more clearly what the writing looks like. Sorry.

And the dialogue can briefly be summarized as follows. Dona sees the Buddha, doesn't know who he is, but can tell that he's something or somebody very special. And he asks him, are you a God? Buddha says no. Are you a demigod? Buddha says no. Are you a spirit? Buddha says no. Are you a human being? Buddha says no.

And now perhaps you see why this is in the Book of the Four. It's because it turns around the four questions. Dona then gives up and said says, well, then who the heck are you? And Buddha says, I am the Buddha. The point being, of course, that a Buddha is something entirely separate from and by implication superior to humans and even to gods.

Now, my main point concerning this Sutra is once again to talk about how it compares to other versions in other Buddhist canons. As it happens, this Sutra or something very similar to it, has close parallels in Pali, Sanskrit, and Chinese. So here we can do a four-way comparison. And let's see what happens here.

I'm quoting from Mark Allen, one of my colleagues and collaborators who studied and published and translated this text. And he summarizes the relationships as follows. The Gandhari text parallels the Pali version with reference to some features, but differs from the Pali-- differs from the Pali version and parallels the Chinese and Sanskrit, or both, with reference to other features.

Differences are discernible on virtually all levels. The course of events, the information given, the details of diction, and to a lesser extent, even the grammar. So you can see why I refer to the relationships of these texts as a complex one.

I could give you many more examples of this sort of situation. But I trust these two examples will suffice to make my point. If anyone expected that the discovery of large numbers of texts from a previously unknown and very early body of Buddhist scriptures would at a single stroke unravel the tangled history of the buddhavacana and give us the true, original words of the Buddha, well, that someone would have to be prepared to be disappointed.

As I said, it's not that simple. And if these new materials prove anything, they prove the old rule that the more you know, the the less you know. To explain that, I'd like to draw an analogy briefly to the study of human evolution, which I'm no expert in. But from a layman's point of view, it seems to me that there's an interesting parallel between the study of the origins of the human species and the study of the words of the Buddha.

Let me try to explain that statement. In older times, when paleontologists had only a few fragments of fossil bones of the hominids to work with, they tended to conceive the evolutionary process as a simple line or ladder, and had the idea that we only needed to find one or a few missing links, and everything would become clear. The whole picture would be filled out.

That's not what has happened. As more and older pieces of evidence have gradually turned up, they have provided not missing links forming a single line or chain, but rather a bewildering variety of side branches and dead ends, such that, and I here quote a popular account published recently, "a tangled bush has now replaced a tree as the ascendant imagery of human evolution."

So I think the situation is somewhat analogous to the situation for our search for the original words of the Buddha. The new material, these new manuscripts, do not provide us with a single, simple solution to the issue. They do not constitute a Gandhari canon as a missing link between the original buddhavacana and the later surviving texts. The chart that I'm about to show you is not right.

I'm saying this is what one-- and I won't name any names, but someone who began to study this material might have naively thought that the pattern would work like this, and that the Gandhari canon would be the prototype of the later ones, and in turn would be closest to the original buddhavacana.

The examples of specific comparisons, detailed comparisons that I mentioned to you before I think will make it clear that this is not the way it is. So I propose this alternative as even still a somewhat simplified model of how things might have actually worked, but it's the best that I think we can say at this point.

All of these four canons have an equal claim to authenticity and originality. The original buddhavacana is asterisked, meaning that it's a theoretical thing only that may or may not have ever significantly existed. And please note also that I have dotted lines between these canons. We now know that these did not develop independently and separately, that they influence each other in complex ways, that they were in contact, that they were trading and sharing material so that we have what in textual terms would be called a conflated text.

In fact, it is somewhat doubtful in modern perspective whether there ever even really was a set of original actual words of the Buddha. But even if there ever was such a thing in any meaningful way, such a collection would have begun very early on in the history of the Buddhist tradition to develop as it were a life of its own. By this, I mean that the separate monastic communities that spread up-- sprung up as Buddhism spread throughout India and then beyond India would have developed their own versions of the buddhavacana with variations small and sometimes quite large in wording arrangement and, especially importantly, in the inclusion or exclusion of certain texts.

So it is now clear that no one of these versions, or none of these small number of versions which have survived until modern times, can be privileged as the most authentic or original words of the Buddha. They all have an equal claim to historical and doctrinal validity. And this includes our new Gandharan material.

Now, that statement might seem to be a bit troubling, both for historically oriented academic scholars of Buddhism such as myself, and for the many millions of practitioners of Buddhism all around our modern world. If all the versions of the buddhavacana are said to be of equal validity, we're still left with the original question. How do we know what the Buddha really said?

On what basis can we choose one or the other version of the buddhavacana as a reliable guide to, on the one hand, historical understanding of Buddhism, and on the other hand, to the actual following the spiritual practice of the Buddhist path? Well, I would submit my sort of semi-answer that this apparent dilemma need not really be considered such a problem.

Now, to justify that position, I want to bring you back to the words of Sariputra whom I quoted early on. And when he asked-- I remind you, when he asked Asvajit about the doctrines of the Buddha, he said just tell me the essential meaning in detail or in brief. I only care about the meaning, never mind the words themselves. And these, I remind you, are the words of one of the foremost founding fathers of Buddhism, second perhaps to the Buddha himself.

And I believe that they express what I consider a characteristic and fundamental feature of the Buddhist attitude toward scriptures. What matters is not so much the precise wording as the sense, the spirit over the letter of the law, as I said before. This underlying principle also explains why the Buddha urged and encouraged his followers to translate his teachings into any and every language. And it also explains why, as I mentioned earlier, the inspired words of his followers could be considered buddhavacana, as fully imbued with truth and wisdom and power as the words which actually came out of the Buddha's own mouth.

But still, what does this mean for the Buddhist practitioner or scholar who wants to be sure that the text he or she selects for study really represents the true words of the buddhavacana? For the practitioner, I could say, at least in theory, the following-- it doesn't really matter. Despite their variations, sometimes very considerable, any of the various versions of the early Buddhist scriptures ultimately embody the same messages-- the same message, the same essential Buddhist teaching. The difference ultimately is more in the packaging than in the essence. That is to say, in the letter but not in the spirit of the law.

I have to admit that those of you who are familiar with Buddhist tradition might find what I just said a little bit simplistic or naive. And I admit that that's somewhat true. I simply say it because to go into it in detail, I'd have to keep you here all night, and I assume that's not what you want. Of course, there is, as many of you know, a big issue about the relationship of the innovative doctrine of the Mahayana and its rather serious doctrinal conflicts with mainstream or traditional Buddhism.

There is much to be said here. I'm sorry I can't say it now, but I do want to say that the new material does in fact have important bearing or clues about that issue. And perhaps I can answer questions on that later, as if there are any, as I anticipate.

Turning now to the dilemma of the scholar, and here I feel that I'm speaking in my own proper milieu, the answer is, of course, a little more complicated. But I think it's widely agreed now that the chief lesson of the modern academic study of Buddhism over the past century and a half and more specifically from the spectacular discovery of ancient, unprecedentedly early manuscripts within the last 10 years, the chief lesson is basically this.

We've been asking the wrong questions. To try to recover the original words of the Buddha or even to try to identify one or the other of the Buddhist traditions as more original or more authentic or closer to the original words is, in hindsight, to really miss the point. What Buddhist scholars can more profitably pursue is to study in detail the contents and structures of the individual versions of the Buddhist canons with a view to understanding their historical developments and doctrinal relationships.

In this project, the newly discovered corpus of Gandharan manuscripts that I've shown you a little bit about will be of the utmost importance and utility. And I want to emphasize this point because I did not wish to give the impression, and I want to avoid giving the impression, that in any way that I and others involved in this study are disappointed with these new discoveries. Surprised, yes, but disappointed by no means. They tell us a lot. They just didn't tell us perhaps what we expected them to.

Let me mention in closing just one example of the interesting surprises or revelations that we get from this new material. These new gandharan texts seem to be providing us with long sought for archetypes of some of the earliest Chinese translations of Buddhist scriptures. This is something that is not entirely unexpected, because Buddhist scholars, philologists, and linguistic scholars have observed for many years, 75 years or more, that there are certain early Buddhist, early Chinese translations of Buddhist texts which record certain Indian words and names in forms that do not seem to reflect the pronunciation that you would expect from languages like Sanskrit and Pali. That is to say, languages that are better known as the major scriptural languages of Buddhism in India.

And in fact, it was suspected that the reason these Indian words had seemingly peculiar forms in their Chinese renditions was that the underlying texts were being translated from a language like Gandhari rather than from Sanskrit and Pali. So in connection with that, we had something referred to as the Gandhari hypothesis, the hypothesis that early Chinese Buddhist texts had been translated from Buddhist texts in the Gandhari language. The problem until recently is that texts of that type were virtually completely unknown.

Now we have lots of them, and we are finding pretty strong and increasing indications that it is, in fact, the case that many or some very important early Chinese Buddhist texts were translated from Gandhari prototypes, and that in fact these texts that we're looking at, and that I showed you a few examples of tonight, are very similar to the actual manuscripts that were brought from India, from Gandhara to China in and around from the 3nd century AD onward and rendered into Chinese.

So in this sense, and I will now slightly contradict what I said before in a different context, this new material does in fact, provide a missing link, but not the missing link that some might have expected it to give. It is not the missing link between the Buddha's original words and their later forms in other areas and collections of Buddhist literature. That missing link, if it ever existed, will never be found because it would have been in the pre-literate period.

But the new material does give us an almost as important missing link between the original Indian forms of Buddhism and their translated expressions in China and thence throughout the rest of Asia. This and any number of other exciting prospects that I don't have time to tell you about are currently under investigation by myself and my collaborators.

And in conclusion, I hope it's clear to you that this is why we have dedicated our scholarly lives to their study, and we will be occupying ourselves studying them for many years to come, or perhaps many lifetimes to come. Thank you very much.

[APPLAUSE]