

Evam Me Sutam: Who Heard What?

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Abstract: My paper does not go much beyond the first four words of the title of the conference for which this paper was written: ‘Thus have I heard’. From its beginnings to the present, this phrase has propelled Buddhist literature across Eurasia and beyond. The deceptively simple phrase is the logic and the foundation (*nidāna*) for the authority of the scriptures. The ‘who’ of the matter is this: *who* heard *what* and *where* did they hear it?

Keywords: Buddhist canon(s), Ānanda, ‘Thus have I heard’

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Punctuating the Dharma

It is remarkable, it is extraordinary, that a large body of the scriptural corpus of an ancient and major world religion is introduced by the phrase ‘thus have I heard’ without giving any weight to the *identity* of the ‘one who hears’ or ‘has heard’, or ‘the one who is recounting what he has heard’. The prevailing commentarial interpretation is that the ‘I’ is Ānanda—that the ‘I’ is Śākyamuni’s devoted disciple, Ānanda. In earlier Anglophone literature, this attribution is presented easily and without hesitation. Examples are by English scholar monk Ñāṇamoli (Osbert Moore, 1905–1960) in his ‘Setting Rolling the Wheel of Truth’ (1960) and his *The Life of the Buddha* (1972).¹ The notes to the opening ‘Thus I heard’ of the translation inform the reader that this refers to ‘words spoken by Ānanda Thera at the First Council when all the Discourses were recited, three months after the Buddha’s *Parinibbāna*’.² The venerable author’s *Life of the Buddha* bears the subtitle ‘*As it appears in the Pali Canon the Oldest Authentic Record*’. This volume, ‘published from the posthumous papers of the late Venerable Author’, identifies his sources as ‘voices’: two narrators, three voices, and one chanter. The first of the voices is ‘the voice of the Elder Ānanda, the disciple and personal attendant of the Buddha, who recited the Discourses (or Suttas) at the First Council, held at Rājagaha three months after the Buddha’s final attainment of *nibbāna*’.³ One might say that in modern studies the assumption that the ‘I’ is Ānanda is engrained and automatic. Even Edward Conze (1904–1979), one of the great twentieth-century scholars of Buddhism, wrote that ‘The “I” here means the disciple Ānanda, who recited the entire Buddha-word immediately after the Buddha’s death’.⁴

¹ Ñāṇamoli Thera, trans., *Three Cardinal Discourses of the Buddha*, 19, note 1; Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli, trans., *The Life of the Buddha as it appears in the Pali Canon the Oldest Authentic Record*.

² Ñāṇamoli, trans., *Three Cardinal Discourses of the Buddha*, 19, note 1.

³ Ñāṇamoli, trans., *Life of the Buddha*, vi.

⁴ Conze, *Buddhism*, 28

This raises the question: Why should the Buddha's teaching, in particular 'all the discourses' or suttas, be filtered through a single source, Ānanda? Does this suggest that the entire Buddhist canon is an artifice of ventriloquism? What is the reason for this wholesale seconding of the Buddha's teaching to this devoted disciple? And, more broadly, to what degree does the authority of reported speech depend on the identity of the speaker or reciter?

Opening the Sutta: *Evam me sutam ekam samayaṃ bhagavā... viharati...*⁵

Pāli suttas are almost invariably introduced by the formula *evam me sutam ekam samayaṃ bhagavā ... viharati*: 'Thus have I heard at one time the Fortunate One was staying at ...'. This has been variously translated during a century and a half of English-language translation. Lord Chalmers translates, 'Thus have I heard. Once when the Lord was staying at ...'.⁶ Red Pine translates, 'Thus have I heard. Once the Buddha was staying...'.⁷ Recently Gómez and Harrison have rendered the opening as 'This is what I heard at one time when the Exalted One was staying in Vaiśālī, in the Grove of Āmrpālī'.⁸ Debate continues to rankle about this formula,

⁵ As a matter of convenience, in this essay I generally use Pāli forms. The formula is known in Sanskrit, in Gāndhārī, and in translation (for example, Chinese and Tibetan), but these are not germane to the questions raised here. The formula is generally paired with the closing formula *idam avoca bhagavā attamanā te bhikkhū bhagavato bhāsitaṃ abhinandun ti*. Both of these cognate editorial interventions raise intriguing questions, but I cannot discuss the closing formula here, *bahugranthabbhayāt*.

⁶ Chalmers, trans., *Further Dialogues of the Buddha translated from the Pali of the Majjhima Nikāya*, vol. I, 1.

⁷ Red Pine, trans., *Why Not Paradise*, 11, 21.

⁸ Gómez and Harrison, trans., *The Teaching of Vimalakīrti*, 3. Note the various translations of *bhagavan*: Fortunate One, Buddha, Exalted One ... there are many more.

like a never-ending storm in a translator's teacup.⁹ The classic punctuational conundrum of Buddhist literature, it centres on the relation between *ekam samayaṃ* and the phrases that precede and follow it. But my essay does not directly concern this question, which might well be insoluble or at least *acinteyya* (inconceivable).

The exegesis of the Mahāvihāra school of the Sri Lankan Theravāda is given in the Pāli commentaries of the fifth-century Buddhaghosa Ācāriya.¹⁰ This is well-known and has strongly influenced modern discourse on the topic, whether pious or academic. In addition, several north Indian commentaries composed in Sanskrit discuss the phrase. Some are available in translation, but for purposes of a comparative study all of them need to be edited, analysed, and translated in a way that takes into account the broader issues of the context and the first convocation and brings these factors into the conversation. Here I might mention the following examples:

An eighth-century tradition in the Pāla dynastic period of north India, represented by Vīryasrīdatta, who wrote at Nālandā Mahāvihāra. Vīryasrīdatta comments on the *Arthavinīś-cayasūtra*, and he most probably presents a Sarvāstivāda or Mūlasarvāstivāda tradition.

Haribhadra, writing about the same time, commenting on the *Abhisamayālaṅkāra* and the *Prajñāpāramitā*.

Jñānaśrīmitra, commenting on the Dharaṇī text, the *Anantamukhanirbhāra*, preserved only in Tibetan translation.

A commentary on the long Perfection of Wisdom, **Āryasatasāhasrikāpañcaviṃśatisāhasrikāṣṭādaśasāhasrikāprajñāpāramitābrhṭṭikā* [The Long Explanation of the Noble Perfection of Wisdom in One Hundred Thousand, Twenty-Five

⁹ See Skilling, *Questioning the Buddha*, 133–37.

¹⁰ For Buddhaghosa's exegesis, see Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans., *The Discourse on the All-Embracing Net of Views*, 94–95; Jayawickrama, 'Papañcasūdanī: The Commentary to the Majjhimanikāya', 75–88.

Thousand, and Eighteen Thousand Lines].¹¹

There are numerous mentions in Tibetan and Chinese and other sources that remain to be edited or translated, and there are hosts of mentions and articles in modern scholarship.¹²

An interesting sourcing of ‘canonical’ material is seen in the introductory verses (*vatthu-gāthā*) of the ‘Way to the Beyond’ (*Pārāyaṇa-vagga*) of the *Suttanipāta*.¹³ The ancient verses of the ‘Way to the Beyond’ are introduced by fifty-five narrative verses, which are described as *vatthu-gāthā*. This seems to be the only use of the term *vatthu-gāthā* in Pāli (and I have not seen any examples of the hypothetical Sanskrit counterpart, **vastu-gāthā*). The commentary, the *Paramatthajotikā*, ascribed to Buddhaghosa, relates an interesting story of the past lives of the protagonists and how fifteen brahman ascetics, disciples of the sage Bāvarī, travel from the south to see the Buddha. The commentary explains that ‘tam attham gahetvā āyasmā ānando saṅgītikāle pārāyanavaggassa nidānaṃ āropento imā gāthāyo abhāsi’ (having learned this matter, at the time of the convocation, Long-lived Ānanda, recited these verses [the *vatthu-gāthā*] to supply the introduction to the ‘Chapter on the Way to the Beyond’).¹⁴

¹¹ See English translation from the Tibetan in Sparham, trans., ‘The Perfection of Wisdom in Eighteen Thousand Lines’, 1.3ff.

¹² See, with references to the ‘Style des sutta’ by Jean Filliozat, in Renou and Filliozat, *L’Inde Classique, Manuel des études indiennes*, tome II, 333–34. Filliozat’s criticisms are discussed by Nanayakkara, but I find his reasoning unconvincing: Nanayakkara, ‘Evaṃ me suttaṃ’.

¹³ *Pārāyaṇa-vagga*, 976–1031.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 580.29–30. In Smith, ed., *Sutta-Nipāta Commentaty III, being Paramatthajotikā II*, 2, Vol. II, *Mahāvagga, Atthakavagga, Pārāyanavagga*, my translation; see also Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans., *The Suttanipāta: An Ancient Collection of the Buddha’s Discourses Together with Its Commentaries*.

Evam me sutam is not the only introductory formula used by Buddhist narrators. Other, cognate phrases introduce classical Buddhist narratives, especially of the *jātaka* and *avadāna* genres:¹⁵

tadyathānuśrūyate: Āryasūra's and Haribhaṭṭa's *Jātakamālās*
evam anuśrūyate: *Suvarṇavarṇāvādāna*
tamyathā 'nusūyate: *Milindapañhā*

In addition, the 'canonical' *Vinayas* have their own distinctive openings, as does the Pāli sutta collection *Itivuttaka* and its Sanskrit *Itivṛttaka* counterpart(s). If the first two 'baskets' of the Pāli canon are certified by their openings, the third basket, the *Abhidhamma*, is not. The Pāli *Abhidhamma* texts lack any *nidānas* whatsoever and this gave rise to questions about how they had been transmitted. The varying strategies used to introduce texts of different (as well as overlapping) genres is a fascinating topic that deserves a comprehensive study, the results of which would be encyclopaedic if not mind-boggling. My topic here is not a totalising 'Buddhism's great whodunnit' but rather one significant instance of 'Buddhism's great who heard it and who said it?' The question I choose to face is this: is it possible that the suttas were all remembered and recited by one man, Ānanda? Is long-lived Ānanda the *me/mayā* of the opening formula? My argument is, I hope, based on tradition/scripture (*āgama*) and common sense and logic (*yutti*).¹⁶

¹⁵ This is not the place to go into detail. Mattia Salvini kindly reminds me of the commentary on Śūra, edited by Ratna Basu, 'Eine literatur-kritische Studie zu Āryasūras Jātakamālā', 248.1 foll.

¹⁶ What does 'common sense' mean? What principles of *yutti* apply, and how should one apply them? These questions are perennially pertinent but I had best avoid them for now. Merriam-Webster (s.v. 'common sense') defines 'common sense' prudently and simply as 'sound and prudent judgment based on a simple perception of the situation or facts'. Albert Einstein (1879–1955) is *reported* to have said that 'Common sense is nothing more than a deposit of prejudices laid down in the mind before you reach eighteen', Knowles, ed., *Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*, 293; and see O'Toole, 'Common Sense'.

The idea that Ānanda recited the scriptures is not ‘canonical’ as such—that is, it is not validated by a plurality of mainstream canons. Nonetheless, this explanation has been widely accepted as factual by the pious—the faithful foot-soldiers of the Theravāda and other schools—and by modern academics. Lamotte aptly calls the formula ‘la profession de foi traditionnelle’ (the traditional profession of faith).

One of the first modern thinkers to raise questions about the *evam me sutam* formula was Tominaga Nakamoto 富永仲基 (1715–1746). He wrote:

In the expression ‘Thus I have heard’, who is the ‘I’? It is none other **than the expositor of a later time**. What is the ‘heard’? It is that **the later expositor** has heard something passed on. What is the ‘thus’? It is the **later expositor’s** having heard it passed on ‘thus’.¹⁷

The idea that the ‘I’ or ‘me’ is Ānanda was neither explicit nor even implicit in the scriptures themselves: the scriptures, the suttas, do not mention his name or, in most instances, even his presence. The notion that the ‘I’ is Ānanda is a hermeneutic construct that emerged gradually, but once it was introduced it became a widely received ‘fact’. It has been unquestioningly adopted as the default interpretation by modern piety and scholarship. It is sometimes pointed out that the phrase *evam me sutam* vouches for the authenticity of what is to follow,¹⁸ but I am not convinced that the anonymous *me* or *mayā* is much of a guarantee of anything. Perhaps

¹⁷ Emphasis my own. Tominaga, ‘Thus I Have Heard’, 85–88; Skilling, *Questioning the Buddha*, 133–37. I would be surprised if others have not come to the same conclusion. For Tominaga see Durt, *Problems of Chronology and Eschatology*.

¹⁸ Whose authenticity? Authentic for whom? For the schools, for the monastics, for the listeners? Everything was hearsay, as was the Buddha’s sterling reputation (*evam kalyāṇo kittisaddo*). Authentic for the mythical imaginings of antiquity, for the paradigmatic formulas of canonical fictions (of whatever school), for the historicist imaginings of early and latter-day generations of modernist scholars, for today’s digital Buddhists?

its function is similar to that of the introductory lines of Shelley's 'Ozymandias':

I met a traveller from an antique land,
Who said—'Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert. . . . Near them, on the sand,
Half sunk a shattered visage lies...'¹⁹

The anonymous voice frames what follows and gives it a sense of detached perspective.

My argument floats in the interstices of the known and the knowable. There is little if any contemporaneous Indian evidence from which to develop any sort of hypothesis. None of the key actors are available to speak up and join the debate, and none of the people involved left behind any testimonies or memoirs that might explain their decisions. The grand *evam me sutam* tapestry is interwoven with the narratives of the first convocation when Gotama's legacy was recited, and with the evolution of corpora of literature that were passed on orally for several centuries until they were eventually written down.²⁰ There are no spokespersons for any of the eighteen schools apart from representatives of a contemporary Theravāda diluted by modernity. The discussants are a phantom 'we'—a community constituted by several generations of modern scholars whose perspectives, assumptions, and aims are radically different from those of the original saṅghas or from master scholars of the past like Vasubandhu and his predecessors and contemporaries.

¹⁹ Shelley, *Poetical Works*, 550.

²⁰ The literature is immense. For this essay, I have consulted Jean Pryzluski's perennially engaging *Le concile de Rājagṛha: Introduction à l'histoire des canons et des sectes bouddhiques*; Lamotte, *Le Traité de la Grande Vertu de Sagesse de Nāgārjuna (Mahāprajñāpāramitāsāstra)*, tome I, chapters 2 and 3; Bareau, *Les premiers conciles bouddhiques*; Lamotte, *Histoire du Bouddhisme Indien*; Suzuki, 'The First Convocation of Buddhism, 1904'; Kākkāpalliye Anuruddha Thera, Fung, and Siu, trans., *The First and Second Buddhist Councils*; Allon, *The Composition and Transmission of Early Buddhist Texts with Specific Reference to Sūtras*.

The Buddhist scriptural collections are enormous. I cite as example the only collection of Indic scriptures to survive, the ‘Pāli canon’, which consists of four major collections:²¹

Dīghanikāya [Collection of Long Scriptures]: 34 suttas

Majjhimanikāya [Collection of Medium-Length Scriptures]: 152 suttas

Samyuttanikāya [Collection of Thematically-Ordered Scriptures]:
7,762 suttas

Ānguttaranikāya [Collection of Numerically-Ordered Scriptures]:
9,557 suttas

This makes a total of 17,505 suttas. This is fair enough, but the figure is entirely imaginary. These ‘ideal’ figures are different in different printed editions, and surely in different manuscript recensions—and in many cases the *evam me sutam* and the *nidāna* formulas are abbreviated according to the conventions laid down across the centuries by successive and effectively independent editorial boards. These are editorial interventions and they do not have any quantifiable bearing on the question. There is no ‘ideal’ edition of the Tipiṭaka in any script or any language, whether manuscript or print. Figures like these only give a rough approximation of the enormous size of the collections.

The Buddha credits Ānanda with an extraordinary memory and capacity to understand his teachings, pronouncing him ‘the foremost of my disciples who are well-versed’ (*babussuta*). Stanzas ascribed to Ānanda himself state that he knew 84,000 dhamma-teachings:²²

*dvāsītiṃ buddhato gaṇhi, dve sabassāni bhikkhuto
caturāsīti sabassāni ye ’me dhammā pavattino.*

From the Buddha I learned eighty-two [thousand], from the monks I learned two thousand:

²¹ Figures after Lamotte, *Histoire*, 167–68. These are ideal figures: the number of suttas in the *Samyutta* and *Ānguttara* differ in the different collections.

²² *Ibid.*, 162–63.

Eighty-four thousand are the dhammas that are present in me.²³

Could a single individual have mastered this number of suttas? Perhaps—let me not be one to underestimate capacity of the human memory and mind.

But all of this raises practical questions. Even if Ānanda did memorise this number of texts, how did he pass them on? How did he transfer this massive corpus, *in toto*, to others? We know that the scriptures were transmitted by groups of trained recitation specialists called *bhāṇakas*. Are we to believe that Ānanda himself organised and implemented the *bhāṇaka* system—that the whole system was Ānanda's start-up?

There are many gaps in the narrative, and numerous questions; in this essay I can only broach a few topics. A central point is the nature and quality of the texts, the suttas, that are introduced by *evam me sutam*. I will limit myself to two well-known texts: the *Dhammacakkappavattana-sutta* and the *Mahāparinibbāna-sutta*, both of which encapsulate key episodes in the grand tableau of Śākyamuni's life and mission. The two suttas may be situated chronologically as the 'first' and the 'last' suttas of Gotama's career. Mahākassapa proclaims this to Ānanda in the *Da zhidu lun* 大智度論 (Skt. *Mahāprajñāpāramitā-śāstra*, T no. 1509): 'From the *Dhammacakkappavattana-sutta* to the *Mahāparinibbāna-sutta*, the collection forms the four *Āgamas*... This is what one calls the *Basket of Suttas*'.²⁴ Both of these suttas mix narrative frame stories with direct 'reported speech' of the Buddha. The *Dhammacakkappavattana* has liturgical status in that it is memorised and recited as part of the chanting practices of the Theravāda saṅgha up to the present. As far as I know, the *Mahāparinibbāna-sutta* does not enjoy any such liturgical status.²⁵

²³ Pāli quotation from Lamotte, *History*, 162. English translation my own.

²⁴ Translated from the French of Lamotte, *Le Traité*, I, 103.

²⁵ There are, however, vernacular recitation poems in Thai traditions.

The *Dhammacakkappavattana-sutta*

One of Gotama the Buddha's emblematic teachings—perhaps his signature teaching—is the ‘Sutta on the Turning of the Wheel of the Dhamma’ (*Dhammacakkappavattana-sutta*).²⁶ The *Dhammacakkappavattana* is part of the sequence of post-enlightenment events that starts with Gotama's decision to travel from the seat of enlightenment (the *bodhimāṇḍa* at Bodh Gaya) to Varanasi to share his discoveries with his five former companions (in Pāli, the *pañcavaggiye bhikkhū*).²⁷ Chronologically, the *Dhammacakkappavattana-sutta* is Gotama the Buddha's first teaching, and hence the *first sutta*. It is for this reason that, in some accounts of the first convocation, the *Dhammacakkappavattana* is recited first, for example in the *Vinaya* of the Sarvāstivādins.²⁸ The last sutta is the *Mahāparinibbāna*. It too begins with *evam me sutam*.

The *Dhammacakkappavattana-sutta* is a complex text, symphonic and many-voiced. The narrative takes place in the Deer Park at Varanasi where Gotama announces his discovery of the middle path and his realisation of the four realities of the noble ones. A chorus of devas joyfully resounds the news of Gotama's achievement across the heavens. Starting with the earth-dwelling gods, they successively announce that the Bhagavan has turned the wheel of the Dhamma:

The Fortunate One has turned the unsurpassed wheel of the Dhamma at Migadāya in the Isipatana at Varanasi. It cannot be turned back by any ascetic or brahman or by any god or māra or brahma, or indeed by anyone in the world.²⁹

²⁶ May the gentle readers forgive my ironic use of the vapid cant term ‘signature’.

²⁷ In Pāli, this is recounted in the ‘Great Chapter’ of the *Vinaya*, in the Sarvāstivāda in the *Catuspariṣatsūtra* and in corresponding sections of the Mūla-sarvāstivādin *Vinaya*.

²⁸ Kākkāpalliye Anuruddha Thera, Fung, and Siu, trans., *The First and Second Buddhist Councils*, 47–50.

²⁹ Pussadeva, *Suatmon chabab luang*, 51–56.

The devas repeat this in ascending tiers up to the Brahmakāyika devas. At this moment the ten-thousandfold world-system shakes and quakes, and a boundless and magnificent radiance shines forth. The sutta closes with a brief declaration by the Buddha that one of his five former companion monks, Koṇḍañña has understood: that is, the wheel has turned and has been realised by others.

Ānanda was not present at this momentous event. The *Dhammacakkappavattana* is a multi-layered and polyphonic composition or compilation—it is hardly a matter-of-fact event that can be reported by a single individual as ‘this is what I have heard’.

Mahāparinibbāna-sutta

The *Mahāparinibbāna-sutta* is one of the longest of the long suttas. It relates the events of the Buddha’s last journey leading to the place that he had selected to lie down and breathe his last breath, between a pair of *sāla* trees. The narrator relates not only teachings, words and phrases, but also actions and narratives. In such cases, what exactly did Ānanda *hear*?

It is hard to conceive this complex series of events and teachings as a simple didactic or narrative unit that can be reported as ‘this is what I have heard’.

Another incongruity is that in many of the suttas the narrator participates in the narrative and dialogue. If the narrator is Ānanda himself, how does he *hear* the sutta? For example, the two suttas on Emptiness (*Majjhimanikāya* nos. 121, 122) open with *evam me sutam* and relate long conversations between the Buddha and Ānanda on methods to attain or realise emptiness.

Another difficulty with the phrase *evam me sutam* is that it opens some suttas that were delivered post-nirvāṇa and even post-*saṃgīti*,³⁰ for example the *Ghoṭamukha Sutta* and *Gopakamoggallāna Sutta*.³¹

³⁰ Lamotte gives several examples: *Histoire*, 141.

³¹ *Majjhimanikāya* no. 94, Bodhi and Nāṇamoli, trans., *The Middle Length Discourses*, 771–74; *Majjhimanikāya* no. 108, *ibid.*, 880–86, respectively.

The latter opens as follows:

Thus have I heard. On one occasion the venerable Ānanda was living at Rājagaha in the Bamboo Grove, the Squirrel's Sanctuary, **not long after the Blessed One had attained to final Nibbāna.**³²

The exegetical traditions recognize that the *saṅgītikāras*, the redactors, played a role in the production of the suttas that we know now. Their role is mentioned regularly in the commentaries. For example, in the case of 'editorial additions', the commentaries point out that some phrases or verses were added by *saṅgītikāras* at the first or second recitation. If that is the case, then the sutta in question is a *redaction*, not an account of 'what was heard'.

Lamotte writes that 'la première partie du Nidāna ou Prologue de la Pañcaviṃśati[sahasrikā-prajñāpāramitā] débute comme tous les sutra par la profession de foi traditionnelle: *Evaṃ mayā śrutam ekasmin samaye*, et fournit les preuves de son authenticité en faisant connaître le lieu où le sūtra a été prêché par qui et à qui ...' (The first part of the *Nidāna* or Prologue of the *Pañcaviṃśati* [*sahasrikā-prajñāpāramitā*] starts like all the sūtras with the traditional profession of faith, *evaṃ mayā śrutam ekasmin samaye*, and gives proof of its authenticity by announcing where the sūtra was preached, by whom, and to whom the sūtra was taught).³³

The idea that the narrator is Ānanda was by no means universal. In one account cited in the *Da zhidu lun* translated by Kumārajīva, Ānanda himself states that he did not witness or hear the *Dhammacakkappavattana*. The passage is cited in the *Fayuan zbulin* 法苑珠林

³² Bhikkhu Bodhi notes that 'the *Majjhima Commentary* says that after the Buddha's relics had been distributed, Ven. Ānanda had come to Rājagaha for the recitation of the Dhamma (at the first Great Council)': Bodhi and Nāṇamoli, trans., *The Middle Length Discourses*, 880, note 1031; 1313.

³³ Lamotte, *Le Traité*, I, xiv. Emphasis and English translation mine.

[Forest of Pearls from the Dharma Garden, *T* no. 2122], attributed to the seventh-century monk Daoshi 道世 at Chang'an.

According to the *Da zhidu lun* (T.1509:69b12–15) [Ānanda] uttered the following verse:

As for the first sermon of the Buddha
I have not seen or heard it.
This has been reported through various intermediaries:
The Buddha travelled to Vārāṇasī;
To the five monks he preached
The Dharma wheel of the Four Noble Truths.³⁴

To complicate matters, in Jean Przyluski's translation of an account of the first convocation that is extant only in Chinese translation, Ānanda affirms the opposite:

Ānanda from afar towards the place where the Bhagavat had entered *parinirvāṇa*; and with his mind concentrated and his hands joined together, he spoke this verse:

This I heard, one time
The Buddha was staying at Vārāṇasī,
In the Deer Park of the R̥ṣis, and he uttered
In full the *Sūtra of the Wheel of Law*.

Il [Ānanda] se tourna de loin vers le lieu où le Bhagavat entra dans le *parinirvāṇa*, et, l'esprit concentré et les mains jointes, il proféra cette stance:

Ainsi j'ai entendu; une fois,
le Buddha se trouvant à Vārāṇasī,
dans le Parc des Cerfs du R̥ṣi (R̥ṣipattana), il prononça

³⁴ Shinohara, trans., *Forest of Pearls from the Dharma Garden*, vol. II, 203. For Lamotte's rendering, see *Le Traité*, I, 101–02.

intégralement le Sūtra de la Roue de la Loi.³⁵

Much of the considerable discussion about *evam me sutam* concerns parsing the phrase ‘*ekasmiṃ samaye*’ and the question of whether it should link up with the opening *evam me sutam* or with the following *bhagavān viharati*, or both, and in what way(s).³⁶ Many have focussed on punctuation in Tibetan and Sanskrit manuscripts. The proposition that the *me* is the *bhāṇaka* or *saṅgītikāra* might close this debate, since I suggest that *evam me sutam* is spoken by the *reciter*, and that therefore the *ekam samayam* belongs with what follows.

³⁵ *T* no. 2027, 49: 6c11–14, one of the many texts ascribed to the early Parthian master An Shigao 安世高, an attribution questioned by modern research. I cite here Przyluski, *Le Concile*, 18. The English translation is my own. Marcus Bingenheimer, via personal correspondence, kindly informs me as follows: ‘in this text as in others by An Shigao the phrase has no [equivalent of the Pali] *me*. The *je* is added by Przyluski. The passage has 聞如是一時, lit. “heard thus one time”, no subject here! That is why the text is in that sense unproblematic. Ānanda, at least in this Chinese translation, does not assert that “he” heard it—rather simply that ‘it was heard’. It is the same for the following paragraph. I would take that (but cf. Przyluski) as: “Then he mounted the Lion’s seat, and like the lion for the first time taught, saying: ‘heard thus one time’ And—following the places where the Bhagavant had stayed, the sutras that could be heard there—recited them all” (乃上師子座如師子行第一說言。聞如是一時隨尊所處所可聞經皆悉誦宣). This opening without the I/我 in Chinese is not unusual, but appears only in early (pre-fourth c.?) translations. After the early translators the Chinese settled on 如是我聞, lit. ‘Thus I have heard’ (如是我聞).’ I had best leave Chinese complications to those qualified to discuss them. Jan Nattier deploys her expertise to navigate the different Chinese translations of the *evam me sutam* formula, with reference to Indian developments, in ‘Now You Hear It, Now You Don’t’.

³⁶ Boucher gives a thorough listing of relevant literature up to the time of writing: Boucher, *Bodhisattvas of the Forest and the Formation of the Mahāyāna*, 213–14, note 4.

Reflection and Hypothesis

Is this a question of dogma, history, faith, or narrative? Does any of this matter? Is any of this important (whatever this overworked word might mean)? Can anyone answer the question? If not, how does this reality impact on our understanding of the suttas? Am I trying to fit a fluid skein of ideas associated with Ānanda into the rigid regimens of historicity, when they may only be strands of grand reimaginings of the oral transmission of the Buddha's legacy? The points discussed here concern key aspects of Buddhology and even its epistemological foundations.³⁷ They concern how, by what avenues, we know the Buddha and how, by what media, we know his teachings. More broadly, they concern how we assess the traditions of convocations (*saṅgāyanā*, *saṃgīti*) and the transmission of the huge corpus of texts from orature to literature.³⁸ The investigation erodes the 'one-nikāya' model that has been prevalent from the beginnings of (largely Anglophone) Buddhist studies and it raises intriguing uncertainties about the authority of individuals or persons (*puggala*) and scriptural traditions (*āgama*). At this point it seems best to face these questions and to try to sort out our ideas about *evam me sutam*.

Albert Einstein is said to have *said* (so I, the writer, have not *heard* but *read*): 'The intellect has little to do on the road to discovery. There comes a leap in consciousness, call it Intuition or what you will, the solution comes to you and you don't know how or why.' In addition to this, he *wrote*, 'I think that only daring speculation can lead us further and not accumulation of facts.'³⁹ What I have written

³⁷ Here (and in general) I use 'Buddhology' in the sense of 'the study of the nature of the, or a, Buddha', rather than as a synonym for the broad and motley discipline of 'Buddhist studies'.

³⁸ For *saṅgāyanā* and *saṃgīti* see Skilling, 'Nine Recitations and the Inclusive Tripiṭaka'.

³⁹ Letter to Michele Besso, 8 October 1952, Albert Einstein, *Michele Besso: Correspondence 1903–1955*, 488. Knowles, ed., *Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*, 294. It may appear that in this article I enlist the illustrious physicist (who lived from 1879 to 1955) as Buddhist commentator, an *aṭṭhakathā-ācariya*—and why

here results from the accumulation of narratives and considered reflection. I hope that it is, to quote Thomas Brown, ‘not wrung from speculations and subtilties, but from common sense, and observation; not pickt from the leaves of any Author, but bred amongst the weeds and tares of mine own brain’.⁴⁰

The evolution of the *āgamas* was managed by the ‘editorial boards’, the *saṅgītikāras*, who redacted them through the first two root or pan-*nikāya* convocations, and after that through the *nikāya*-specific or ‘sectarian’ convocations arranged by individual schools periodically, autonomously, and independently. The dissemination was filtered by the reciters, the *bhāṇakas*, who, on the evidence of the Pāli commentaries and of the textual variations revealed by critical study, participated actively in the editorial processes. The heyday of the reciters was the oral centuries before texts were committed to writing, beginning with the second or certainly the first centuries BCE. I find it more likely that, rather than an artefact of Ānanda’s legendary deep involvement with the Buddhavacana, *evam me sutam* is the opening formula with which trained reciters introduced their recitations during the oral period. The *me* is the reciter, announcing intangible *buddhavacana* to his or her audience, ‘This is what I [the reciter sitting here before your eyes and within your hearing] have heard, have learned, have been taught by my tradition’. This means that the ‘I’ or ‘me’ does *not* refer to Ānanda but to the *reciter* or *bhāṇaka*. I have mentioned above a few of the difficulties that arise when the historical Ānanda is taken to be the sole narrator: most of these vanish when the opening *evam me sutam* is interpreted as a *bhāṇaka*’s introduction to the recitation he or she is about to give.⁴¹ The reciters are not enacting or invoking the role of Ānanda: rather they are reciting the redacted narrative-cum-didactic account as they have received it.

not? The rules of intellectual discourse are a theoretical physics of their own.

⁴⁰ Browne, *Religio Medici*, part I, sect. 36.

⁴¹ See Skilling, *Questioning the Buddha*, 136–37. Considering that nuns were also active in the transmission of the Buddhavacana as *bhāṇikās*, I prefer to rephrase this as ‘interpreted as a *bhāṇaka*’s or *bhāṇikā*’s introduction to the recitation he or she is about to give’.

Evam me sutam, evam anuśrūyate, and other formulas both delimited and expanded the fields of discourse over the centuries and across the continents, from classical Buddhist languages like the Middle Indics Gāndhārī, Pāli, or Saindhavī, to Buddhist Sanskrits and formal Sanskrits—and to Central Asian, East Asian, and South-east Asian vernaculars well beyond my limited scope. For the visual and plastic arts, the notion of ‘Thus have I seen’ adds further dimensions to the question.⁴² How far all this is a matter of dry authenticity controlled by monastic committees is open to speculation. Is it all a matter of hearsay? Yes, in a positive sense all of the Buddhist traditions begin with hearsay, the ventriloquism of an inaccessible master. The *evam me sutam* phraseologies open the doors to the galleries and architectures of narrative arts that keep abreast of the interests and needs of the changing times and social environments.

In this investigation, who is Ānanda? The assumption that the majestic library of Buddhist suttas was stored and transmitted by a single individual is generally tacitly accepted in modern exegesis. The literary powers of this Ānanda are simply mind-boggling. I see him as more of a metaphor than a historical agent: Ānanda is a moving metaphor for the impact of Gotama the Buddha’s teaching and its dissemination through oral and afterward through written means. We can regard him as a template for meaning and authority. In the first convocation, Ānanda mounts and speaks from the lion throne, the seat of authority: his legendary transmission of the Dhamma is an allegory of monastic fidelity and dedication and the authority of the Buddhavacana. His anonymity establishes him as a neutral narrator who does not stand for any factional interests; as a trusted direct disciple he guarantees a level playing field. It is an inspiration that helps maintain the unbroken continuity of the Three Precious Jewels.

Are legend, myth, and narrative ahistorical or antihistorical? Or do they participate in the historical movement as ideas and even convey it into the realms of the spirit so that it may benefit all beings—*sabbasattā hitāya sukhāya*.

⁴² See Rotman, *Thus Have I Seen: Visualizing Faith in Early Indian Buddhism*.

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Abbreviations

T *Taishō shinsū daizōkyō*. See Secondary Source, Takakusu and Watanabe, eds.

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