

MAGICAL THERAVĀDA?

PĀLI PARITTA CHANTING AS MAGICAL PRACTICE*

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1 INTRODUCTION

Paritta chanting, the performance of melodic recitation of *paritta* texts, is a central practice of monastic and secular religious life in traditional countries of Theravāda Buddhism, above all Sri Lanka, Thailand and Myanmar. For this purpose, normally monks (*bhikkhū*) recite a specific genre of texts in the Pāli language, the religious language of the Theravāda tradition, in order to avert undesirable circumstances and to protect and bless the audience. The recitation of *paritta* protective texts is generally considered as having apotropaic, that is evil averting, and healing magical effects. The individual *paritta* texts can be of varying lengths and are often of canonical origin, but do not infrequently represent para-canonical or modern compositions as well. Every *paritta* text refers explicitly or implicitly to one or more “effective powers” (*ānubhāva*), the most important of which is that of truth (*sacca*) and which is eventually embodied in the Buddha as a cosmic reality. The powers of the deities (*devatā*) and of benevolence (*mettā*) are other forces to which those texts often take recourse. The *paritta* recitation is usually embedded in a superordinate ritual, the components of which make the practice further determinable as magical.

Based on the presentations in Lüders (1944), who illuminated the “magical power of truth” as a topos that has remained present since the time of the Ṛgveda and continues in the Buddhist canon and other texts of the Indian classical period, this paper, against the background of a heuristic definition of magic, first aims to determine the implementation of *paritta* recitation as a magical practice. Using examples from primary literature, the various summoned and invoked powers are then explicated and interpreted as magical ones. For such an interpretation it is necessary to finally define the connection of *paritta* recitation in the context of Buddhist soteriological teachings and to classify its place in them. Translations in this work were made by the author, but a comparison with standard English translations is encouraged and may be

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easily performed by the reader. Canonical Pāli texts are cited according to the electronic version of the Burmese Chaṭṭhasaṅgāyana (Sixth Buddhist Council) edition, stating the *sutta* number, in the case of the Suttanipāta (Sn), Theragāthā (Th) and the Cariyāpiṭaka (Cp) by referencing the stanza number. The Jātaka is cited by giving the number of *nipāta*, *vagga* and poem. The citation of non-canonical *paritta* texts is according to Piyadassi Thera's edition of the *catubhāṇavāra* (Piyadassi 2011) and the collection made by Ajahn Mettiko (Mettiko 2017).

2. MAGIC IN BUDDHISM: A HEURISTIC DEFINITION

The search for a final definition of magic, for a determination of its essential characteristics, is just as confused and intricate in the history of religious studies as is the quest to provide a fundamental concept of religion, against which magic has all too often been demarcated, indeed contrasted (cf. Frazer 2013 and Durkheim 2013).

The preliminary end point of such definitional expeditions within today's specialist discourse is usually the abandonment of the attempt to define the essence of religion and the transition to functionalist and heuristic models of definition and interpretation, the parameters of which are able to unveil the functions and meanings of religion and magic for those individuals who practice them. They also clarify how those can be represented meaningfully in the course of scientific analyses. Such a functionalist and heuristic approach seems to be of particular use with regard to the clarification of the question of the extent to which the intoned recitation or chanting of the *paritta* protective texts can be regarded as a magical practice. It has the advantage that the intertwining of the magical and the soteriological context can thereby be demonstrated, both of which exist in dependence on the personal standpoints of the listeners and reciters, their individual situations and personal religious goals. The latter distinction goes beyond the difference between monastics and lay followers. Reynolds (Reynolds 2016: 339) addresses this interrelatedness when he writes:

The boundary between religion and magic is never clear, and in some cultures the distinction between 'magic' and 'religion' does not even apply. When it comes to Buddhism, the boundary is especially blurred [...].

In his monograph "Buddhist Magic: Divination, Healing, and Enchantment through the Ages" (2020), Sam van Schaik provided a heuristic definition of magic that the present work employs to provide the basis for the description of *paritta* recitation as a magical practice.

According to van Schaik (2020: 38), magic is used as a term "to highlight a certain kind of practice in a wider cultural context". Based on a comparative approach to magical practices in different religious and cultural contexts, he arrived at a "working definition of how the word is used" (ib.) by bringing to light three common characteristics of magical practices and relating them to the Buddhist tradition. In the Buddhist context, magic means those practices and rituals (1) "entirely performed for 'this worldly' ends, in which the ultimate aim of Buddhism is only very indirectly linked to the practice" (ib.: 40). This first point already addresses the importance of magical practices against the background of the Buddhist teachings on liberation, which will be dealt with in more detail in part six of this article. Furthermore, magic in Buddhism denotes those rituals (2) "characterized by a swift and clear relationship between ritual and result" (ib.: 41). The desire for the results of magical rituals to be brought forward quickly arises from the urgency of their concerns: magical practices "address pressing concerns, including illness, the need for urgent answers, or the resolution of a difficult social situation" (ib.). Finally, magical rituals in the Buddhist context can usually be performed by anyone who feels a need for them, they are (3) "usually quite brief, and the instructions are clear even to a nonspecialist" (ib.).

As a helpful expansion of this threefold scheme of definition, I would like to add Reynolds' understanding of magic, as it allows a further dimension to become visible in the description of *paritta* chanting as a magical practice. He defines magic in the Buddhist context as "certain beliefs and practices for mastering the physical world by appealing to supernatural forces" (Reynolds 2016: 338). The specific supernatural forces or effective powers (*ānubhāva*) that practitioners call upon and hope to make effective in their recitation of *paritta* are the topic of the fifth chapter of the present paper. How the above mentioned definitional characteristics manifest in the course of the recitation of the protective texts is the subject of part four. Beforehand, however, the origin and nature of the *paritta* texts need to be clarified in more detail.

3. THE PARITTA TEXTS

The Theravāda tradition can be found today mainly in the South and South-East Asian countries of Sri Lanka, Thailand and Myanmar (formerly Burma), but also in Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos and in enclaves around the world. The *paritta* texts constitute a special genre of Theravāda Buddhist literature in the Pāli language, the language of the Theravādin

canon and its religious text in general, in which the individual protective chants mostly have their origin. Due to its apotropaic nature, Peter Skilling (1992) aptly characterized this category of texts as "rakṣā literature", i.e. as "protection literature" (from S. *rakṣā* 'protection'). Their recitation is intended, and believed, to provide security for both the reciters and the listeners from the dangers of e.g., wild animals, hostile supernatural beings or detrimental natural phenomena, as well as to bestow blessings and happiness, and in some cases also to engender healing. Etymologically, the word *paritta* (either a grammatical neuter or feminine) is derived from the Pāli prefix *pari* 'around' and the verb *tāyati* 'protects' and can be translated simply as "protection". The Dictionary of Pāli (2020: 280b) gives the acceptation of *paritta* as "protection; what gives protection; a protective mantra or charm", thereby already alluding to the words magical connotation. Synonymous Pāli designations of this type of text are *rakkhā* 'protection' (cf. AN 4.67: *katā me rakkhā katā me parittā*) and *gutti* 'guarding' (Skilling 1992: 110). Its Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit and Sanskrit equivalents are *parīta* and *paritrāṇa* respectively.

According to Skilling (113), the use of *paritta* texts has been a persistent, active pan-Buddhist phenomenon since the earliest times of the tradition:

A distinguishing mark of the rakṣā [= *paritta*] literature is that it was actually used - that is, memorized and recited for specific purposes - by both monks and lay-followers, from a very early date. This is in contrast with the bulk of the canonical literature which would only have been studied by the assiduous few, mainly monk-scholars.

Parittas, insofar as they do not represent modern, post-canonical compositions (like the *Mahājāyamaṅgala*, cf. Skilling 1992: 122–123 for further apocryphal suttas and *gāthas*), have their origins in the five *nikāyas* of the Suttapiṭaka, the collection of discourses of the Buddha and his disciples (cf. Spiro 1971: 144; Skilling 1992: 116–124 and Mettiko 2017: 52–62) and are considered to be rooted in the Buddha's own teaching. On this textual basis, three *parittas*, the Dhajaggariparitta, the Khandhaparitta and the Āṭṭānāṭṭiyaparitta, can even be regarded as having been personally instituted by the Buddha, who is on record as recommending their recitation on certain occasions.

Several editions and compilations of the basic *paritta* texts exist in Theravāda countries today (cf. Skilling 1992: 118–121 for a synopsis). They can mostly be traced back to the *catubhāṇavāra*, the 'Four Pieces for Recitation', a Sri Lankan compilation of 22 or 29 texts used

as *parittas*. Its earliest dating lies between 929 and 939 C.E. (ib.: 118). In its current form as the Book of Protection (*pirit pota*), the *catubhāṇavāra* has even been referred to as the “Buddhist Bible” (cf. Piyadassi 2011: 1) and represents the most immediate source of Buddhist sacred texts for Sri Lankan lay Theravāda practitioners. The *catubhāṇavāra* is itself based on listings of *parittas* in the para-canonical commentarial texts, the *aṭṭhakathās* (cf. Skilling 1992: 174–177 for a tabular listing). This additionally demonstrates the active employment of this protective genre of literature since early times. Their comparison throws into relief a core of four canonical texts which can be considered as *parittas par excellence*: (1) the Ratanasutta (Sn 222–238), (2) the Moraparitta (Cp 79–82), (3) the Dhajaggaparitta (SN 11.13) and (4) the Āṭānāṭṭiyaparitta (DN 32). It can safely be assumed that these four *parittas* in particular, but also the entire body of protective literature, were and still are the most frequently learned, recited and ritually employed texts of the Buddhist canonical archive (cf. Samuels 2005).

With regard to *parittas*, Shulman (2019: 219 and 223) distinguishes between those that make their protective function explicit in the text itself (“self-reflective” or “self-aware” *parittas*) and those that are employed as *parittas*, but do not contain any reference to protection in the text itself. Based on Shulman, I therefore propose to classify *paritta* texts as either explicit or implicit *parittas*, depending on whether they themselves contain references to their protective function in the text or are only used for this purpose. This usage is to be interpreted as magical in the following section.

4. PARITTA AS MAGIC

The characterization of *paritta* chanting as a form of magical practice is not an innovation. Melford Spiro, in his sociological study of Theravāda Buddhism in Burma (Spiro 1971), pointed towards the recitation of *paritta* texts as part of what he called “apotropaic Buddhism”, “a religion of magical protection” in which *paritta* recitation forms the “central core” (ib.: 140). This category represents the first of three types of Buddhism classified in his study. Spiro specifically describes *parittas* as “spells” (ib.: 144, cf. also ib.: 265), and the act of reciting *parittas* is “by any definition of ‘magic’, magical” (ib.: 143). In addition, Shulman remarks on the functional magic of *paritta* as follows: “[...] to some degree, paritta-s can be treated as ‘spells’ or ‘charms’ in a similar way to mantras” (Shulman 2019: 213). Richard Gombrich also discusses the recitation of *parittas* in the context of his examination of magical practices in Sri Lanka (Gombrich 1971: 237, 243 and 245). Unfortunately, Spiro and Gombrich do not provide

a definition of their respective concept(s) of magic. However, with the help of the criteria established by van Schaik, *paritta* chanting can definitely be interpreted as a magical practice.

As a first criterion, van Schaik lists the this-sidedness of the use of magical practices; they are "entirely performed for 'this-worldly' ends" (van Schaik 2020: 40). According to Spiro, the main concern of apotropaic Buddhism "is with important matters in this present existence: health and illness, drought and rain, calamity and tranquility" (Spiro 1971: 140). Elsewhere he similarly describes *paritta* as "a magical technology to deal with worldly suffering" (ib.: 160). As magical texts, *parittas* are therefore only of subordinate soteriological relevance. Their desired benefit consists in protecting this world from imminent danger or in engendering happiness and blessings in regard to an impending event.

This leads to the second of the characteristics indicated by van Schaik: the relative immediacy of the desired result. *Paritta* recitations are magical practices in so far as they are "characterized by a swift and clear relationship between ritual and result" (van Schaik 2020: 40); it is hoped that the protection or blessing of the invoked powers is manifest soon after the recitation of the texts. Spiro also refers to this criterion when he states that apotropaic Buddhism "assumes that the goals involved [...] can be attained by specific magical acts which, [...], either create immediate merit or enlist the assistance of supernatural beings and / or power" (Spiro 1971: 140).

As a third feature, van Schaik describes the free availability and relative simplicity of magical rituals in Buddhism; they are "usually quite brief, and the instructions are clear even to a nonspecialist" (van Schaik 2020: 40). The protective effect of a *paritta* should unfold simply by virtue of the recitation of the text. The recitation can be performed by religious non-specialists (laypeople) as well as by specialists (monks and nuns). Gombrich states: "Pirit [the Sinhalese expression for *paritta*] may be 'said' by anyone (even a layman, if no monk is present) [...]" (Gombrich 1971: 238). Spiro notes in this regard that laypeople usually learn some of the texts as part of their training in monastery schools (Spiro 1971: 265). Reciting the protective texts by heart is still a basic skill for novices up to the present day and is seen as an essential part of monastic education and training. Through this training the young monks and nuns not only become familiar with a portion of Buddhist literature that is still actively employed today, but also rehearse their role as religious specialists in society by ritual recitation (cf. Blackburn 1999; Greene 2004 and especially Samuels 2005). In relation to the recitation, Gombrich additionally describes the "extremely unspecific nature of the ceremony" (Gombrich 1971: 242). In the course of time a specific *paritta* ritual has taken

shape, the central instruments of which are, in addition to the recitation, a long white string and water. These, however, must be viewed as accessories and in no way as necessary. The cord is attached to the hands of a Buddha statue and held by all those in attendance at the recitation, monks and lay people, during the ritual verbal performance of the text. The water is either stored in a bowl or a bottle and positioned under a table on which lie a *paritta* manuscript or another text considered to be the word of the Buddha (*buddhavacana*). The cord and water become, as it were, charged with the protective power of the *paritta*, so that the cord is often cut into small pieces and subsequently worn around the neck or the wrist as a talisman by those who listened to the recitation (cf. Gombrich 1971: 237 and Schalk 1971). *Paritta* recitation rituals can greatly vary in length depending on the occasion, from a few minutes to over a day, up to a whole week. Its duration, however, does not change the fundamentally simple structure of the ritual.

If we add to van Schaik's understanding of magic, according to which the recitation of a *paritta* clearly manifests as a magical practice, the additional dimension of reference to supernatural powers proposed by Reynolds (cf. Reynolds 2016: 338), *parittas* can not only be identified functionally as magical texts, but, by focusing on the active powers (*ānubhāvā*) addressed in them, we can also illuminate in which way *parittas* are considered to be effective. This is the subject of the following part.

5. EFFECTIVE POWERS

Parittas are not deemed to work simply by virtue of the power of words being recited (cf. Shulman 2019: 212). Rather, a protective text is believed to unfold its apotropaic effect in taking recourse to and by invoking certain effective forces and powers. In the following, the four effective powers (*ānubhāvā*) of truth (*sacca*), the Buddha, deities (*devatā*) and benevolence (*mettā*) will be discussed as being of magical relevance.

As the first and most important of these forces must be considered that of truth (*sacca*). It is evidently prominent in the following excerpt from the Ratanasutta (Sn 222-238) of the Suttanipāta and is invoked by the repetition of “May there be good fortune by this truth!” for the purpose of imparting a blessing. The central truth of the statement is assumed to be the excellence of the qualities of the three jewels (*tiratana*), of the Buddha, *dhamma* and *saṅgha*, their superior nature and uniqueness in comparison to everything that could otherwise be considered a jewel (cf. also Shulman 2019: 226–231):

*yaṃ kiñci vittaṃ idha vā huraṃ vā, saggesu vā yaṃ ratanaṃ paṇītaṃ.
na no samaṃ atthi tathāgatena, idampi buddhe ratanaṃ paṇītaṃ.
etena saccena suvatthi hotu.*

*khayaṃ virāgaṃ amataṃ paṇītaṃ, yadajjhagā sakyamunī samāhito.
na tena dhammena samatthi kiñci, idampi dhamme ratanaṃ paṇītaṃ.
etena saccena suvatthi hotu.*

*yaṃ buddhaseṭṭho parivaṇṇayī suciṃ, samādhimānantarikaññamāhu.
samādhinā tena samo na vijjati, idampi dhamme ratanaṃ paṇītaṃ.
etena saccena suvatthi hotu.*

Whatever treasure there may be, here or beyond,
even a sublime jewel in the heavens,
none is like the Tathāgata,
regarding the Buddha, this is a sublime jewel.
May there be good fortune by this truth!

Exhaustion, dispassion, the sublime deathless,
which the composed sage of the Sakya* attained,
nothing is like this *dhamma*,
regarding the *dhamma*, this is a sublime jewel.
May there be good fortune by this truth!

The Buddha, the best, praised the pure composure,
which is spoken of as immediate,
there is no composure like it,
this, too, in regard to the *dhamma*, is a sublime jewel.
May there be good fortune by this truth!

The appeal to truth as a powerful force is not an innovation of Buddhist texts, but goes back to the origin of Ind(oari)an literature and religiosity, the Ṛgveda. Under the Vedic term *ṛta* it is invoked there as the truth of the cult song that celebrates the heroic deeds of the gods. Heinrich Lüders pioneered in describing the “magical power of truth” as a topos persisting since the hymns of the Ṛgveda through numerous texts of the Indian literal archive such as, e.g. the

* The Buddha, who came from the Sakya clan.

Mahābhārata (cf. Lüders 1944). Truth has become, as it were, a force of its own, through which even the gods receive strength and life:

Truth has freed itself from its foundation in the thought of the Indian; it has become an absolutely independent power that pervades heaven and earth and manifests itself in the regular phenomena of nature.*

Magically effective statements of truth receive their power from this "primordial ground" which constitutes their "ontological basis" (Lüders 1944: 10) and can take recourse to either a purely personal truth or to one of universal importance and scope (Lüders 1944: 5–6 and Mettiko 2017: 39). In the Pāli literature, such an act of testimony to the truth is called *saccakiriya* (cf. Lüders 1944: 4; Gombrich 1971: 263; Skilling 1992: 145; Mettiko 2017: 39; Piyadassi 2011: 5; and Shulman 2019: 230–231).

Such an 'act of truth' consisting in the proclamation of a general truth is carried out in the *Vaṭṭakaparitta*, which can be classified as an explicit *paritta* employing the classification mentioned in part four. It is taken from the *Vaṭṭapotakacariyā* of the *Cariyāpiṭaka*, a collection of verses in the *Kuddhakanikāya* of the *jātaka* type that portray previous births of the *bodhisatta*. In this case, the future Buddha was born as a quail chick. When a fire threatened to destroy an entire forest and all inhabiting animals had fled, the quail chick found itself completely abandoned. To protect itself from the approaching flames and impending danger of death, it invoked the protective power of truth with the following verses (Cp 79–82):

*atthi loke sīlaguṇo, saccaṃ soceyyanuddayā.
tena saccena kāhāmi, saccakiriyamuttamaṃ.*

*āvejjetvā dhammabalaṃ, saritvā pubbake jine.
saccabalamavassāya, saccakiriyamakāsahaṃ.*

*santi pakkhā apatanā, santi pādā avañcanā.
mātāpitā ca nikkhantā, jātaveda paṭikkama.
sahasacce kate mayhaṃ, mahāpajjalito sikhī.
vajjesi soḷasakarīsāni, udakaṃ patvā yathā sikhī.
saccena me samo natthi, esā me saccapāramī.*

* "Die Wahrheit hat sich im Denken des Inders von ihrem Grunde gelöst, sie ist eine absolute selbstständige Macht geworden, die Himmel und Erde durchdringt und sich in den regelmäßigen Erscheinungen der Natur bekundet.", Lüders 1944: 10.

There is in the world the boon of virtue,
truth, purity and compassion.
I will work through this truth
a supreme act of truth.

Knowing the power of the teaching,
recollecting former victors,
by abiding in the power of truth,
I work an act of truth.

Wings are not yet feathered,
legs are still immobile,
mother and father are gone,
Fire deity, back away!

Because of the truth that I have worked,
the great flames have spared sixteen *karīsa**,
like fire meeting with water.

Nothing is like my truth,
this is my perfection of truth.

Striking in this text is the parallelization of the power of the *dhamma* (*dhammabala*) with the power of truth (*saccabala*). The *dhamma* as a teaching can be considered as a representation and proclamation of the truth (*sacca* or *ṛta*) in the sense of Lüder's presentation. Likewise, the post-canonical *Bojjhaṅgaparitta*, which refers to the truth power of the so-called awakening factors (*bojjhaṅga*†), speaks of the power of the proclamation of truth, the word of truth, when it repeatedly expresses (Mettiko 2017: 124): "*Etena saccavajjena sotthi te hotu sabbadā*.", "By this word of truth, may you always have good fortune".

A *paritta* taking reference to a truth of purely personal relevance is the *Aṅgulimālaparitta*, which has been extracted from the *Aṅgulimālasutta* of the *Majjhimanikāya* (MN 86). It is on record as having been spoken by the infamous mass murderer *Aṅgulimāla*, who mended his evil ways after meeting the Buddha (during which meeting the Buddha is reported to have himself employed a feat of supernatural powers) and becoming his disciple. After this

* A unit of square measure.

† *Sati* 'mindfulness', *dhammavicaya* 'investigation of *dhammas*', *virīya* 'energy', *pīti* 'joy', *passaddhi* 'serenity', *samādhi* 'composure', *upekkha* 'equanimity'.

encounter, Aṅgulimāla is said to not have harmed any living being ever again. When he met on his alms round an expectant mother undergoing severe difficulties in labour, the text tells of his performing the following act of truth out of compassion for the woman and the yet unborn child: "*yato haṃ, bhagini, ariyāya jātiyā jāto, nābhijānāmi sañcicca pāṇaṃ jīvitā voropetā, tena saccena sotthi te hotu, sotthi gabbhassā*", "Since I was born by the noble birth, I do not recollect deliberately depriving a living being of life. By this truth you shall be healthy, shall the child be healthy!" In this narrative, the birth of the child is correlated with Aṅgulimāla's metaphorical birth in the community of noble ones (*ariyasaṅgha*, the Buddha's disciples), subsequent to which he had not injured any living being.

The founder of this community, the Buddha, is himself called upon for protection in other *parittas*. Shulman justifies this protective ability of the Buddha through his "unique position [...] in the cosmos" when he writes (Shulman 2019: 213):

[...] the Buddha is the core cosmological truth toward which all realities and beings are oriented, including divine beings both supportive and malevolent. The Buddha accesses this truth through his realization, and by his complete transformation embodies it with his very being, thereby allowing others to contact it through his presence, whether physically or symbolically.

The Buddha thus embodies the truth of the *dhamma* that he has realized; he not only has a share in it, but is this truth itself and is thereby able to engender protective and beneficial effects. Shulman also formulates this in the following way (Shulman 2019: 230): "the Buddha not only expresses or realizes truth but [...] he is this truth". The Buddha himself expresses this embodiment of truth in a discourse where he is on record as declaring to a monastic by the name of Vakkali (SN 22.87): "*yo kho, vakkali, dhammaṃ passati so maṃ passati*", "Vakkali, whoever sees the *dhamma* sees me". In other places the Buddha is similarly referred to as having 'become *dhamma*', *dhammabhūto* (e.g. in DN 27, MN 18, SN 35.116, AN 10.115). Embodying the cosmic truth of the *dhamma*, the Buddha is even able to exercise (protective) power over the forces of nature, which are at times themselves presented as deities. As Shulman puts it (Shulman 2019: 219): "The Buddha commands the worlds, including the skies and the divine or demonic beings that inhabit them". In the *candaparitta* and *suriyaparitta* of the *catubhāṇavāra* (cf. Piyadassi 2011: 32–33), which are taken from the *Devatāsaṃyutta* (SN 2.9 and 10), Rāhu, the "Lord of Asuras" (*asurinda*), threatens to devour the sun and moon. They seek refuge with the Buddha. Both the *candaparitta* and the *suriyaparitta* can be

classified as implicit *parittas*, because despite them dealing with protection as a theme, they do not explicitly extend this to all those who may recite the text:

*namo te buddha vīratthu, vippamuttosi sabbadhi.
sambādhapaṭipannosmi, tassa me saraṇaṃ bhava*

Homage to you, hero, awakened,
you are liberated in every way.
I have gotten into trouble, be my refuge!

The Buddha then banishes Rāhu with the words:

*tathāgataṃ arahantaṃ, candimā saraṇaṃ gato.
rāhu candaṃ pamuñcassu, buddhā lokānukampakā*

The moon took refuge in the Tathāgata, the arahat.
Rāhu, set the moon free,
(for) Buddhas have pity for the world.

In the Suriyaparitta, it is the sun instead of the moon who asks the Buddha for help and consequentially receives it.

The taking of refuge (*saraṇagamana*) in the Buddha (as well as in the *dhamma* and the *saṅgha*) is the defining characteristic of anyone converting to Buddhism. The Buddha is given epithets in literature that refer to him as the 'provider of security', *khemaṅkara* (MN 56) or describe him as the one 'who has nothing to fear from anywhere' (*akutobhaya*, e.g. Th 135 and 334; cf. also Skilling 1992: 110–111). This fearless protective role of the Buddha is not only thrown into relief textually, but also materially and artistically. Skilling summarizes (Skilling 1992: 111):

It is therefore no accident that in the earliest images of Mathurā, Gandhāra, Amarāvati and Nāgarjunakoṇḍa, the Buddha, whether seated or standing, is nearly always depicted in the *abhaya-mudrā*, the 'gesture of dispelling fear' [...].

That the driving away of fear remains a need also after canonical times is evidenced by more modern *paritta* compositions such as the Abhayaparitta (cf. Piyadassi 2011: 119–120 and Mettiko 2017: 142–143). The Dhajaggaparitta, which is considered to be particularly powerful,



Figure 1: The Buddha in the standing posture, showing the *abhayamudrā*, 150–200 CE, Gandhāra.

in a similar vein shows a theme of the dispelling of fear. It is taken from the Dhajjaggasutta (SN 11.13) and can be classified as an explicit *paritta*. In it the Buddha narrates the story of a war between celestials (*devatā*) and demons (*asurā*): In order to strengthen their morals, Sakka, the leader of the celestials, is reported to have advised his troops that whenever they should feel fear they may look to the top of his banner (*dhajjagga*), whereupon their fears would vanish. The Buddha notes that this may or may not work since Sakka himself is not free from lust, ill-will, and delusion and is therefore not free from fear (*sakko hi, bhikkhave, devānamindo avītarāgo avītadoso avītamoho*). Only the Buddha could truthfully lay claim to this and therefore is on record to have advised the monks:

ahañca kho, bhikkhave, evam vadāmi - 'sace tumhākaṃ, bhikkhave, araññagatānaṃ vā rukkhamūlagatānaṃ vā suññāgāragatānaṃ vā uppajjeyya bhayaṃ vā chambhitattaṃ vā lomahaṃso vā, mameva tasmīṃ samaye anussareyyātha - itipi so Bhagavā Araham sammāsambuddho vijjācaraṇasampanno sugato lokavidū anuttaro purisadammasārathi Sattha devamanussānaṃ buddho bhagavā'ti. mamañhi vo, bhikkhave, anussarataṃ yaṃ bhavissati bhayaṃ vā chambhitattaṃ vā lomahaṃso vā, so pahīyissati.

Monks, I tell you: "If you who have gone into the wilderness or to the root of a tree or to an empty dwelling should fear, freeze or get goose bumps, then you should remember me at that time - Thus is He the exalted one, worthy, perfectly awakened, accomplished in knowledge and conduct, fortunate, knower of the world, unsurpassed leader of persons to be trained, teacher of deities and humans, the awakened, the exalted one. 'If you remember me in this way, whatever fear, freezing or goose bumps there may be will be abandoned."

Similar things are said about reflection on the *dhamma* and the *saṅgha*, thereby establishing a continuity between the three jewels (*tiratana*), a continuity that is also assumed in the already mentioned Ratanasutta, when it recurs in its evocation of truth to the unsurpassable qualities of the Buddha, the *dhamma* and the *saṅgha* (cf. Shulman 2019: 227).

The Candaparitta and Suriyaparitta clearly show the superiority of the Buddha over the gods, who even ask him for help. Lüders points out that the ancient Indian gods were considered to be strengthened by truth. Truth harnesses the horses of the gods and bestows upon the gods their strength. Even those deities active in creation draw their power from the true word, yet none of them is the truth itself (cf. Lüders 1944: 8–11). It therefore seems only logical that the Buddha, as the embodiment of the truth of the *dhamma* is also superior to the gods in their power to protect. Nonetheless, since they represent a power that is superior to that

possessed by human beings, the deities are often asked for their protection in *paritta* texts, even if “only” at the side of the Buddha (cf. also Spiro 1971: 151 and 153). The “protective text of the peacock”, the *Moraparitta* (Piyadassi 2011: 30), which, taken from the *Morajātaka* (Ja I 2.1.9), first recurs on the rising and setting sun as a protective force and asks him for his care:

*Udet 'ayaṃ [/Apet' ayaṃ] cakkhumā ekarājā, harissavaṇṇo pathavippabhāso
taṃ taṃ namassāmi harissavaṇṇaṃ pathavippabhāsaṃ, tay 'ajja guttā viharemu divasaṃ.*

This sole ruler endowed with vision rises / descends, the golden illuminator of the earth,
I pay homage the golden illuminator of the earth, guarded by you we want to spend the day.

This is followed by the parallelization with the awakened and liberated ones, who, like the sun, metaphorically illuminate the world with their wisdom and brilliance (cf. Shulman 2019: 217):

*ye brāhmaṇā vedagū sabbadhamme, te me namo te ca maṃ pālayantu.
namatthu buddhānaṃ namatthu bodhiyā, namo vimuttānaṃ namo vimuttiyā.*

Those brahmins, knowing in all things, they have my reverence, may they protect me!
Homage to the awakened ones, homage to awakening, homage to the liberated ones, homage to liberation!

In analogy to the *Canda-* and *Suriyaparitta*, we also understand this text as an implicit *paritta*. Another text that turns to the deities for protection is the *Ratanasutta*, already quoted, which is introduced (Sn 222–223) with the following words, and, due to its direct invocation, can be considered as an explicit protective text:

*yānīdha bhūtāni samāgatāni, bhummāni vā yāni va antalikkhe.
sabbeva bhūtā sumanā bhavantu, athopi sakkacca suṇantu bhāsitaṃ.*

*tasmā hi bhūtā nisāmetha sabbe, mettaṃ karotha mānusiya pajāya.
divā ca ratto ca haranti ye baliṃ, tasmā hi ne rakkhatha appamattā.*

Spirits who have come here, whether earthly or in space –
may all spirits be gracious and respectfully listen to what is said.

Therefore, spirits, pay all heed and treat the human race benevolently.
Day and night they offer gifts – therefore, guard them carefully!

The presence of deities is often requested before the actual *paritta* recitation begins through an invitation (*ārādhana*) by the reciters (cf. Piyadassi 2011: 10 and Mettiko 2017: 42). These *paritta* preparations (*parittaparikkammāni*) are usually of post-canonical origin and belong to a later historical period (cf. Skilling 1992: 122). However, as the introduction of the Ratanasutta shows, this cannot be considered to apply to invoking *devas* as a protective power per se.

The last of the effective powers to be discussed is that of *mettā*, 'friendliness', 'benevolence' or even 'love' (as below). It can be regarded as a power in its own right that is not derived from truth. About the protective effect of benevolence, Shulman (2019: 232) writes:

Mettā is a central element in *paritta*, and is thought to have exceptional protective power, mainly because when one harbors a mind of love, any being who would contemplate harming him or her would be spontaneously appeased.

In order to protect the monks against various beings who could harm them while meditating in the wilderness, the Buddha is on record as having taught the Khandhaparitta (AN 4.67). With it, the reciters, upon encountering different types of dangerous beings, attempt to avert violence and harm by establishing an attitude of benevolence, as the following excerpt shows::

*apādakehi me mettaṃ, mettaṃ dvipādakehi me.
catuppadehi me mettaṃ, mettaṃ bahuppadehi me.
mā maṃ apādako hiṃsi, mā maṃ hiṃsi dvipādako.
mā maṃ catuppado hiṃsi, mā maṃ hiṃsi bahuppado.
sabbe sattā sabbe pāṇā, sabbe bhūtā ca kevalā.
sabbe bhadraṇi passantu, mā kañci pāpamāgamā.
appamāṇo buddho, appamāṇo dhammo.
appamāṇo saṅgho, pamāṇavantāni sarīsapāni.
ahivicchikā satapadī, uṇṇanābhī sarabū mūsikā.
katā me rakkhā katā me parittā, paṭikkamantu bhūtāni.*

I am benevolent towards the legless, I am benevolent towards the bipeds.
I am benevolent towards the four-legged, I am benevolent towards the many-legged.
May the legless not harm me, may the bipeds not harm me.
May the four-legged not harm me, may the multi-legged not harm me.

All beings, all life, entirely all creatures,
may they all experience happiness and not fall prey to evil.

The Buddha is limitless, the *dhamma* is limitless,
limitless is the *saṅgha*, but limited are the reptiles,
snakes and scorpions, centipede, spider, lizard and mouse.
I have built protection, I have built *paritta*. You beings, back away!

The practice of benevolence is described in the texts as being ideally characterized by the quality of limitlessness or boundlessness. In the above text it is correlated with the limitlessness of the three jewels and contrasted with the limitation of all possible harmful beings. With reference to the Buddha, Shulman expresses the effect of this boundlessness as follows (Shulman 2019: 233): “[...] becoming boundless, he has power over anything that has been formed; having no end, he can impact that which is limited and thereby transform it”. This limitless benevolence finds its most known expression in the Karaṇīyamettasutta. It is part of the Suttanipāta collection (Sn 143-152) and is likely one of the most famous texts of the Theravāda tradition. Like other *paritta*, it is part of the basic recitational repertoire of every novice. The following verses speak of boundless benevolence (Sn 150):

mettañca sabbalokasmiṃ, mānasaṃ bhāvaye aparimāṇaṃ.
uddhaṃ adho ca tiriyañca, asambādhaṃ averamasapattaṃ.

Towards the whole world, an unlimited benevolent mind should be developed,
Upwards, downwards and straight ahead, without narrowness, hatred and enmity.

The last verse of the *sutta* refers to the goal of any Buddhist development of the mind, the becoming free from all passions and wrong views and consequentially to no longer having to undergo the sufferings of rebirth:

diṭṭhiñca anupaggamma, sīlavā dassanena sampanno.
kāmesu vineyya gedhaṃ, na hi jātuggabbhaseyya punareti.

Not holding to a view, virtuous and endowed with insight,
having removed greed for sensual pleasures, one never again enters a womb.

This concluding verse shows that the *parittas* texts do not ultimately stand for themselves, but are embedded in a soteriological frame of reference that contextualizes and situates them meaningfully. The discussion of this framework is the subject of the final part of this article.

6. THE PLACE OF PARITTA IN SOTERIOLOGY

According to Schalk (1971: 124), the chanting of *parittas* responds, in its intended areas of protection, healing and prosperity, to the very needs of human existence, which manifest as insecurity and illness, as well as poverty and loneliness. Its function is to ward off danger, to drive out disease and to attract worldly gain, the goals of which are security, health and wealth. The magical practice of *paritta* recitation can be classified as part of what Spiro aptly called "apotropaic Buddhism" (Spiro 1971: 140–144). In addition to "kammatic Buddhism" (from *kamma* 'action, deed') and "soteriological Buddhism", it is part of a triad of different types of Buddhist practice, which differ in terms of their respective aims and the means employed.

Correlated with the presentations in Lewis (2016: 320), apotropaic Buddhism is geared towards a pragmatic type of wellbeing, which it tries to achieve mainly through the use of rituals, of which *paritta* recitations can be regarded as one of the most important. Kammatic Buddhism, whose goal is moral cultivation, mainly focuses on acts of generosity and the giving of donations (*dāna*) and on the performance of morally good deeds or accumulation of merit (*puñña*) in general. Those, according to the law of moral retribution (*kamma*), are believed to lead to a type of rebirth in heaven. The majority of Buddhist practitioners, who Lewis estimates at around 95%, follow one or both of these types of Buddhist religious practice. Soteriological Buddhism, on the other hand, whose aim is not only to deal with the contingencies of existence in a practical way, but to bring them to lasting cessation in the state of *nibbāna*, has always been the domain of a small religious elite (Lewis estimates 5%) who understand the practice of renunciation and meditation as legitimate means of attaining liberation.

The trinity of apotropaic, kammatic and soteriological Buddhism can be understood as forming a hierarchical system in which the next layer builds on the former. Gombrich comments (Gombrich 1971: 245): "[...] magic per se is not contrary to Buddhist doctrine, provided it serves only worldly ends". Only the practice of soteriological Buddhism, that is, practice in renunciation and meditation, is seen as leading to the type of knowledge resulting in permanent liberation of the mind, but this does not exclude the use of apotropaic and kammatic means for supporting purposes. The majority of practitioners do not look towards such a lofty

goal, or if so, only remotely. They pursue objectives that are closer to them in practical life, which lie in coping with the various contingencies of their existence as human beings. They pursue a “pragmatic philosophy for living”, as Reynolds (2011: 347) formulates, as an expression of which the recitation of protective *paritta* texts is to be interpreted. Spiro summarizes the inclusion of magical practices into soteriological Buddhism as follows (Spiro 1971: 143):

In brief, in response to an irrepressible psychological need, Theravāda Buddhism has come to include nonsoteriological goals within the domain of legitimate Buddhist concern, and in doing so it has added magical ritual to its previous inventory of legitimate Buddhist action.

However, as the numerous examples from primary literature have shown, a great age has to be attested to the use of *paritta* recitation as an apotropaic means, which leads back historically to the beginnings of Pāli literature and is religiously legitimized by the Buddha.

For Shulman, the juxtaposition of apotropaic Buddhism in the form of *paritta* recitation and of soteriological Buddhism indicates two different conceptions of the Buddha himself, the "Buddha of Buddhist civilization" and the "Buddha of the philosophers" (Shulman 2019: 238):

The Buddha of Buddhist civilization, as he appears through the ideological framework of *paritta*, is far removed from the Buddha of austere philosophers and meditators. The latter's Buddha remains aloof and inaccessible, beyond the realms of conditioned existence. [...] The Buddha of Buddhist society and religion, however, somehow finds his way back. Nominally beyond this world, he still acts in it for the welfare of his followers. [...] Perhaps the empty Buddha is superior to the full, active one; perhaps they are two sides of the same coin.

If we – in line with the presentations above – regard the Buddha as the embodiment of the universal truth of the *dhamma* that becomes active as an effective power in the recitations of the protective *parittas*, then these two faces of the Buddha, the silent and the living one, indeed reveal themselves as the two sides of the one coin of the truth of the *dhamma*.

SUMMARY

The practice of recitation of *paritta* protective texts, which has its origins in the Pāli *rakṣā* literature of the Theravāda Buddhist canon, can be identified as a magical practice within Theravāda Buddhism on the basis of four characteristics. First, the apotropaic *paritta* texts pursue the exclusively mundane aim of protecting those who are reciting and listening from danger and adverse circumstances. Second, it assumes an immediacy with regard to the desired result of the recitation. Its third characteristic is the simple and unspecific way of performance, so that a *paritta* recitation can be performed by anyone who wishes to engender its protective effects. Its fourth characteristic is the recursion to four magical effective powers, the first of which is that of truth, and which is understood as an independent force that is supposed to release its protective and apotropaic effects by a verbal "act of truth". As the embodiment of the universal truth of the *dhamma*, the Buddha is himself invoked as a protective power. Likewise the gods, who are considered to be strengthened by truth and represent a superior power to man, although they are still considered inferior to the Buddha in their protective ability and function. The last of the powers discussed is that of friendliness or benevolence, which provides protection by reversing harmful intentions. *Paritta* chanting can be understood as part of apotropaic Buddhism, whose magical and ritual means are used to cope with contingency. Improvement of outer circumstances in the form of better rebirth is sought with the help of kammatic Buddhism, which generally employs the means of the accumulation of merit, especially that of gift giving. The ultimate cessation of the experience of contingency itself is sought after in soteriological Buddhism, whose means lie in renunciation and meditation. *Paritta* chanting, as a magical apotropaic practice, thus has its provisional and supporting position in a stratified soteriological system, the ultimate goal of which is complete and final liberation from suffering.

ABBREVIATIONS

AN	Aṅguttaranikāya
Cp	Cariyāpiṭaka
DN	Dīghanikāya
KN	Khuddakanikāya
MN	Majjhimanikāya
S.	Sanskrit
SN	Samyuttanikāya
Sn	Suttanipāta
Th	Theragāthā

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Figure 1: [https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/b/b0/Gandhara%2C_shakyamuni_in_piedi%2C_forse_da_takhi-i-](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/b/b0/Gandhara%2C_shakyamuni_in_piedi%2C_forse_da_takhi-i-bahi_%28pakistan%29%2C_150-200_dc_ca.jpg)

[bahi_%28pakistan%29%2C_150-200_dc_ca.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/b/b0/Gandhara%2C_shakyamuni_in_piedi%2C_forse_da_takhi-i-bahi_%28pakistan%29%2C_150-200_dc_ca.jpg).

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