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EDITORIAL CONSULTANTS

Ratna HANDURUKANDE Ph.D.

Professor Emeritus, University of Peradeniya.

Y KARUNADASA Ph.D.

Professor Emeritus, University of Kelaniya

Visiting Professor, The Buddha-Dharma Centre of Hong Kong.

Oliver ABEYNAYAKE Ph.D.

Professor Emeritus, Buddhist and Pali University of Sri Lanka.

Chandima WIJEBANDARA Ph.D.

Professor, University of Sri Jayewardenepura.

Sumanapala GALMANGODA Ph.D.

Professor, University of Kelaniya.

Academic Coordinator,

Nāgānanda International Institute of Buddhist Studies, Sri Lanka.

Toshiichi ENDO Ph.D.

Visiting Professor, Centre of Buddhist Studies

The University of Hong Kong.

EDITOR

Bhikkhu KL DHAMMAJOTI 法光

Director, The Buddha-Dharma Centre of Hong Kong.

Chair Professor, School of Philosophy, Renmin University of China.

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CONTRIBUTORS

(In alphabetical order)

Bhikkhu ANĀLAYO Ph.D., D.Lit.
Professor,
Numata Center for Buddhist Studies,
University of Hamburg.

Bhikkhunī DHAMMADINNĀ Ph.D.
Associate Research Professor,
Dharma Drum Institute of Liberal Arts. Taiwan.
Director, Āgama Research Group,
Dharma Drum Buddhist College, Taiwan.

Bhikkhu KL DHAMMAJOTI Ph.D.
Director,
The Buddha-Dharma Centre of Hong Kong.
Chair Professor,
School of Philosophy, Renmin University of China.

DAZHEN
Researcher,
Tibet Autonomous Region Archives.

Pietro DE LAURENTIS LÜ Ph.D.
Visiting Professor,
School of Fine Arts Education,
Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts.

Xiaofang LÜ Ph.D.
Researcher,
Conservation Department,
National Museum of China.

Bhikkhu MIHITA (Suwanda H.J. SUGUNASIRI) Ph.D.

Adjunct Professor,
Divinity Faculty, Trinity College,
The University of Toronto.
Founder Editor Emeritus,
Canadian Journal of Buddhist Studies.

Kawa Sherab SANGPO Ph.D.

Director,
Institute of Antiquarian Studies,
Tibet University.

Peter SKILLING (Bhadra RUJIRATHAT) Ph.D.

Special Lecturer,
Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok.
Honorary Associate,
Department of Indian Sub-Continental Studies,
University of Sydney.

Xin SONG Ph.D.

Postgraduate Researcher,
Information Resource Management School,
Renmin University of China.

Junqi WANG Ph.D.

Lecturer,
Institute for the Study of Buddhism and Religious Theory,
Renmin University of China.

Venerable WEI SHAN Ph.D.

Associate Professor,
Institute for the Studies of Buddhism and Religious Theory,
Renmin University of China.

Charles **WILLEMEN** Ph.D.
Professor and Rector,
International Buddhist College, Thailand.

Meifang **Zhang** Ph.D.
Professor,
Information Resource Management School,
Renmin University of China.

The *Tevijjavacchagotta-sutta* and the *Anupada-sutta* in Relation to the Emergence of Abhidharma Thought

Bhikkhu ANĀLAYO

Introduction

In this article I intend to clarify aspects my research on the emergence of Abhidharma thought in reply to comments voiced by von Hinüber (2019) and Johnson (2019).¹ The aspects taken up are the significance of the *Tevijjavacchagotta-sutta* in relation to the attribution of omniscience to the Buddha and the comparative lateness of the *Anupada-sutta* as a testimony to a tendency for analyses of the mind to become increasingly concerned with providing a comprehensive coverage.

The Buddha's Omniscience

Later Buddhist traditions are in general agreement that the Buddha should be reckoned to have been omniscient. This idea may well have performed a key role in the development of Abhidharma thought, in the sense of an attempt to provide a coverage as comprehensive as possible, mirroring the omniscient knowledge that had come to be attributed to the Buddha.

The position that the Buddha was omniscient is not easily reconciled with the way the early discourses present him. A sufficiently strong argument in this respect was made by Gombrich (2007: 206f) as follows:

the idea that the Buddha was omniscient is strikingly at odds with the picture of him presented in every *Vinaya* tradition ... [which] show that the Buddha ... occasionally made a false start and found it necessary to reverse a decision. Since omniscience includes knowledge of the future, this is not omniscience.

Several early discourses of different transmission lineages support the impression that, during early stages in the development of Buddhist thought, the founder of the tradition was not yet seen as omniscient (Anālayo 2014: 117–125). In addition, a Pāli discourse (of which no parallel is known) explicitly reports the Buddha stating that he did not claim to be omniscient. The relevant passage in the *Tevijjavacchagotta-sutta* proceeds as follows:²

Vaccha, those who speak like this: ‘the recluse Gotama is omniscient and all-seeing, he claims to have complete knowledge and vision thus: ‘when walking, standing, awake, and asleep, knowledge and vision are established in me continuously and uninterruptedly,’ they are not speaking what has been said by me, but they are misrepresenting me with what is untrue and false.

The Pāli commentary struggles with this statement and reasons that it should not be read as a total rejection.³

‘He is omniscient and all-seeing, he claims to have complete knowledge and vision,’ this would indeed have to be granted. But ‘when walking ... etc. ... are established,’ this should not be granted. He indeed knows with omniscient knowledge when adverting to it. For this reason, keeping with what is not permissible and disregarding what is permissible he speaks like this.

The explanation is rather strained. The Buddha has explicitly been asked by Vacchagotta to clarify if the attribution of such a claim to himself was correct or rather a misrepresentation. Such a request is quite natural in the oral setting of ancient India, where being face to face with someone would offer a convenient opportunity to clarify if certain rumours are correct. Given the setting, it would be out of keeping with the way the Buddha is portrayed elsewhere if he had given a reply that is only partially true. Had the intention been to reject merely the notion of continuous presence of omniscience, it would have been more straightforward for him to be shown to say so directly.

In fact, the *Tevijjavacchagotta-sutta* continues with Vacchagotta inquiring further. Given that he has now found out what type of claim should not be attributed to the Buddha, as that would be a misrepresentation, he wants to know in what way one can avoid any misrepresentation, that is, what did the Buddha claim to have reached? Had the situation been as imagined in the commentary, at this point the Buddha should have clarified the type of omniscience he indeed claimed to have. Instead of doing that, however, according to the *Tevijjavacchagotta-sutta* the Buddha only claimed to have reached the three higher knowledges. These are recollection of his own past lives, the divine eye, and the destruction of the influxes, which are the three knowledges generally associated with the night of his awakening (Anālayo 2017b: 96–124). The continuity of the discussion in the *Tevijjavacchagotta-sutta* thereby makes it unmistakably clear that the commentary does not accurately explain the discourse.

The commentarial gloss may have been inspired by the fact that the *Cūladukkhakkhandha-sutta* attributes a claim to the continuous presence of omniscience to the Jain leader Mahāvīra (referred to by his clan's name as Nāthaputta or Nātaputta):⁴

Friend, the Nigaṇṭha Nāthaputta is omniscient and all-seeing, he claims to have complete knowledge and vision thus: 'when walking, standing, awake, and asleep, knowledge and vision are established in me continuously and uninterruptedly.'

This part of the *Cūladukkhakkhandha-sutta* is not supported by its three Chinese parallels, which do not take up Mahāvīra's claim to omniscience.⁵

An occasion where the Buddha could have refuted the type of claim attributed to Mahāvīra occurs in the *Kaṇṇakatthala-sutta*, which reports the Buddha being asked if he had in principle rejected the possibility of omniscience. The Buddha clarifies that this was yet another misrepresentation, as he had only rejected the possibility of knowing everything simultaneously:⁶

Great King, I acknowledge having made a statement in this way: 'There is no recluse or brahmin who knows everything and sees everything simultaneously, this is an impossibility.'

A similar statement occurs in parallels in the *Madhyama-āgama* and the Mūlasarvāstivāda *Vinaya*.⁷ The Pāli commentary explains that the key expression *sakideva* here refers to knowing all with a single adverting through a single state of mind, *ekacittena*.⁸

The point of the type of statement reported in the *Kaṇṇakatthala-sutta* and its parallels is thus only to clarify that it is not possible for a single act of knowing to comprise everything knowable. This does not reject the claim made by Mahāvīra as something that is in principle impossible. Perhaps this lack of explicit rejection motivated the position taken in the commentarial gloss on the *Tevijjavacchagotta-sutta*, in an attempt to establish the Buddha's omniscience and at the same time reject the omniscience claimed by Mahāvīra.

In a discussion of the *Tevijjavacchagotta-sutta*, von Hinüber (2019: 255) follows the commentarial gloss in stating that "the Buddha rejected the Jain view (as he does more often in the *Tiṭṭaka*), but not his own omniscience," in other words

the Buddha does not reject his being omniscient, but being omniscient in a particular way. For the Buddha explicitly rejects

the claim that he possesses omniscience (like Mahāvīra claims) of all and everything in one moment (p. 254).

This statement conflates the *Tevijjavacchagotta-sutta* formulation with the one found in the *Kaṇṇakatthala-sutta*. The *Tevijjavacchagotta-sutta*, just as the *Cūladukkhakkhandha-sutta*, is not about knowing all “in one moment.” The expression “in one moment” or “simultaneously” (*sakideva*) only occurs in the *Kaṇṇakatthala-sutta*.

There appear to be two types of omniscience under discussion in these discourses. One of these two positions is a claim attributed to Mahāvīra and mistakenly also attributed to the Buddha, which he rejects. This is the claim to continuous omniscience. The claim implies that at any time, whatever one’s posture, be it awake or asleep, one is able to access complete knowledge and vision. The other position, not attributed to either of the two and rejected by the Buddha as something in principle impossible, is the idea that everything can be known in one moment or simultaneously.

The difference between the two positions could be illustrated with the example of Wikipedia. The first position would amount to claiming that one has continuous internet access to whatever information can be found in Wikipedia; the second one would be the claim that one is able to access all information found in Wikipedia simultaneously. The latter is simply impossible; even with the best imaginable internet connection, one still can only open one page at a time.

In addition to being based on a conflation of these two types of omniscience, the discussion in von Hinüber (2019: 254) also expresses criticism of my study of the *Tevijjavacchagotta-sutta* in Anālayo (2014), as

the important middle part of the quotation is left out, which says: “whether I am walking or standing or sleeping or awake knowledge and vision are continuously and uninterruptedly present to me” (Bhikkhu Bodhi). If this sentence is taken into account the interpretation changes considerably.

Firstly, the assumption that this part changes the interpretation is based on following the commentarial gloss combined with the conflation mentioned above. Secondly, the implicit criticism that I left out parts of the original that were not congenial to my interpretation is unfounded. In fact, I had introduced the relevant discussion in Anālayo (2014: 117n61) by stating that “my discussion of omniscience is based on revised excerpts” from an article of mine published on this topic previously. In that earlier article, I had already examined the commentarial explanation (2006: 6):

The Pāli commentary tries to reconcile this statement with the view that the Buddha was omniscient by explaining that the Buddha's refusal referred only to the later part of this proclamation, to being endowed with omniscience "continuously." Yet, in that case one would expect the Buddha to refute only that part of the statement and explain the type of omniscience with which he was endowed, instead of reckoning the attribution of a claim to omniscience to him as misrepresentation, untrue, and contrary to the fact.

Following up the reference given by me to this article, which is freely available on the internet for download, could have clarified that there is no need for me to suppress part of the original in order to bolster my interpretation.⁹

Sāriputta's Analysis of Absorption

The other topic to be covered in this article is the *Anupada-sutta*'s description of Sāriputta's analysis of absorption. Several features of the discourse point to its comparative lateness, which makes it an important testimony to the evolution of Abhidharma thought.

In an introduction to her translation of the *Dhammasaṅgani*, C. A. F. Rhys Davids (1900/1922: viii) notes the occurrence of terminology in the *Anupada-sutta* that is distinctly late:

The intrusion of two words – of *anupada*, and of *vavatthita*, 'determined' – which are not the old idiom, suggest a later editing and show us that when this editing took place, the period of the compiling of the naïf crude analyses of the Abhidhamma Piṭaka was either at hand, or not far removed in time.

Nyanaponika (1949/1985: 54f) comments that

Though *anupada* does not occur frequently in the Piṭakas, it is also not at all an expression characteristic of any later period of Pāli literature; so we cannot draw any conclusions from the mere fact of rare occurrence. With regard to the other word, it is true that derivatives of the verb *vattheti*, *vavatthita* and particularly *vavatthāna*, are found very frequently in later canonical books as the *Paṭisambhidā-Magga* and the *Vibhaṅga*, and especially in the commentaries and the *Visuddhimagga*. But *vavatthita*, 'determined' or 'established', is likewise not such a highly technical term that the dating of a text could be based on that evidence alone.

Another argument has recently been made by Johnson (2019: 107), referring to the occurrence of the term *anupubbābhisaññānirodhasampajānasamāpatti* in the *Poṭṭhapada-sutta*.¹⁰ He notes that "it would be difficult to find this particular compound word outside of this one *sutta*,

yet this *sutta*, the *Poṭṭhapāda-sutta*, seems an authentic teaching of the Buddha.” He then reasons, in relation to the *Anupada-sutta*, that this discourse “contains enough unique elements to warrant some creative use of vocabulary and compound words befitting the particular emphasis of the teaching” (p. 108).

However, the compound in the *Poṭṭhapāda-sutta* combines terminology found regularly elsewhere: *anupubba*, “gradual,” *nirodha*, “cessation,” *sampajāna*, “clear knowing,” and *samāpatti*, “attainment.” The only real innovation is the addition of the prefix *abhi-* to the otherwise very common term *saññā*, “perception.” In contrast, terms like *anupada* and *vavatthita* are indeed foreign to the language of the Pāli discourses.

Moreover, the *Poṭṭhapāda-sutta* has parallels in Sanskrit and Chinese which, although not using exactly the same term, testify to a similar idea. The Sanskrit fragment parallel speaks of the “cessation of higher perception and feeling”, *abhisaṃjñāveditanirodha*.¹¹ The occurrence of *abhisaṃjñā* at the outset of this compound testifies to the existence in another reciter tradition of the only term in the *Poṭṭhapāda-sutta*’s compound that indeed seems to be unique to its exposition, *abhisaññā*. The *Dīrgha-āgama* parallel speaks of the “gradual attainment of the concentration on the cessation of perception and knowing,” 次第得想知滅定.¹² If this were to be translated into Pāli, it could become something quite closely corresponding to the phrase found in the *Poṭṭhapāda-sutta*.

Comparable support for the terminology in the *Anupada-sutta* terminology is not available, as no parallel is known to this discourse. This is not to take the position that absence of a parallel automatically implies lateness. As rightly pointed out by Skilling (2020), to question the authenticity of a discourse simply because it has no parallels is unconvincing, as it may have had counterparts in any of the canons that do not survive (see also Anālayo 2018). In the present case, the *Anupada-sutta* in fact shares the status of lacking parallels with the *Tevijjavacchagotta-sutta*, discussed above. It seems best to avoid drawing far-reaching conclusions based on such lack of parallels. What definitely results from such a situation is just that the evidence provided by such a discourse for reconstructing early Buddhist thought is comparatively weak and would be stronger if it had parallels that have a similar presentation.

Returning to the suggestion of a comparative lateness of the *Anupada-sutta*, another relevant observation, also made already by C. A. F. Rhys Davids (1900/1922: ix), is the inconsistent nature of the listing of mental

factors in descriptions of the absorptions in this discourse, where “two quite distinct lists are lumped together.” In the case of the first absorption, for example, the mental factors mentioned in the standard description found elsewhere in the discourses come with the conjunction *ca*. This conjunction is missing in the remainder of the list.¹³ The difference can best be evidenced by providing a literal translation:

application and sustaining and joy and happiness and mental unification and contact, feeling, perception, volition, mind, desire, determination, energy, mindfulness, equipoise, attention.

Such inconsistency is a fairly strong sign of a combination of two originally different listings. Johnson (2019: 110), however, objects to such a conclusion:

I think there is a very obvious reason for using “*ca*” in the list of *jhāna* factors in [the] *Anupada-sutta*, and dropping it in the second list in the same passage ... the word “*ca*” can denote things that are linked together in time and space. It is a good word to indicate factors that arise simultaneously. The latter list has a different purpose. It is designated to indicate sequence, not simultaneity. By listing factors without “*ca*” the effect of communicating a sequence (rather than simultaneity) is enhanced. Hence the title of the *Anupada-sutta*, with the idea of [a] sequence of mental states being one of the main points being taught. They occurred one by one, not at the same time.

For absorption to take place, the simultaneous existence of the factors in the second part of the list is also required. Being in the first absorption does not only necessitate application, sustaining, joy, happiness, and mental unification. If mindfulness and attention were to be missing, for example, the attainment of absorption could not happen.

Moreover, the phrase *anupada*, “step by step,” applies to all members of the above list. It is not relevant only to its second part. Thus the attempt to account for the irregular use of the conjunction *ca* in the above listing as intentional is not convincing. A more reasonable explanation is indeed that we have here a combination of what originally were two different lists.

The impression of a combination of originally different textual pieces finds further support in the circumstance, already noted by Schmithausen (1981: 231n116), that at times the resulting description of an absorption results in duplications:

The lists of the mental factors present in the various stages are clearly heterogeneous, each consisting of two different sets, the first of which comprises the specific factors of the respective stage, whereas the second list contains factors equally present in all stages (viz. *phasso*, *vedanā* etc.). In some instances, the mechanical combination of these two sets has led to repetition: *sati* occurs twice in the case of the Third *Dhyāna*, *upekkhā* in the case of the Third and Fourth *Dhyāna*.

However, Johnson (2019: 105) asserts that “the Buddha’s teaching as given in the *suttas*, often used duplication and redundancy.” It would perhaps be more correct to say that “repetition” is a recurrent feature of the early discourses. In contrast, the kind of doubling of terms found in the *Anupada-sutta* is indeed unusual. Although on its own indeed not decisive, it does support the impression that the discourse combines two originally different listings. The first part corresponds to the usual description of absorption attainment in the discourses, whose concerns are to facilitate absorption attainment by way of highlighting the most significant aspects of each level of such attainment. The second part, however, includes mental factors present in any state of mind. Its concerns are thus clearly different from those of the first part. Among Pāli discourses, an explicit listing of the presence in an absorption of mental factors that are found in every state of mind (such as contact, feeling, perception, and volition) is unique to the *Anupada-sutta* and has parallels only in Abhidharma texts.

Together with the other points surveyed above, it seems fair to conclude that arguments proposed by various scholars in support of the impression of the relative lateness of the *Anupada-sutta* present a convincing assessment of the discourse. Needless to say, the very fact of being included in the *Majjhima-nikāya* collection at the same time shows that the *Anupada-sutta* is not that late. In other words, such assessment need not result in a wholesale rejection of the discourse. Instead, it can be considered to provide a fascinating window on early trends in the development of Abhidharma thought.

Yet, according to Johnson (2019: 93) “the *Anupada-sutta* is often ignored by meditation teachers or considered to be inauthentic by scholars who propound the *Visuddhimagga*.” This seems curious, since the *Visuddhimagga* is clearly later than the *Anupada-sutta*. The problem here appears to be rather the possibility of relying on the *Anupada-sutta* to authenticate the idea of insight absorption, *vipassanā-jhāna*, as something already found in the early discourses.

However, the origin of the notion of *vipassanā-jhānas* appears to be quite recent, emerging as a strategic move adopted by Mahāsi Sayādaw in order to defend his approach to insight meditation against the objection that it bypasses the cultivation of absorption (Anālayo 2020). From having been employed as a strategy in a debate, the idea has quickly gained appeal among Buddhist modernists, presumably because it enables authenticating even shallow states of concentration with the prestigious label of being a “*jhāna*.” Attempts to argue that such states correspond to the description of absorption found in the discourses often rely on the *Anupada-sutta*, in the belief that it shows Sāriputta contemplating the arising and disappearing of mental factors while immersed in an absorption.

The type of reasoning involved can be exemplified with the statement by Gethin (2020b: 40) that the description of Sāriputta’s contemplation implies that his “knowledge occurs within each attainment.” In line with the resultant perspective, Gethin (2020a: 127 and 129f) then argues that the *Jhāna-saṃyutta* (SN 53) shows that practices listed earlier in the *Mahā-vagga* of the *Saṃyutta-nikāya* are typically developed while the practitioner is in absorption attainment. Yet, the *Jhāna-saṃyutta*, for which no parallel is known, appears to be simply the outcome of the proliferation of repetitions in the *Saṃyutta-nikāya*, by way of combining the standard description of the four absorptions with repetitions series found at the end of previous *saṃyuttas* in the *Mahā-vagga*. This does not imply that the practices described in these previous *saṃyuttas* require absorption. Take the first of these *saṃyuttas* on the noble eightfold path (SN 45). It could hardly be maintained that cultivation of path factors like right action or right livelihood, for example, involve absorption attainment. Such unconvincing type of conclusions can be caused by the idea that insight takes place during absorption, as supposedly testified by the *Anupada-sutta*.

This is indeed the position defended by Johnson (2019: 95) when he states that “in each of the *jhānas*, Ven. Sāriputta is aware and open to the arising of phenomena ... Ven. Sāriputta is having insight while in *jhāna*.” It follows that “in the *Anupada-sutta*, the *samādhi* practiced by Ven Sāriputta is not a state of intense concentration to the exclusion of various phenomena, but rather open, aware, and relaxed, allowing phenomena to arise.”

This assessment is best evaluated in the light of the actual description in the *Anupada-sutta*, where the relevant part proceeds as follows:¹⁴

Known to him these states arose, known they remained, known they disappeared. He understood thus: 'Indeed, in this way these states, which have not been for me, come into being; having been, they disappear.'

As already clarified quite some time ago by Vetter (1988, p. 69), "it is certainly not possible to observe, as is stated in the text, the disappearance of these qualities in any of these states [i.e., the absorptions], because they are constituted by these qualities." In other words, the arising and disappearance of the mental factors of an absorption can only be observed either before entry into absorption or else after emerging from it. If these factors were to disappear, the absorption attainment would concomitantly be lost. The same holds for their arising, which implies that up to that point they had not been present. Without their presence, the absorption cannot come into being.

The situation could perhaps be illustrated with the example of someone using warm water mixed with medicinal herbs to bathe a wounded hand. The patient might immerse the hand into the water that "having been boiled, cools down," and once it has become too cold, starts heating it again, as a result of which his hand is in water that "not being warm, comes to be warmed." The popular interpretation of the *Anupada-sutta* is somewhat as if, on hearing this description, someone concludes that the hand was kept immersed even when the water was actually boiling. That is not possible, since immersion in boiling water would damage the hand. Similarly, cultivating insight into impermanence while being in an absorption is not possible, since attending to variety and change would damage the mental unification and stillness of an absorption.¹⁵

In this way, the perceived need to defend the authenticity of the *Anupada-sutta* is based on a misreading of its actual content. Whether early or late, the discourse simply does not provide support for the idea that contemplation of impermanence can take place while being immersed in the four absorptions.

Conclusion

The *Tevijjavacchagotta-sutta* does indeed testify to the lateness of the attribution of omniscience to the Buddha and the *Anupada-sutta* to the lateness of the tendency for analysis of the mind to attempt a comprehensive coverage. As of now, I see no reason to revise any aspect of my reconstruction of the beginnings of Abhidharma (Anālayo 2014) as being an attempt to achieve a comprehensive coverage that mirrors the notion of omniscience which by that time had come to be attributed to the Buddha.

Abbreviations

D	Derge
DĀ	<i>Dīrgha-āgama</i>
DN	<i>Dīrgha-nikāya</i>
MĀ	<i>Madhyama-āgama</i>
MN	<i>Majjhima-nikāya</i>
Ps	<i>Papañcasūdanī</i>
SN	<i>Samyutta-nikāya</i>
T	Taishō

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Notes

- 1 The latter more specifically criticizes Sujato and Brahmali 2014.
- 2 MN 71 at MN I 482,14.
- 3 Ps III 195,19.
- 4 MN 14 at MN I 92,35.
- 5 MĀ 100 at T I 587b18, T 54 at T I 849a17, and T 55 at T I 850c6.
- 6 MN 90 at MN II 127,28.
- 7 MĀ 212 at T I 793c6 and D 1 *ḍul ba, kha* 88b1 or Q 1030 g 81b6; see Anālayo 2014: 120.
- 8 Ps III 357,2.
- 9 A not entirely adequate treatment of my work is also evident in the remark by von Hinüber 2019: 247n40 that “Bhikkhu Anālayo seems to hide the embarrassing wording of Upaka’s answer in a footnote,” made with reference to Anālayo 2011: 184n214. This forms part of a discussion by von Hinüber 2019: 247 of the report of the first encounter the recently awakened Buddha had with someone else, where “Upaka remains sceptical, which was hard to digest for later Buddhists.” Now, the point of my footnote 214 is actually to present evidence for a suggested overall pattern of the verse exchange between the Buddha and Upaka, as the parallel versions differ in regard to the sequence and at times also content of these verses. His final reaction at the conclusion of this exchange comes up earlier in my comparative study, discussed in the main text rather than in a footnote (Anālayo 2011: 183): “during this meeting, the Buddha proclaimed that he had reached full awakening. This proclamation apparently did not convince Upaka, since all versions report that he left the Buddha and took a different road.” This is far from an attempt to hide the fact that the Buddha’s first encounter after his awakening did not result in a successful conversion.
- 10 DN 9 at DN I 184,26.
- 11 Melzer 2006: 256 (fragment 418r1); see also Kudo and Shono 2015: 433 (reconstruction of Or 15009/625 verso 6).
- 12 DĀ 28 at T I 110cs.
- 13 MN 111 at MN III 25,15: *vitakko ca vicāro ca pūi ca sukhañ ca cīttekaggatā ca phasso vedanā saññā cetanā cittam chando adhimokkho viriyaṃ sati upekkhā manasikāro.*
- 14 MN 111 at MN III 25,18.
- 15 For a more detailed discussion see Anālayo 2017a: 110–150 and 2019.

