

# THE AUTHENTICITY OF THE PALI CANON

By Dr. Douglas Burns

To what extent does the Pali Canon represent the original teaching of the Buddha? In all probability Buddha's teachings were not put into writing until the first century B.C., or about 500 years after his death. However, scholars such as Prof. Rhys Davids and others have stated that the suttas and the Vinaya were probably completed (though not written) in their present form within a century after the Buddha's demise and certainly were completed before the time of Emperor Asoka (270-230 B.C.). Dr. Richard Gard believes that the Pali and Sanskrit schools of Buddhism developed independently and that neither was copied from the other. If this is true, then most of the Theravada doctrines probably are authentic, for there is a considerable amount of similarity between the Pali and early Sanskrit writings. Perhaps the most significant fact to contend their authenticity is the internal consistency of the Pali scripture themselves. Though these writings are several times larger than the Bible, contradictions are rare, and the essential teachings of the Four Noble Truths and the other paramount features of the Dhamma are the major themes throughout the entire Sutta Pitaka.

According to the Theravada tradition, a council was held three months after the Buddha's demise at which time all of his discourses were recited. Groups of "reciting monks" were then appointed, and it was the duty of each group to memorise thoroughly specific sections of the Dhamma. On occasions groups which had memorised the same sections would confer with each other as a means of cross checking and verification. Thus the oral tradition of Buddhism is said to have been carefully preserved by men of advanced mental discipline until such time committed to writing. Such was probably the case. Even today groups of reciting monks still carry on their selected portions of the Dhamma, and occasionally monks have committed the entire Tripitaka to memory: Also, the repetitious style in which the suttas are recorded probably was a device to facilitate memorising. For it is quite unlikely that such repetitions represent the exact wording of unrehearsed dialogues, nor are they any convenience to reading or writing.

This tendency to modify the Buddha's dialogues into repetitions and verbose stanzas gives credence to the assertions of those who claim that the Buddha was correct, and the discrepancies with science have resulted from errors in recording his sayings. For example, let us assume that the Buddha did describe the arrangement of solar systems, galaxies and galactic in the same way as now described by modern astronomy. One can easily see how a quest for rhetorical symmetry and repetition would lead to the description of 1000 X 1000 X 1000

world systems each like our own, as are now recorded in the Anguttara – Nikaya. In a similar manner the Buddha stating that the world will end by solar system colliding with other suns could easily have been modified into the description of seven suns appearing one by one in the sky.

Or again let us suppose that the Buddha did teach evolution of exactly the same sort as taught by Darwin. His disciples were men astute in matters of ethical and spiritual concern and relatively ignorant of science as we know it today. Consequently, one would expect that the Agganna Sutta, in which the Buddha describes evolution, would, from the scientific viewpoint, over-emphasise the moral and psychological aspects of evolution. And conversely, matters of major concern to modern evolutionary theory would appear relatively unimportant to the early recorders of the Dhamma and thus would become either omitted or inadvertently modified.

But the question we must now answer is: How reliable is a system of oral tradition when extended over a period of several generations? Perhaps the best means of answering this question is to examine a similar situation which existed until recently in the illiterate Polynesian cultures, especially the New Zealand Maori.