
ĀGAMA AND AṄGA IN THE EARLY BUDDHIST ORAL TRADITION

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Abstract

In this paper I explore the significance of the set of nine or twelve *aṅgas* of texts as reflected in early Buddhist discourse literature and in relation to the division of texts into *āgamas* or *nikāyas*.

Key Words

Āgama, Aṅga, Early Buddhism, Nikāya, Oral Transmission

The Term *Āgama* in the Singular

The term *āgama* used in the singular occurs in the Pāli discourses, often qualifying a learned monk to be *āgatāgama*, literally one who has “obtained the *āgama*”.¹ Such references often form part of a description of learned elders whom one would approach to receive clarifications regarding the teachings given by the Buddha.²

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¹ Similar references can also be found in Vin I 119,22, Vin I 127,30, Vin I 337,12, Vin I 338,20, Vin II 8,28, Vin II 55,19, Vin II 98,5, Vin II 299,16, and Vin IV 158,18, where notably the last case involves a learned layman.

² AN 3.20 at AN I 117,28, AN 6.51 at AN III 361,23, and AN 10.11 at AN V 15,30.

Alternatively, the passage in question may take up the need for such learned elders to give teachings.³

Most of these references occur in discourses in the *Āṅguttara-nikāya*, of which no parallels have been preserved. In the case of one such reference in the *Mahāgopālaka-sutta* of the *Majjhima-nikāya*, however, three parallels preserved in Chinese translation also mention such elders. Yet they only qualify them as “learned”, without bringing in the other epithets used in the *Mahāgopālaka-sutta* and thus also without a counterpart to *āgatāgama*.⁴

In the *Mahāparinibbāna-sutta* one or several elders who have “obtained the *āgama*” feature as possible sources of a teaching that requires further verification in order to determine whether it is indeed in accordance with the teachings already known and accepted.⁵ The Sanskrit fragment parallel has preserved only a reference to the elders as sources of a teaching in terms of their being upholders of the discourses and the *Vinaya*, to which the Tibetan version adds also the upholders of the summaries.⁶ A *Dīrgha-āgama* parallel extant in Chinese translation describes these elders as being learned and alternatively as being upholders of the discourses, the *Vinaya*,

³ AN 4.160 at AN II 147,²⁹ and AN 5.156 at AN III 179,².

⁴ MN 33 at MN I 221,²¹ (=AN 11.18 at AN V 349,¹⁶) describes the elders as “learned, have obtained the *āgama*, are upholders of the Dharma, upholders of the *Vinaya*, and upholders of the summaries”, *bahussutā āgatāgama dhammadharā vinayadharā mātikādharā*. SĀ 1249 at T II 343a²⁵ and a discourse quotation in T 1509 at T XXV 74a²⁸ use the expression 多聞; an individually translated discourse, T 123 at T II 546c⁴, instead employs the expression 學問 to qualify the elders as “learned”.

⁵ DN 16 at DN II 125,⁶ (= AN 4.180 at AN II 169,¹⁸), where this forms part of the formulation of the four great standards, *mahāpadesa*.

⁶ Fragment 360 folio 181 V6, Waldschmidt 1950: 24: *sūtradharā vina[yadharā]* and folio 182 R2 *[vi]nayadh[arā]*; Waldschmidt 1951: 243 (§24.16): *mdo sde 'dzin pa 'dul ba 'dzin pa ma lta bu 'dzin pa* (the transliteration style has been adjusted).

and the code of rules.⁷ In a counterpart in the *Ekottarika-āgama* preserved in Chinese translation, the learned elders are capable in reciting the discourses and upholding the Dharma.⁸ Thus none of the parallels to the *Mahāparinibbāna-sutta* has a counterpart to *āgatāgama*.

This does not mean, however, that the expression *āgatāgama* is only attested in Pāli discourses. Two discourses in the *Madhyama-āgama* have the same phrase as part of a description of a learned monk. In these two cases, the Pāli counterparts do not have the corresponding expression.⁹

In a discourse in the *Aṅguttara-nikāya* a monk, who has not yet memorized the discourses, is encouraged to “learn the *āgama*”, *āgamaṃ pariyāpuṇassū ti*.¹⁰ Another *Madhyama-āgama* discourse somewhat similarly speaks of being capable at *āgama* recitation, which here is part of the description of a learned monk who might pride himself on his learning.¹¹

In sum, the expression *āgama* in the singular serves as one of several terms to express that a learned monk was familiar with the orally

⁷ DĀ 2 at T I 17c15: 多聞 (T 7 at T I 195c23 and 196a3 has comparable references to being learned) and DĀ 2 at T I 17c27 and 18a11: 持法, 持律, 持律儀者.

⁸ EĀ 28.5 at T II 652b17, c3, and c10: 誦經, 持法 ... 博學多聞.

⁹ MĀ 1 at T I 421b19, b21, and b23: 阿含及所得 and MĀ 95 at T I 577b8, b11, and b14: 阿含及其所得; these references to being *āgatāgama* have no counterpart in the listing of otherwise comparable qualities in the parallels AN 7.64 at AN IV 114,3 and AN 10.53 at AN V 96,6.

¹⁰ AN 10.44 at AN V 80,23; a recommendation also given in Vin II 249,16.

¹¹ MĀ 85 at T I 561b27, b28, c1, and c2: 諳阿含. The corresponding passage in the parallel MN 113 at MN III 39,18+31 has two separate cases, where a monk could be “learned”, *bahussuto*, or else an “upholder of the *Vinaya*”, *vinayadharo*, none of which involves a reference to *āgama*.

transmitted discourses by the Buddha and his disciples.¹² Although this type of usage is attested in discourses of more than one tradition, actual instances of its occurrence are as a rule not supported by their respective parallels.

A usage of the term *āgama* comparable to these instances in Pāli texts and *Madhyama-āgama* discourses can be seen in Asoka's Rock Edict XII, which combines a reference to being learned, *bahusrutā*, with *kallāṇāgamā* (Girnar version).¹³ Similarly the Jain *Vavahāra* refers to a learned monk as *babbhāgamaṃ*.¹⁴

The Four Āgamas

Accounts of the first *saṅgīti* in the Dharmaguptaka, Haimavata (?), Mahāsāṅghika, Mahīśāsaka, and Mūlasarvāstivāda *Vinayas* employ the plural form *āgamas* in their description of the compilation of the teachings that according to tradition took place under the leadership of Mahākassapa soon after the Buddha's demise.¹⁵ The different

¹² Barua 1923: 359 comments that "in the Pāli discourses, ascribed to the Buddha himself, the expression *Āgama* is often met with, no doubt in the sense of a floating body of Buddhist literary traditions."

¹³ Bloch 1950: 123,29, Girnar: *bahusrutā ca assu kallāṇāgamā ca*, Kālsī: *bahuṣṣuta cā kayyānāgā ca*, Śāhbāzgarhī: *bahuśruta ca kalaṇagama ca*, Mānsehrā: *bahuśruta ca kayāṇagama ca*.

¹⁴ *Vavahāra* 1.35, Schubring 1918: 15,4+6; cf. also Caillat 1965: 50.

¹⁵ The Dharmaguptaka *Vinaya*, T 1428 at T XXII 968b19, the Haimavata (?) **Vinayamātrkā*, T 1463 at T XXIV 820a23, the Mahāsāṅghika *Vinaya*, T 1425 at T XXII 491c16, and the Mahīśāsaka *Vinaya*, T 1421 at T XXII 191a24, agree on using the expression 阿含, and the Mūlasarvāstivāda *Vinaya*, T 1451 at T XXIV 407b27, uses the expression 阿笈摩 with its counterpart in *lung* in D 6 da 314a7 or Q 1035 ne 297a4; on *lung* cf. the discussion in Eimer 1983: 23. Although the account of the first *saṅgīti* in the Sarvāstivāda *Vinaya* does not refer to the textual collections with either *āgama* or *nikāya*, elsewhere the expression 阿含 occurs repeatedly in this text in evident reference to textual collections that are to be memorized and recited; cf., e.g., T 1435 at T XXIII 453c17 for an occurrence, alongside a reference to the *Vinaya*, in relation to the undertaking of recitation. On the school affiliation of T 1463 cf. Anālayo 2011b: 270f note 11.

Vinayas reporting this event agree that the Buddha's personal attendant Ānanda recited the discourses on this occasion.

They further report that the resultant textual material was divided into groups, presumably to facilitate oral transmission, by collecting long discourses and discourses of middle length into corresponding *āgamas*; and short discourses were further separated into those assembled according to topic and those assembled according to a numerical principle (a discourse can discuss one or more items and can accordingly be allocated to the Ones, the Twos, the Threes etc.).

This division corresponds to the four *Āgamas*, which comprise a *Dīrgha-āgama* containing mostly long discourses, a *Madhyama-āgama* that assembles predominantly middle length discourses, a *Samyukta-āgama* with discourses that share a common topic, and an *Ekottarika-āgama* that follows an incremental numerical principle from Ones to Elevens (earlier perhaps only reaching up to Tens).¹⁶

The accounts of the first *saṅgīti* in the Mahāsāṅghika and Mahīśāsaka *Vinayas* adopt the above sequence of *dīrgha*, *madhyama*, *saṃyukta*, and *ekottarika*,¹⁷ which corresponds to the order of the corresponding four collections adopted in the Theravāda canon.¹⁸ The Dharmaguptaka *Vinaya* is closely similar, in so far as it adopts the sequence *dīrgha*, *madhyama*, *ekottarika*, and *saṃyukta*, thereby

¹⁶ For a survey of the four *āgamas* cf. Anālayo 2015a.

¹⁷ T 1425 at T XXII 491c₁₆ (another sequence can be found in a different context in T 1425 at T XXII 492c₁₈, which lists the *Vinaya*, the Abhidharma, and then the *Samyukta-āgama*, the *Ekottarika-āgama*, the *Madhyama-āgama*, and the *Dīrgha-āgama*) and T 1421 at T XXII 191a₂₄.

¹⁸ The account of the first *saṅgīti* in the Theravāda *Vinaya*, Vin II 287,¹⁶ only mentions the *Brahmajāla* (DN 1) and the *Sāmaññaphala* (DN 2) as the first two discourses recited and thus does not explicitly indicate the order of the four collections.

having only the last two in the opposite order.¹⁹ These four traditions thus agree on beginning with the long discourses, followed by those of middle length and then the shorter discourses.

The Haimavata (?) *Vinaya* instead adopts the sequence *ekottarika*, *madhyama*, *dīrgha*, and *saṃyukta*,²⁰ and the Mūlasarvāstivāda *Vinaya* has the exact opposite by listing the four collections as *saṃyukta*, *dīrgha*, *madhyama*, and *ekottarika*.²¹ These two versions thus neither follow the pattern observed in the other versions of proceeding from long to short discourses, nor do they adopt the opposite pattern of moving from short to long discourses.

The central point conveyed by the account of the first *saṅgīti* in the different *Vinayas* is that the distinction into four *āgamas* was considered a creation by the reciting elders soon after the Buddha's demise, a shared division whose sequential order underwent some independent evolution in the different traditions. The discourse passages mentioned earlier that use the term *āgama* in the singular as a referent to what appears to be the whole body of discourses might then reflect a stage preceding this basic structural division into four collections, a time when the body of orally transmitted texts had not yet been systematically structured in the way reported in the accounts of the first *saṅgīti*.

¹⁹ T 1428 at T XXII 968b19.

²⁰ T 1463 at T XXIV 820a23.

²¹ T 1451 at T XXIV 407b27 and D 6 da 314a7 or Q 1035 ne 297a5. Similar to the case of the Theravāda *Vinaya*, the Sarvāstivāda *Vinaya* does not give a full list, but only mentions the discourse recited first, which in its account is the first discourse spoken by the Buddha, parallel to the *Dhammacakkappavattana-sutta* (SN 56.11); cf. T 1435 at T XXIII 448b13. The pride of place given to the Buddha's first discourse here might be related to what appears to be a reworking of this discourse in the Mūlasarvāstivāda and Sarvāstivāda traditions. As a result of this apparent reworking, the three turnings become the essence of the first discourse, with the perplexing result that Kauṇḍinya (Pāli Kondañña) attains stream-entry after hearing about these three turnings to be applied to the four truths, but only afterwards receives information on what these four truths actually mean; cf. in more detail Anālayo 2012.

The Theravāda *Vinaya* account of this first *saṅgīti* differs in so far as it does not use the expression *āgama*, but instead refers to the same type of collections of discourses as *nikāyas*.²² Another difference is that the Theravāda *Vinaya* speaks of “five” *nikāyas*.²³ In addition to the four *nikāyas* that correspond to the four *āgamas*, this expression includes the *Khuddaka-nikāya*, a miscellany of texts also known in other traditions, where this fifth grouping is at times rather considered to be a *piṭaka*.²⁴

Not only the *Vinaya* accounts of the first *saṅgīti* differ in their usage of *āgama* or *nikāya*, but also accounts of the first *saṅgīti* in the *Samantapāsādikā* and its Chinese counterpart differ. The Pāli version’s reference the “four *nikāyas*” (as distinct from the fifth) has as its equivalent “the four *āgamas*” in the Chinese counterpart.²⁵

It is noteworthy that the Pāli *Vinaya* and its commentary give preference to the term *nikāya*, which is not employed in the Pāli discourses as a referent to scriptural collections. Instead, the Pāli discourses rather employ the expression *āgama*. This is significant in so far as it gives the impression that expressions like *āgatāgama* or *āgamaṃ pariāpuṇassu*, after having been introduced, where

²² Tournier 2014: 25 note 95 notes that “among the southern Mahāsāṅghika sub-schools, which transmitted a canon in Prakrit, there is epigraphical evidence that at least the Apamahāvīnaseliyas also called the divisions of their *Sūtrapiṭaka nikāya*.”

²³ Vin II 287,²⁷ speaks of the recitation of the *pañca nikāye*.

²⁴ For the classic study on the topic cf. Lamotte 1956.

²⁵ Sp I 16,¹⁴ *cattāro nikāye* and T 1462 at TXXIV 675b22: 四阿鎔, translated in Bapat and Hirakawa 1970: 9; a difference already noted by Lamotte 1958: 167. Heirman 2004: 385 comments that “when the translator adapted the text to the Chinese environment, he hereby translated all five *nikāyas* as *āgama*.” The usage of the term *āgama* nevertheless continues in Pāli commentarial literature. Thus, e.g., Vism 442,³⁰ defines knowledge of *āgama* to be mastery the teachings of the Buddha, be it only the Chapter on Similes (the third chapter in the *Majjhima-nikāya*), and Mp II 189,¹⁷ equates the *nikāyas* with the *āgamas* and concludes that *āgatāgama* refers to mastery of one of these.

kept in place without being adjusted to the eventual predilection in the Theravāda tradition for the term *nikāya*.

The Nine *Aṅgas*

A recurrent reference in the Pāli discourses provides a list of nine items that eventually came to be known under the heading of being *aṅgas*, although the term *aṅga* itself is not used for these in the discourses. In what follows I list the nine items, translating them in a way that reflects my current understanding of the probable implications of each, without intending to present at a definite solution of their individual significance:

- discourses [involving lists] (*sutta*),²⁶
- prose combined with verse (*geyya*),²⁷
- explanatory expositions (*veyyākaraṇa*),²⁸
- stanzas (*gāthā*),
- inspired utterances (*udāna*),

²⁶ According to Przyluski 1926: 341, the use of the expression *sutta* in the context of the *aṅgas* has the specific sense of an exposition that begins with an enumeration of a particular item, “un *sūtra* était un sermon commençant par un exposé numérique” (e.g., “there are four things ... what are the four”, etc.). Ñāṇaponika 1977: 13f explains that *sutta* in its Buddhist usage refers to a presentation of the Dharma that is internally connected by a thread, as it were, “eine zusammenhängende Lehrdarstellung ... durch die sich ein gemeinsamer Faden hindurchzieht.” The need to ‘string together’ material for recitation also emerges from a reference to the nine *aṅgas* in Vin III 8,7, according to which the teachings of former Buddhas who did not give much instructions in terms of the nine *aṅgas* were quickly lost, comparable to flowers not held together by a string; for a survey of publications relevant to the alternative explanation that derives *sutta* from *su* + *ukta*, “well spoken”, cf. Anālayo 2011a: 150 note 22.

²⁷ Jayawickrama 1959: 12 comments that “*geyya* (from $\sqrt{gai}$ *gāyati*, to sing), seems to represent the *ākhyāna*-type containing stanzas punctuated with narrative prose.” According to Mayeda 1964: 24, *geyya* “is not, however, a simple juxtaposition of prose and verse. The prose section which comes first is repeated once again in the verse section which follows. This *repetition* of similar contents is the key point of *geyya*”; cf. also Burnouf 1844/1876: 47.

²⁸ For a detailed discussion of this term cf. Anālayo 2008b.

- quotes (*itivuttaka*),
- birth stories (*jāataka*),
- marvels (*abbhutadhamma*),
- answers to questions [between disciples] (*vedalla*).²⁹

Comparison with similar listings in the discourse parallels of other traditions shows that these usually taken the form of an expanded listings of twelve.³⁰ This expanded listing in turn suggests an adjustment to the sequence of the nine *aṅgas* as reflected in Pāli sources. On adopting this adjustment, marvels (*abbhutadhamma*) comes to stand in last position, preceded by answers to questions (*vedalla*).³¹

For *abbhutadhamma* to be the last member of the list would conform to the principle of waxing syllables. According to this principle, several terms in a list tend to be arranged in such a way that words with fewer syllables are followed by words with an equal or a higher number of syllables.³²

This in turn implies that the assumed shift of *vedalla* to last position would have taken place only at a time when the demands of facilitating oral transmission no longer made themselves felt

²⁹ Karashima 2015: 136 explains that “the most original form ... could have been **vedulla*, a Middle Indic form corresponding to *vaitulya* (> *vetulla* > **vedulla*), which might mean ‘not’ (*vi*) ‘of the same kind’ (*tulya*, MW, s.v.), i.e. ‘unusual, irregular’. Scriptures consisting of repeated questions and answers, not always between the Buddha and another person, but rather between two disciples, might have been labelled as **vedulla*, because they were ‘unusual, irregular’. This form presumably changed in the Pāli tradition to *vedalla*.”

³⁰ Lamotte 1956: 263 note 2 explains that this twelve-fold presentation prevails in the *Āgamas*, in the Chinese *Vinayas* (except for the Mahāsāṅghika *Vinaya*), in the main treatises of the Sarvāstivāda, Sautrāntika, Vaibhāṣika and Yogācāra schools, and in most Mahāyāna *sūtras*. For studies of the listing of twelve cf., e.g., Hirakawa 1963: 61–65, Lamotte 1980: 2281–2305, and Nattier 2004.

³¹ Cf. the survey provided in table form in Mayeda 1964 and Skilling 2013: 157.

³² Anālayo 2009.

as acutely as earlier. The possible demotion of *vedalla* to the last place in Pāli listings of the nine *aṅga* might be related to the negative associations that *vedallakathā* carries in a discourse in the *Aṅguttara-nikāya* as leading to the future corruption of the Dhamma and *Vinaya*,³³ and to the even more negative connotations of the term *vetulla* in Theravāda chronicles.³⁴

Regarding the principle of waxing syllables, items in longer lists can be arranged into subgroups that are often based on some thematic or formal connection, and these subgroups then internally follow the principle of waxing syllables. From the viewpoint of oral transmission,³⁵ a conveniently structured pattern results in this way that provides a rhythm for catching one's breath during recitation and at the same time facilitates ease of memorization.³⁶ Applying this principle to the adjusted listing of the *aṅgas*, the resulting subsections together with their syllable count would be as follows:

1. *sutta, geyya, veyyākaraṇa*, 2+2+5,

³³ AN 5.79 at AN III 107,4; discussed in Skilling 2013: 87.

³⁴ Skilling 2013: 88 explains that in the Ceylonese chronicles and later texts “*Vetulla* in *Vetullavāda* is used only negatively for unacceptable ideas or theories, in connection with doctrinal controversies that arose from the third to the second centuries BCE onwards.”

³⁵ For a more detailed discussion cf. Anālayo 2007; for other aspects of the early Buddhist oral tradition cf. Anālayo 2014 and 2015b.

³⁶ An example to illustrate this would be a listing in MN 76 at MN I 513,23 which proceeds as follow: *rājakathaṃ, corakathaṃ, mahāmattakathaṃ, senākathaṃ, bhayakathaṃ, yuddhakathaṃ, annakathaṃ, pānakathaṃ, vatthakathaṃ, sayana-kathaṃ, mālākathaṃ, gandhakathaṃ, ñātikathaṃ, yānakathaṃ, gāmakathaṃ, nigamakathaṃ, nagarakathaṃ, janapadakathaṃ, ithikathaṃ, sūrakathaṃ, visikhākathaṃ, kumbatthānakathaṃ, pubbapetakathaṃ*. The listing seems to involve the following subgroups as themes for talk: powerful/dangerous men: “kings, robbers, ministers”, war: “armies, dangers, battles”, requisites: “food, drink, clothing, beds”, household life: “garlands, perfumes, relatives, vehicles”, localities: “villages, towns, cities, counties”, others: “women, heroes, streets, wells, the departed”. For these subgroups, the following syllable count results: 4+4+6, 4+4+4, 4+4+4+5, 4+4+4+4, 4+5+5+6, 4+4+5+6+6. Cf. also Allon 1997: 48.

2. *gāthā, udāna, itivuttaka*, 2+2+5,
3. *jātaka, vedalla, abbhutadhamma*, 3+3+5.

Following the model of other subgroups in such long listings, it could be expected that the resultant three subsections have some thematic or formal connection. In view of the uncertainty that surrounds the exact implications of each of these *aṅgas*,³⁷ however, such thematic continuity is less easily determined. Nevertheless, perhaps the following themes could be taken as approximate summaries of the import of each of the three subsections:

1. basic modes of exposition: “discourses, prose and verse, expositions”,
2. shorter textual pieces: “stanzas, inspired utterances, quotes”,
3. others: “birth stories, marvels, answers to questions”.

The Function of the Nine *Aṅgas*

My above presentation of the nine *aṅgas* is to some extent based on the assumption that the original import of the *aṅgas* is to designate textual types instead of collections of texts.³⁸ It is in fact hard to see how this list of nine, or even the more evolved list of twelve,

³⁷ For discussions of the significance of the nine *aṅgas* cf., e.g., Jayawickrama 1959, Kalupahana 1965, and von Hinüber 1994, and for a summary Anālayo 2011a: 150f.

³⁸ According to Dutt 1957: 89, “the list [of *aṅgas*] ... rests on an analysis of different forms of composition found in the canon.” Jayawickrama 1959: 11 states that “it is a mere description of the literary types.” Kalupahana 1965: 616 similarly indicates that “this classification ... does not refer to nine different groups of literature, but to nine types of composition.” Ñāṇatiloka 1952/1988: 193 explains that the *aṅga* system “is a classification according to literary styles, and not according to given texts.” Lamotte 1980: 2282 clarifies that the *aṅgas* are not literary genres, but types of composition for forming texts, “ces Aṅga ne sont pas des genres littéraires, mais simplement des types de composition concernant la forme des textes.” Norman 1983: 16 points out that “despite the fact that books called *Jātaka*, *Udāna* and *Itivuttaka* actually exist in Pāli, it is probable that the list of nine *aṅgas* did not originally refer to specific works in the canon.”

could have functioned as an organizational principle for allocating discourses into textual collections. The problem here is that dividing the texts according to individual *aṅgas* would not yield groupings of material suitable for division of labour among reciters, which requires portions of at least roughly comparable size that provide the respective reciters with a representative selection of teachings.

An *aṅga* like marvels, for example, is a fairly rare occurrence in the early discourses and would hardly have sufficed for creating a corresponding textual collection. Moreover, one might wonder what would happen if some reciters were to memorize a textual collection with only marvels. Even the division into four *Āgamas* or *Nikāyas* led to differences of opinion and understanding among their respective reciters.³⁹ Thus a distribution of the texts to be memorized over different reciters according to the *aṅga* system would have inevitably resulted in rather lopsided understandings and quickly become a source of conflict.

The Pāli commentaries do explain *aṅgas* like *udāna*, *itivuttaka*, and *jātaka* as corresponding to the respective collections in the Pāli canon.⁴⁰ Yet among the discourses in the four *Nikāyas* — and thus apart from the canonical *Udāna*, *Itivuttaka* and *Jātaka* collections — *udānas* explicitly identified as such occur repeatedly,⁴¹ making it clear that this textual type is not confined to the collection so-called. Similarly, quotations marked with the help of the quotative *iti* and introduced as something said, *vutta*, are not confined to the collection of discourses known as the *Itivuttaka*. Instead, quotations

³⁹ Cf., e.g., Adikaram 1946/1994: 27–32, Dutt 1978: 42, Endo 2003a and 2003b, Goonesekera 1968: 689, and Mori 1990: 127.

⁴⁰ Cf., e.g., Sp I 28,18.

⁴¹ For a survey of occurrences cf. Anālayo 2008a: 381f note 1.

explicitly marked in this way are a recurrent feature in the discourses in the four *Nikāyas*.⁴² In the case of *jātakas* found among the early discourses, these actually fall into a distinct class by being all in prose, whereas the collection so-called is entirely in verse and the stories are only found in its commentary.⁴³ Clearly the *aṅga* of *jātakas* could not have originally intended the transmitted *Jātaka* collection.⁴⁴ This makes it safe to conclude that the commentarial explanation is better not taken as reflecting the original significance of these *aṅgas*.

Shorter Lists of *Aṅgas*

In what follows I turn to theories that assume the list of nine or twelve *aṅgas* to have evolved from a supposedly earlier stage with a shorter listing of *aṅgas*. Such theories do not avoid the problem that the *aṅgas* are not easily amenable to a system of textual divisions. Adopting such theories implies that the supposedly earlier listings eventually evolved into the listings of nine and twelve. This in turn would entail that at a very early stage a presumably workable scheme became unfit for use by being expanded to nine, and in spite of that the list then still continued to expand to twelve. This seems hardly convincing.

⁴² One of two examples to illustrate this type of usage can be seen when a statement to be explained is introduced with the construction *iti kho pan' etaṃ vuttaṃ, kiñc' etaṃ paṭicca vuttaṃ*, followed by concluding the explanation with *idam etaṃ paṭicca vuttaṃ*, found, e.g., in MN 54 at MN I 361,1. Another example can be seen when quotes are introduced by stating *vuttaṃ kho pan' etaṃ bhagavatā*, followed by concluding the quote with *iti*, a usage even employed by the Buddha to quote himself, cf., e.g., MN 3 at MN I 13,11. On the use of *iti* in commentarial literature cf. the study by Kieffer-Pülz 2014.

⁴³ Cf. von Hinüber 1998: 187.

⁴⁴ Jayawickrama 1959: 13 comments that “there is no justification for equating the Aṅga called *Jātaka* with the extant *Jātaka* collection ... firstly, the stories themselves have no Canonical status, which is reserved for ... the stanzas only. Secondly, there is no reason why *Jātakas* of Canonical antiquity such as those incorporated in other suttantas ... should be excluded.”

Such shorter listings of *aṅgas* are found in two Pāli discourses. One of these occurs among the Fives of the *Āṅuttara-nikāya*. In the passage in question, a Brahmin proclaims that one will no longer be interested in the teachings of others once one has heard the Buddha's teaching in the form of *sutta*, *geyya*, *veyyākaraṇa*, and *abbhutadhamma*.⁴⁵

This reference probably reflects the presumably original sequence of the listing of the nine *aṅgas*, attested in other traditions, when *abbhutadhamma* was still occupying the last place. The fact that the full list is not given would then simply be a case of abbreviation, following a standard pattern where the first three and the last member of a list are given in full.⁴⁶

Only *sutta*, *geyya*, and *veyyākaraṇa* are mentioned in the other instance to be discussed, which occurs in the *Mahāsuññata-sutta*.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ AN 5.194 at AN III 237,17+23. Bodhi 2012: 1744 note 1196 comments that the Brahmin protagonist, “for some reason, he cites only four of the nine divisions of the Dhamma. Perhaps it was only these with which he was familiar” (this is one of two possible explanations proposed by him). I take this to imply that, since in this instance the speaker is neither the Buddha nor one of his well-known disciples, the Brahmin protagonist of this discourse could perhaps on purpose have been depicted as not fully versed with the whole set of nine *aṅgas*. In line with a general tendency in the discourses to present Brahmins as particularly concerned with the marvellous qualities of the Buddha, such as his physical marks, in this instance he might presumably be shown to remember only *abbhutadhamma* out of the six *aṅgas* mentioned usually after *sutta*, *geyya*, and *veyyākaraṇa*.

⁴⁶ In reply to the hypothesis by von Hinüber 1994 that this passage points to an early stage in the evolution of the *aṅgas*, Choong 2010: 60 argues that it is “likely that the unique Pāli list of just four *aṅgas* ... is, rather, an abbreviation of the entire set of nine *aṅgas* in their original sequence; that is ‘*sutta*, *geyya*, *veyyākaraṇa*, ... *abbhuta-dhamma*’.” The idea that these four were an early division of the textual material is also not easily reconciled with the problem I discussed above, in that a reciter who specializes on marvels would have relatively little material to learn and would moreover stand good chances to acquire an unbalanced understanding of the teachings.

⁴⁷ MN 122 at MN III 115,18. For a critical reply to the suggestion by Sujato 2005: 62 that Sanskrit fragments of the *Mahāparinirvā-sūtra* support the notion of a special emphasis being accorded to the first three *aṅgas* cf. Anālayo 2011a: 698 note 69.

The same three are found in a parallel preserved in the *Madhyama-āgama* extant in Chinese translation, whereas a Tibetan parallel has the full set of twelve.⁴⁸

According to the context of this reference in the *Mahāsuññata-sutta* and its parallels, one should not follow the Buddha for the sake of *sutta*, *geyya*, and *veyyākaraṇa* (or the twelve *aṅgas*). Instead one should follow him for the sake of beneficial types of talks. The *Mahāsuññata-sutta* and its parallels agree that such beneficial types of talk are on the topics of morality, concentration, wisdom, liberation, and knowledge and vision of liberation.⁴⁹

In view of this narrative context, the earlier reference to *sutta*, *geyya*, and *veyyākaraṇa* (or the twelve *aṅgas*) could not be intending a scheme that stood representative of the entirety of the textual collections that comprise the teachings given by the Buddha and his disciples.⁵⁰ If all the textual collections comprising the teachings given by the Buddha and his disciples are set apart as insufficient grounds for following him, there would be nothing left for the sake of following him. His teachings on morality, concentration, wisdom, liberation, and knowledge and vision of liberation are of course contained in precisely those textual collections that would all have been already mentioned earlier if the reference to *sutta*, *geyya*, and *veyyākaraṇa* did indeed stand for some scheme of division of the whole corpus of the textual collections.

It seems therefore reasonable to conclude that the present passage was not originally about a listing of textual divisions that represented the whole of transmitted texts, however short or expanded it may have been. Instead, the original point of what now is a reference to *sutta*, *geyya*, and *veyyākaraṇa* must have been more limited in scope.

⁴⁸ MĀ 191 at T I 739c4 and Skilling 1994: 242,13.

⁴⁹ MN 122 at MN III 115,25, MĀ 191 at T I 739c8, and Skilling 1994: 244,13.

⁵⁰ *Pace* Choong 2000: 9f and Sujato 2005: 61f.

Perhaps at an early stage the present passage was just about following the teacher merely for the sake of ever more explanations, *veyyākaraṇassa hetu*, instead of putting the teachings already received into practice.⁵¹ During oral transmission such a reference could have led the reciters to supplement the first two *aṅgas*, something happening at a stage early enough in the transmission of the discourses to affect both the *Majjhima-nikāya* and the *Madhyama-āgama* versions. In continuity of the same tendency, this reference would have led to further supplementation, as evidenced in the Tibetan version's twelve *aṅgas*.

This would yield a meaningful indication in the present context. The point would then be to contrast following the teacher for ever more explanations of the teachings, a quest not necessarily related to the questioner's personal progress on the path, to following him just for the sake of those teachings that directly help one develop morality, concentration, wisdom, liberation, and knowledge and vision of liberation.

In sum, taking into account the narrative context it does not seem convincing to consider the reference to three *aṅgas* in the *Mahāsuññata-sutta* and its *Madhyama-āgama* parallel as originally intending a scheme that organizes the texts transmitted orally by the Buddha's disciples. In other words, the reference to three *aṅgas* does not appear to be reflecting an early stage in the evolution of the *aṅgas*, instead of which it is more probable that this reference is simply the result of a textual corruption.

According to another theory proposed by Japanese scholars, listing of five *aṅgas* rather formed the starting point for the nine or twelve

⁵¹ This would correspond to the understanding reflected in the Pāli commentary on the present passage, Ps IV 164.9, translated Nānamoli 1982: 30, which explains that, even though to acquire much learning has been compared by the Buddha to a soldier acquiring weaponry, the learning acquired does not function as weaponry if it is not put into practice.

aṅgas.⁵² In the **Karmavibhaṅgopadeśa* a listing of six *aṅgas* can be found.⁵³ Closer inspection shows this to be the result of a textual corruption, as the same **Karmavibhaṅgopadeśa* continues right away by summing up its presentation to be about the nine *aṅgas*.⁵⁴ Variations can also be found in the Jain tradition, where the *Viyāhapaṇṇati* has a reference to eleven *aṅgas* only,⁵⁵ differing from the standard count of twelve that forms the foundation for the Śvetāmbara canon.⁵⁶

In sum, it seems fair to conclude that references in Pāli discourses and elsewhere that in their present state involve less than nine *aṅgas* are best seen as the results of errors during oral transmission, instead of being evidence of a supposedly early stage in the evolution of the nine and twelve *aṅgas*.⁵⁷

⁵² Mayeda 1964: 26 and 34 and Nakamura 1980/1999: 28.

⁵³ Another reference to three *aṅgas* can be found in Nett 78,9, which here comprises *sutta*, *veyyākaraṇa*, and *gāthā*.

⁵⁴ Lévi 1932: 161,8: *sūtraṃ geyam vyākaraṇam itivṛttam gāthodānam, evaṃ navāṅgaśāsanam* (Kudo 2012: 106 reads *evan* instead of *evaṃ*).

⁵⁵ Lalwani 1973: 177,14.

⁵⁶ For a survey of the twelve *aṅgas* according to the Śvetāmbara Jain tradition cf. Dundas 1992: 64f.

⁵⁷ In relation to the hypothesis by von Hinüber 1994 that the listing of four *aṅgas* reflects an early attempt at organizing the texts, Klaus 2010: 518 points out that such hypotheses are not supported by the texts, which do not present the *aṅgas* as an attempt at ordering the texts, but rather as attempts at classification or just enumeration, “mir kommt es auf die Feststellung an, daß Vermutungen in diese Richtung sich nicht an die Texte anknüpfen lassen. Die Texte präsentieren uns die verschiedenen Aṅga-Listen nicht als Versuche, einen wie auch immer gearteten Gesamtbestand an Texten zu ordnen, sondern als Versuche, die verschiedenen Arten von Dhamma-Texten zu klassifizieren oder auch nur aufzuzählen.” Cousins 2013: 105 concludes that “short versions are sometimes interpreted as earlier lists of ‘Aṅgas’, but that seems quite anachronistic to me.”

Pāli Discourse References to the Nine *āṅgas*

In what follows I survey Pāli discourse references to the nine *āṅgas* within their narrative and doctrinal contexts, and in comparison with their parallels, wherever extant. Such contextual considerations can help to corroborate or else counter the significance of the nine *āṅgas* suggested above, in so far as the narrative context can indicate whether listings of these nine were meant to refer to textual divisions or textual types.

A discourse among the Fours of the *Āṅguttara-nikāya* mentions the nine *āṅgas* as part of an exposition of the benefits of memorization.⁵⁸ In this context the nine *āṅgas* stand representative for what one would learn by heart. The same sense recurs in a discourse among the Fives, where not learning the teachings in the form of the nine *āṅgas* is a factor that leads to the decline of the Dharma.⁵⁹

A discourse among the Sevens of the *Āṅguttara-nikāya* employs the nine *āṅgas* in a definition of knowledge of the Dharma,⁶⁰ distinct from knowledge of the meaning. The same distinction is drawn in parallels to this *Āṅguttara-nikāya* discourse found in the *Madhyama-āgama*, in the *Ekottarika-āgama*, and in a discourse translated individually into Chinese (although in terms of the twelve *āṅgas* instead).⁶¹ According to this distinction, mere memorization does not suffice for true knowledge, a theme that continues with other references to the *āṅgas*.

⁵⁸ AN 4.191 at AN II 185,7.

⁵⁹ AN 5.155 at AN III 177,6.

⁶⁰ AN 7.64 at AN IV 113,13; the same contrast recurs in Vibh 294,22 in terms of *dhammapaṭisambhidā* and *atthapaṭisambhidā*.

⁶¹ MĀ 1 at T I 421a17, T 27 at T I 810a11, and EĀ 39.1 at T II 728c3. A Sanskrit fragment parallel has preserved part of the listing of *āṅgas*; cf. SHT III 878 R4, Waldschmidt 1971: 127.

Such a contrast between mere learning and true understanding becomes particularly evident in the *Alagaddūpama-sutta*, which features the monk Ariṭṭha obstinately holding on to a mistaken view. His obstinacy features in the different *Vinayas* as the occasion for a *pācittiya* regulation against such behaviour,⁶² giving the impression that his stubbornness was considered a serious problem. According to the Pāli commentary on the *Alagaddūpama-sutta*, Ariṭṭha had been well learned in the Dharma.⁶³ This suggests his behaviour to be in part due to the arrogant belief that by mere learning he had understood the teachings.

It is against this narrative background that the reference to the nine *aṅgas* falls into place as part of the famous simile of the snake.⁶⁴ According to this simile, someone trying to catch a snake will incur harm if he were to grasp it by its tail. This predicament illustrates the situation of someone who learns the teachings in the form of the nine *aṅgas* without examining their meaning and without cultivating wisdom, instead being motivated just for the sake of being able to debate with others. Conversely, one who learns the teachings in the form of the nine *aṅgas* not for the sake of debating with others, but rather to understand them and cultivate wisdom, compares to someone who catches the snake by its neck, making sure that it cannot bite. In this context the nine *aṅgas* stand representative for a way of learning the teachings which could have wholesome or unwholesome consequences. The same holds for the parallel versions to the *Alagaddūpama-sutta* preserved in the *Madhyama-*

⁶² The Dharmaguptaka *Vinaya*, T 1428 at T XXII 682a9, the Mahāsāṅghika *Vinaya*, T 1425 at T XXII 367a3, the Mahīśāsaka *Vinaya*, T 1421 at T XXII 56c12, the Mūlasarvāstivāda *Vinaya*, T 1442 at T XXIII 840b21, with its Sanskrit and Tibetan counterparts in Yamagiwa 2001: 86,7 and 87,9, the Sarvāstivāda *Vinaya*, T 1435 at T XXIII 106a3, and the Theravāda *Vinaya*, Vin IV 133,32.

⁶³ Ps II 103,1.

⁶⁴ MN 22 at MN I 133,24.

āgama and the *Ekottarika-āgama* (again with the difference that they employ the listing of twelve *aṅgas* instead).⁶⁵

Similar implications are relevant for a range of other occurrences of the nine *aṅgas*. A discourse among the Fours of the *Aṅguttara-nikāya* distinguishes those who have learned the nine *aṅgas* into those who do not understand the teachings and those who do.⁶⁶ Another two discourses among the Fours restate the same contrast in terms of those learned in the nine *aṅgas* either having an insight into the four noble truths or else not.⁶⁷ The first of these two discourses has an *Ekottarika-āgama* parallel which, instead of mentioning the four noble truths, distinguishes those who learn the *aṅgas* into those who do and do not teach others.⁶⁸ Two consecutive discourses among the Fives express the same basic contrast by way of defining one who is a *dharmavīhāri*. Mere learning of the teachings in the form of the nine *aṅgas* is not sufficient for being a *dharmavīhāri*, as such a one might still neglect seclusion and the cultivation of tranquillity of the mind or else not understand with wisdom the meaning of what has been learned.⁶⁹

Another discourse in the *Aṅguttara-nikāya* highlights that, even though the Buddha had taught much in the form of the nine *aṅgas*, for being “learned” it suffices to have penetrated the meaning of

⁶⁵ MĀ 200 at T I 764a₁₄ and EĀ 50.8 at T II 813a₁₆.

⁶⁶ AN 4.6 at AN II 7,2; a distinction that recurs in Pp 62,33.

⁶⁷ AN 4.102 at AN II 103,8 and AN 4.107 at AN II 108,3; the presentation in AN 4.107 recurs in Pp 43,29.

⁶⁸ EĀ 25.10 at T II 635a₁₀, which illustrates mere learning of the twelve *aṅgas* with the same simile of a cloud that thunders but does not rain, found also in AN 4.102. Another parallel, EĀ² 10 at T II 877b₁₀, also employs the same simile, but does not mention the *aṅgas*. Here the one who is like a cloud that thunders but does not rain learns the “discourses” but does not understand the Dharma himself.

⁶⁹ AN 5.73 at AN III 86,25 and AN 5.74 at AN III 88,7.

a four-line stanza and practiced accordingly.⁷⁰ Parallels to this discourse in the *Madhyama-āgama*, in an individually translated discourse, and as part of an *Udāna* collection preserved in Chinese translation make the same point.⁷¹ These references highlight that one need not be familiar with a variety of teachings in the form of the nine *aṅgas*, instead of which thorough understanding of a single specimen from one of these *aṅgas*, a *gāthā*, can make one become truly learned. This conveys the impression that the contrast to the single stanza mentioned is not the entirety of texts in nine textual collections, but rather the variety of teachings the Buddha had given as exemplified by the nine *aṅgas*. Out of these different types of teachings, a single stanza can fulfil the purpose of becoming truly learned.

One more occurrence in a discourse in the *Aṅguttara-nikāya* brings me back to the topic taken up at the outset of this article, namely the term *āgama*. This discourse lists several praiseworthy qualities, one of which is having learned the teachings in the form of the nine *aṅgas*. Another quality is to spend the rainy season with elders who are *āgatāgama*, who have “obtained the *āgama*”, and to use this opportunity to get the teachings clarified by asking them questions. In this discourse the *aṅgas* occur side-by-side with a reference to being *āgatāgama*, each expression applied to different persons. This gives the impression that the two terms were not seen as being in conflict with each other. In line with the conclusion arrived at earlier, it seems that the *aṅgas* do not reflect a supposedly early system of apportioning the discourses which eventually fell into disuse, to be replaced by the system of the four *āgamas* or *nikāyas*. In fact all of the passages surveyed above are well compatible with an understanding of the listing of *aṅgas* as referring to textual types. In contrast, none of these passages gives the definite impression that

⁷⁰ AN 4.186 at AN II 178,12.

⁷¹ MĀ 172 at T I 709b6, T 82 at T I 901c19, and T 212 at T IV 643b25 (each lists twelve *aṅgas*).

the *aṅgas* refer to an arrangement of textual collections comparable to the *āgamas* or *nikāyas*.⁷²

Besides this corroboration, what emerges from the above passages is that the nine *aṅgas* reflect the variety of the teachings that can be learned and as such function as a convenient reference to a considerable degree of learning, which in the ancient oral context of course required memorization. Many of these references draw attention to the shortcomings of mere rote learning without penetrating the meaning of the teachings. A particularly stark example for such drawbacks is the case of Ariṭṭha in the *Alagaddūpama-sutta* and its parallels, where mere rote learning of the teaching in the form of the nine *aṅgas* compares to catching a snake in such an unskilful way that one will get bitten. In short, learning the different types of presentations of the teachings in the form of the nine *aṅgas* does not necessarily imply that one has understood the meaning of what the Buddha taught, which instead can take place even with a single stanza that is well understood.

Conclusion

The overall impression that suggests itself from the evidence surveyed in this article is that an at first somewhat undifferentiated body of discourses, the *āgama* (singular) developed into separate *āgamas* (or *nikāyas*), a development which as far as we are able to ascertain did not involve an intermediate period during which the *aṅgas* fulfilled the purpose of forming textual collections. Instead, the *aṅgas* appear to stand for textual types, for kinds of compositions, and their main function as reflected in the early texts is to highlight the importance of penetrative understanding of the meaning of the teachings over mere rote learning of its different manifestations.

⁷² Cousins 2013: 106 sums up that “there is no indication anywhere that any of this has anything to do with an arrangement of the canonical literature in some kind of earlier recension.”

“One is not wise,
Because one speaks much.
Being peaceful, free from anger and fear,
One is called wise.”⁷³

Abbreviations

AN	<i>Āṅguttara-nikāya</i>
D	Derge edition
DĀ	<i>Dīrgha-āgama</i> (T 1)
Dhp	<i>Dhammapada</i>
DN	<i>Dīrgha-nikāya</i>
EĀ	<i>Ekottarika-āgama</i> (T 125)
EĀ ²	(partial) <i>Ekottarika-āgama</i> (T 150A)
MĀ	<i>Madhyama-āgama</i> (T 26)
MN	<i>Majjhima-nikāya</i>
Mp	<i>Manorathapūraṇī</i>
Nett	<i>Nettipakaraṇa</i>
Pp	<i>Puggalapaññatti</i>
Ps	<i>Papañcasūdanī</i>
Q	Peking edition
SĀ	<i>Samyukta-āgama</i> (T 99)
Sp	<i>Samantapāsādikā</i>
T	Taishō edition
Vibh	<i>Vibhaṅga</i>
Vin	<i>Vinaya</i>
Vism	<i>Visuddhimagga</i>

⁷³ Dhp 258.

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