

Evolution of Buddhist scriptures (summary by Gemini AI)

1. The Era of Oral Transmission (c. 5th – 1st Century BCE)

Before anything was written down, the Buddha's teachings (the *Dhamma*) and the monastic rules (*Vinaya*) were preserved through a sophisticated oral tradition.

- **Communal Chanting (*Sajjhayana*):** To prevent individual memory lapses, monks and nuns chanted texts together. If one person forgot a word, the group corrected them.
- **The Role of the *Bhanakas*:** Specialized "reciters" or *Bhanakas* were appointed to memorize specific collections (Nikayas) of the teachings. This ensured that even if one group of monks was lost to war or famine, the entire Canon remained intact elsewhere.
- **Mnemonic Structures:** The teachings were organized into repetitive patterns, numbered lists (like the Four Noble Truths), and verse forms to make them easier to memorize.

2. The First Council and Standardization

Immediately after the Buddha's passing, 500 Arahats gathered at the **First Buddhist Council** at Rajgir.

- **Ananda and Upali:** Ananda, known for his perfect memory, recited the *Suttas* (discourses), while Upali recited the *Vinaya* (discipline).
- **Verification:** The assembly cross-referenced these recitations to establish an "authorized" version of the oral word.

3. Transition to Writing (1st Century BCE)

The shift to writing was born out of necessity rather than preference. In the 1st Century BCE, Sri Lanka faced severe famines and constant warfare.

- **The Fourth Council (Theravada):** Fearing that the *Bhanakas* might die out and take the teachings with them, the Elder monks gathered at **Aluvihara Rock Temple** in Sri Lanka.
- **The Palm Leaf Medium:** For the first time, the entire Pali Canon (*Tipitaka*) was inscribed onto **Ola (palm) leaves**.
 - The leaves were dried, boiled, and smoothed.
 - A metal stylus was used to scratch the text into the leaf.
 - Inky soot was rubbed over the leaf to make the scratches visible.

4. Pali in Different Scripts

An important distinction to make is that **Pali is a language, not a script**. It does not have an alphabet of its own. As Buddhism spread, the Pali language was written down using the local scripts of the region.

- **Sinhala Script (Sri Lanka):** The earliest manuscripts were written in this rounded script, which evolved to avoid tearing the delicate palm leaves with straight horizontal lines.
- **Burmese Script (Myanmar):** Characterized by its very circular shapes, also optimized for palm leaf durability.
- **Khmer and Thai Scripts (Cambodia/Thailand):** Used for centuries in Southeast Asian monasteries to record the same Pali phonetics.
- **Devanagari (India):** Used later when Pali studies were revived in its land of origin.
- **Roman Script:** In the 19th century, the Pali Text Society began transcribing these works into the Latin alphabet for Western scholars.

We cannot safely assume that the Pali Canon is an exact word-for-word transcript of the First Council.

The consensus among modern scholars is that the Pali Canon is a **later formalized version**—a "literary" language—rather than the raw, spoken dialect of Rajgir. Here is a breakdown of why that is the case and how the language evolved.

1. The "Pali" Language Myth

Interestingly, the word "Pali" originally meant **"text"** or **"line,"** not the name of a language. The monks spoke of *Pali-bhasa* (the language of the texts).

- **The Traditional View:** The Theravada tradition claims the Buddha spoke **Magadhi** (the language of the Magadha kingdom) and that Pali is Magadhi.
- **The Linguistic Reality:** Modern linguistics shows that Pali is actually a **composite language**. It contains features of several different Middle Indo-Aryan dialects (Prakrits), specifically those from **Western India** (near Ujjain or Gujarat), rather than the Eastern Magadha dialect.

2. Evidence of "Translation" or "Transposition"

The Buddha famously told his monks to learn the teachings in their "own dialect" (*saka nirutti*). As Buddhism spread, the teachings were likely "translated" into a regional *lingua franca* to ensure monks from different areas could communicate.

- **Western Features:** Pali shares more in common with the Ashokan inscriptions of Girnar (Western India) than those of Dhauli (Eastern/Magadha India).
- **Māgadhisms:** There are "residues" of the Magadha dialect in the Pali texts (e.g., words ending in -e instead of the standard Pali -o). These are like "linguistic fossils" that suggest an older Eastern version was later smoothed over into the more standardized Pali we have today.

3. The Gap of 450 Years

The gap between the Buddha's death (c. 480 BCE) and the writing of the Canon in Sri Lanka (c. 29 BCE) allowed for a process of **organic formalization**.

- **Standardization:** Over centuries of communal chanting, the language became more rhythmic, structured, and "monastic."
- **The Abhidhamma:** This third "basket" of the Canon shows a much more advanced, technical, and philosophical language than the early *Suttas*, proving the collection grew and was refined over several centuries after the First Council.

4. How Accurate Are They?

Despite the linguistic shift, the *content* is remarkably stable.

- **Comparative Studies:** When we compare the Pali texts to the **Chinese Agamas** (which were translated from different early Indian dialects), the core teachings—like the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path—match almost perfectly.
- **Preservation of Meaning:** While the *language* may have been formalized into a "Church Latin" of its day, scholars believe the *meaning* and *structure* remain the closest link we have to the historical Buddha.

The discovery of the **Gandharan manuscripts** (starting in the 1990s) provided a "missing link" that confirmed much of what we suspected about the Pali Canon, while also revealing how diverse early Buddhism really was.

While the **Pali version** (Theravada) and the **Gandhari version** (likely Dharmaguptaka or Sarvastivada) were written down in roughly the same era (1st Century BCE), they represent two branches of a family tree that had already been growing apart for centuries.

1. Key Physical and Linguistic Differences

The two versions are distinct not just in content, but in their entire "technology" of preservation:

Feature	Pali Version (Sri Lanka)	Gandhari Version (NW India/Afghanistan)
Material	Palm Leaves (<i>Ola</i>)	Birch Bark scrolls
Script	Sinhala (initially)	Kharosthi (written right-to-left)
Language	Pali (Western-Central Indo-Aryan)	Gandhari (Northwestern Prakrit)
Preservation	Continuously copied and intact	Buried in jars; fragmented and fragile

2. "Difference within Similarity"

When you compare a specific Sutta (discourse) in Pali with its Gandhari parallel, the experience is often like hearing the same story told by two different relatives:

- **Core Doctrine:** The "bones" are the same. You will find the Four Noble Truths, the Eightfold Path, and the concept of Dependent Origination in both.
- **The "Expansion and Contraction" Rule:** This is the most striking difference. Pali texts tend to be highly **formalized and expanded**. For example, the *Vessantara Jataka* (a story of the Buddha's previous life) is over 100 pages in Pali but appears as a pithy 4-line summary in some Gandhari fragments.
- **Verse vs. Prose:** In early Buddhism, the **verses** were considered the "sacred core," while the prose was often seen as a "commentary" to explain the verses. Consequently, the verses in Pali and Gandhari match very closely, while the prose descriptions of *where* and *to whom* the Buddha was speaking often vary.

3. The "Library" vs. the "Archive"

The Gandhari finds changed our understanding of the **diversity** of early Buddhist schools:

- **The Pali Canon** is a "closed" library—a complete, edited, and standardized set of books meant to represent a single school (Theravada).
- **The Gandhari Finds** are more like a "time capsule" or an organic archive. They include early versions of the *Dhammapada*, but also early **Mahayana Sūtras** (like the *Diamond Sutra*). This suggests that in the Gandhara region, "Early" and "Mahayana" Buddhism lived side-by-side in the same monasteries much earlier than previously thought.

4. Why is Pali more "Polished"?

Scholars believe the Pali version underwent a much more rigorous **editing process** in the Great Monasteries of Sri Lanka.

- Pali was turned into a **"standard" literary language** specifically for the Canon.
 - Gandhari, meanwhile, remained closer to the **spoken vernacular** of the Silk Road. It reflects a living, breathing, and sometimes "messy" dialect that eventually faded away as Sanskrit became the dominant intellectual language of Northern India.
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Summary: What does this tell us?

The Gandhari texts prove that the Pali Canon is not a "unique" or "isolated" miracle. Instead, both are regional survivors of a vast oral culture. The Pali version survived because it was protected by the island geography of Sri Lanka, while the Gandhari version survived only by accident, buried in the dry soil of the Afghan border.

To illustrate how the same teaching changes between these two traditions, let's look at one of the most famous verses in Buddhism: **Dhammapada Verse 183**.

This verse summarizes the entire path. Here is how it shifts linguistically and structurally between the polished **Pali** of Sri Lanka and the "rougher" **Gandhari** of the Silk Road.

The Comparison: Dhammapada 183

The Pali Version

Sabbapāpassa akaraṇaṃ,
kusalassa upasampadā,
sacittapariyodapanaṃ—
etaṃ buddhāna sāsanaṃ.

- **Linguistic Feel:** Very rhythmic and standardized.
- **The "Vibe":** This is the "Authorized Version." It uses clear, classical forms that are easy to chant in a group.

The Gandhari Version

Saba-pavasya akaraṇa,
kuśalasya uvasampada,
sa-cita-pariyodapana—
eda budhana śasana.

- **Linguistic Feel:** Notice the softening of consonants (the *p* in *pāpassa* becomes a *v* in *pavasya*).
 - **The "Vibe":** It feels like a regional "accent." It is less rigid and reflects how the words were actually spoken in the Northwest frontier.
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Key Takeaways from the Comparison

Feature	Pali (Theravada)	Gandhari (Dharmaguptaka/Early)
Consonants	Crisp and doubled (e.g., <i>Sabba</i>)	Softened or elided (e.g., <i>Saba</i>)
Standardization	Highly polished for chanting	Reflects local dialect (Prakrit)
Survival	Living tradition in Sri Lankan monasteries	Archaeological find in Afghan "jars"

How the Scripts Looked

The visual difference between these two "versions" of the same teaching was even more striking than the sound.

- **Pali on Palm Leaf:** Written in **Sinhala script**, which is characterized by round, circular loops. This was practical: straight lines would have split the grain of the palm leaf and ruined the manuscript.
- **Gandhari on Birch Bark:** Written in **Kharosthi script**. This script was written from **right to left** (likely influenced by Aramaic). Because birch bark is more like paper, the script could be more cursive and angular.

Why this matters for history

The fact that we found the same verses in both languages—thousands of miles apart—proves that by the 1st Century BCE, there was a **stable core of teachings** shared across all of Asia.

While the "packaging" (the language and the script) changed to fit the local culture, the "product" (the Buddha's core message) remained remarkably consistent. It suggests that the **Oral Tradition** we discussed earlier was incredibly successful at preserving the "signal" despite all the "noise" of geography and time.

For more information see:

How the Gandharan Manuscripts Change Buddhist History
By Richard Salomon

Resources

Traces of Gandhāran Buddhism (Exhibition Catalogue of Buddhist Manuscripts in the Schoyen Collection, Bangkok 2010)

A Gāndhārī Saṃyukta-āgama Version of the Discourse on Not-self (P. Anattalakkhana-sutta, Skt. *Anātmalaksana-sūtra)

Fragile Palm Leaves Foundation

A private library of Pali and vernacular Burmese palm-leaf manuscripts from Burma. The manuscripts were collected by Peter Skilling over the past several decades. Manuscripts included in the collection were created/copied between the 17th–20th centuries CE.

The Buddhist Digital Archives

by Buddhist Digital Resource Center

Access almost any text from the major Buddhist traditions. BUDA contains 30 million pages scanned from the precious originals, and 5 million pages of etexts.

Sinhalese Manuscripts

The John Rylands Research Institute and Library, Paramaththa and the International Centre for Theravada Buddhism UK (ICTB UK) have digitised thirty-two Sinhalese Manuscripts and made them freely available online.

Dhammacakkappavattanasuttam

Ola Leaf Book

A reproduction of the Dhammacakkapavattanasutta in Sinhala script written on ola-leaves.