# 5 Pāli Commentarial Literature



> Studies in Pāli commentarial literature are relatively a new area of research even in the field of Theravāda Buddhist studies. Why the Pāli commentaries have been neglected for serious research undertakings as a collective source-material, can be ascribed to several reasons. One of them is certainly a lack of their translation into modern languages. (Endo 2013, XIII)

The words of Toshiichi Endo are still relevant and the commitment of scholars in this field, although increased, still remains limited. Commentaries are a kind of exegesis, but a detailed understanding of the degree of reliability of this literature as a hermeneutical tool to interpret the canon is still a *desideratum*.

The study of commentarial literature started relatively late compared to the study of canonical sources. In the beginning, there was the pioneering work of E.W. Adikaram, *Early History of Buddhism in Ceylon*, a doctoral thesis published in 1946 which dedicates the first forty-two pages to introducing commentaries as the main source for the reconstruction of the history of Buddhism in ancient Ceylon. After some years, two other works were published (in the form of doctoral theses), which focused mainly on the study of commentaries. The first one is the work of F. Lottermoser, entitled *Quoted verse passages in the works of Buddhaghosa* (1982), followed two years later by the work of S. Mori, *Study of the Pāli Commentaries: Theravādic Aspects of the Aṭṭhakathās* (in Japanese, with an English summary).[1] These works certainly laid the groundwork for the future study of the commentaries, a field of study that flourished, especially in Japan, subsequently providing

**1** The original Japanese title is *Pāli Bukkyō-chūshaku-bunken no Kenkyū: Aṭṭhakathā no Jyōzaku-teki Yōsō* (Tokyo: Sankibo Busshorin, 1984).

some valuable works in English[2] as well as some other works which are unfortunately only in Japanese.[3]

For the scopes of the present work, this chapter will discuss the concept of 'commentary', which is often used to translate the Pāli term '*aṭṭhakathā*', highlighting how the exegetical process was an ongoing process, not limited to the commentaries of the V century AD. Moreover, the importance of the commentarial literature and some scholarly approaches will be considered, and the necessity of the commentaries in the analysis of the extraordinary capacities will be highlighted.

## 5.1 The Problem of Being a Commentary

What a commentary is or what we should consider a commentary are questions that are not easy to answer. What is commonly translated in English as 'commentary' is the Pāli word '*aṭṭhakathā*', a term that can be roughly translated as 'exposition of meaning(s)', given that it is composed of the word *aṭṭha* (sometimes *attha*) 'meaning, sense, significance' and the word *kathā* 'talk, story, exposition'.[4] However, Japanese scholars consider 'commentary', as part of the '*aṭṭhakathā* literature', a huge group of texts that do not necessarily include works that comment upon other works, or works that define themself as *aṭṭhakathā* (including the term in their title). Therefore, according to Japanese scholars, a list of Pāli commentarial literature would contain:

1. direct commentaries on the *Tipiṭaka* plus the compendium called *Visuddhimagga*;
2. some other important commentaries, such as the *Nettippakaraṇaṭṭhakathā*, *Catubhāṇavāraṭṭhakathā*, and the *Vinayasaṅgahaṭṭhakathā*;
3. chronicles and narratives, such as *Dīpavaṃsa*, *Mahāvaṃsa*, *Sīhaḷavatthuppakaraṇa*, and *Sahassavatthuppakaraṇa*;
4. abhidhammic summary works (e.g. *Abhidhammāvatāra*, *Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha*), grammatical works (e.g. *Abhidhānappadīpikā*, *Kaccāyanasāra*), works related with poetry (e.g. *Jinālaṅkāra*, *Vuttodaya*).[5]

This above list is still coherent with the interpretation of the term '*aṭṭhakathā*' as opposed to the term '*pāli*', indicating the canonical text(s) (Norman 1983, 1). The opposition between canon and commentaries shows all its limitations as an interpretative tool when we consider the existence of texts such as the *Niddesa*. The *Niddesa* is a canonical text (*pāli*) that comments upon two *vagga*s and one *sutta* of the *Suttanipāta* (another canonical text), and so it can be defined, at least considering its structure, as an *aṭṭhakathā*, even though,

**2** A special mention must go to the seminal works of Mori (1989a) and Endo (1997; 2013).

**3** For a review of the most important works in Japanese on the topic updated to the year 2007, see Mori 2007.

**4** Endo (2013, 3-4) discusses in more detail the problem of the interpretation of the term '*aṭṭhakathā*'. The texts that define themself as *aṭṭhakathā*s are silent concerning the formation of the term '*aṭṭhakathā*' and often the so-called sub-commentaries (*ṭīkā*) alone provide some definitions of the term.

**5** This is the classification provided by Mori (1984, 1-2) reported into English by Endo (2013, 3).

strictly speaking, is not so, and indeed it has its own *aṭṭhakathā* (*Niddesa-aṭṭhakathā* = *Saddhammapajjotikā*).[6] This fact highlights that for the Buddhist tradition, the term *aṭṭhakathā* does not only indicate the function of the text as being a commentary and so to clarify the meaning, but indicates primarily that the text is not part of the older stratum of texts considered canonical, regarded as *Buddhavacana* 'the word of the Buddha'.[7] Other canonical texts contain, indeed, what is in effect commentary: the *Vinaya* has its *padabhājaniya*; *Vibhaṅga* has sections which function as exegeses such as the *suttantabhajājaniya*, *abhidhammabhajājaniya*, *pañhāpucchaka*; *Dhammasaṅgaṇi* has its final section which serves as a commentary and is called either *atthuddhārakaṇḍa* (As 6) or *aṭṭhakathākaṇḍa* (As 409) (Dhs 234-64, see Norman 1983, 99); and there is finally the *Paṭisambhidāmagga* in which "[i]n most cases, a sūtra is first presented and then explained" (Frauwallner 1995, 87). Here, we have seen that the fact of being an *aṭṭhakathā*, namely a text that explains the meaning [of other texts], does not entirely cover the range of meanings that our conception of the word 'commentary', or the expression 'exegetical work', may cover. Thus, it would only be appropriate to further discuss the topic.

What is a commentary? A tautological definition is that a commentary is a literary work that comments upon another literary work. This definition is not totally useless since it highlights that there should be something worthy of being commented on. This latter work can be referred to as the 'original text' or what the Indian traditions often call the 'root (*mūla*) text', namely a work from which something else originates. Commenting on a text is an option among others to review, explore, and generally speaking, 'deal' with an original text. Here, it is worth citing the words of St. Bonaventure (13th century) about the *modus facendi librum* (method of making a book):

> There are four ways of making a book. Sometimes a man writes others' words, adding nothing and changing nothing; and he is simply called a scribe [*scriptor*]. Sometimes a man writes others' words, putting together passages which are not his own; and he is called a compiler [*compilator*]. Sometimes a man writes both others' words and his own, but with the others' words in prime place and his own added only for purposes of clarification; and he is called not an author but a commentator [*commentator*]. Sometimes a man writes both his own words and others', but with his own in prime place and others' added only for purposes of confirmation; and he should be called an author [*auctor*]. (Passage quoted in Burrow 2008, 31; see also Freschi 2015, 94)

In the above excerpt, the commentator is the one who gives pre-eminence to the original work, but provides the addition of some other words for the sake of clarification. Therefore, a commentary implies an addition that may occur only with the aim of clarifying the original text, but may also have the aim of modifying it. However, the original work provides a crucial matrix to the commentary. The commentary is, indeed, strictly connected with the original work upon which it comments. This fact, according to B. Smith

**6** Whereas we know that a commentary upon another commentary is usually called *ṭīkā*.

**7** The term does not only indicate the words spoken by the Buddha, but "sometimes it means what the Buddha would have said, had he been there, or sayings about the Buddha, or sayings in accordance with the Buddha's teaching" (Norman 1997: 136).

(1991, 1), influences the structure of the commentary to mirror the same structure and expository order of the original text.[8] Now we know something more about the commentary, namely that it is a literary work that, following an original work, makes some additions on it. Given that the additions may have an effect on the reception of the original text, we may also say that a commentary may attempt to modify or affect the reader's understanding of an original text. As some scholars point out,[9] a commentary is also a useful tool in India to introduce innovations, because the claim of originality would have diminished the authority of the author(s). However, in the case of the production of early Buddhist commentarial literature, it makes more sense to follow, in particular, one among the many observations that B. Smith made about the commentaries, namely that a commentary is "a device which enables the transmission of the textual force or content of an object text from one age or culture or group to another" (1991, 2). The correct transmission of the Buddha's doctrine was a problem present from the very beginning of the Buddhist tradition. Endorsing an emic perspective, we may even assume that it was a problem which also occurred when the Buddha was still alive.[10] However, the first disciples had the good fortune of being able to turn directly to the Buddha or to some of his closest followers to seek clarification, just as it is recommended by the textual tradition:

> O monks, when you understand the meaning (*attha*) of what I said, then you could memorise it, but when you do not understand the meaning of what I said, then you should ask me or the learned monks.[11]

At that time, a factor that could have influenced understanding could be the linguistic one. For example, in the *Araṇavibhaṅgasutta* (M III 230-7), the Buddha provides seven synonyms for the word 'bowl'. Considering the multilingual environment of early India (a situation still prevalent today), linguistic problems were likely among the major challenges faced by early Buddhists. Therefore, it is no wonder then if the commentary on the *Pātimokkha*, one of the texts that is supposed to be among the oldest,[12] elucidates the meaning of the text for the most part through synonyms and clarification of terms. In fact, the very name of this commentary, namely *padabhājaniya*, means 'Analysis of words'.

The nature of the commentary as a tool which enables the transmission of the Buddhist canon from one age or culture or group to another is also

**8** There are some differences between a commentary and a work of secondary literature: "[w]here a commentary is of its nature oriented around the text of some given object work, a work of secondary literature is standardly oriented around ideas and arguments, the latter conceived at what may be some distance from their specific original formulations. The commentary may, certainly, deal with the arguments of its object text. But it will follow an order of exposition that is determined not, in the first place, by the content of these arguments, but rather by the order of the text itself, and it will strive to do justice to this text as a unitary object to be taken as a whole" (Smith 1991, 1-2).

**9** See Preisendanz 2008, 606-8 and Freschi 2015, 97-9.

**10** The following reasoning remains valid even if we replace the figure of the historical Buddha with a generic group of early Buddhists.

**11** *bhikkhave yassa me bhāsitassa atthaṃ ājāneyyātha tathā naṃ dhāreyyātha, yassa ca pana me bhāsitassa atthaṃ na ājāneyyātha ahaṃ vo tattha paṭipucchitabbo ye vā pan'assu viyattā bhikkhū* (M I 134).

**12** See von Hinüber 1996, 9-12; 1998; Norman 1983, 18; 1997, 43, 149; Kieffer-Pülz 2020-21, 157-61.

demonstrated by the treatment that the commentarial literature had when it was transmitted in Sri Lanka:

> The commentary [to the *Dīghanikāya*], from the beginning, was recited by five hundred masters [monks], and re-recited later. So, it was brought by the master Mahā-Mahinda to the island of the Sīhaḷas, where it was rendered into the Sīhaḷa language for the benefit of the inhabitants of the island.[13]

The existence of the possibility that a commentary could be translated into another language highlights another important characteristic of the commentarial literature, namely that it was a more fluid and dynamic literature than the canonical one. If, on the one hand, the canonical texts do not seem to have traces of Sinhalese dialects (although, according to the tradition, Buddhism was brought to Sri Lanka in the III century BC),[14] on the other hand, the commentaries were not only translated into the Sinhalese language, but a commentarial tradition was even started in Sri Lanka, and this was an open *corpus* of texts until the III century AD.[15]

The very existence of a *corpus* of commentarial literature in an early period should make us more confident about an early existence of another *corpus* of texts that was fixed or, at least, quite strict. This latter *corpus* of texts is what we normally know as the Buddhist canon. The exegetical activity, indeed, presupposes a fixed material with which it is not possible to intervene. In this regard, Jonathan Z. Smith writes that:

> Where there is a canon, it is possible to predict the *necessary* occurrence of a hermeneute, of an interpreter whose task is continually to extend the domain of the closed canon over everything that is known or everything that exists without altering the canon in the process. (Smith 1982, 48)

Concerning the Buddhist literature, we may note that a hermeneutic process started quite early, not only thanks to texts like the *Niddesa* or the *padabhājaniya* of the *Pātimokkha*, but also through some texts that aimed to systematise and explain in a more objective way the teaching of the Buddha. The *corpus* I am referring to is the so called Abhidhamma literature. In the words of Rupert Gethin:

> The term *abhidharma* (Pali *abhidhamma*) means approximately 'higher' or 'further' Dharma. In many ways the extant works of 'the basket of Abhidharma', the third part of the ancient canon of Buddhist scriptures, can be seen as continuing the process of systematization already evident in the Nikāyas. That some form of commentary and interpretation formed part of Buddhism almost from its inception is indicated by certain of the sūtras in the Nikāyas. […] But it is the Abhidharma *par excellence* that represents the earliest attempt to give a full and systematic statement of the Buddha's teaching on the basis of what is contained in his discourses. (Gethin 1998, 47-8)

**13** *aṭṭhakathā ādito vasisatehi pañcahi yā saṅgītā anusaṅgītā ca pacchā pi Sīhaḷadīpaṃ pana ābhatā 'tha vasinā Mahā-Mahindena ṭhapitā Sīhaḷabhāsāya dīpavāsīnaṃ atthāya* (Sv I 1 = Ps I 1; Spk I 1; Mp I 1), this passage is quoted also by Endo (2013, 11-12).

**14** See Norman [1978] 1991, 34-7; 1997, 90.

**15** See Mori [1988] 1989.

The exegetical process was then an ongoing process, and the Pāli commentarial literature of the V century AD onwards is only the acme of a process that worked in the background for centuries. This process also had its milestones; each Abhidhammic text, for example, is an end point in itself, or the Abhidhamma collection in its whole marks a boundary. The Abhidhamma, indeed, was included among the canonical texts and then became closed at a certain point. Therefore, when we consider the Theravāda exegesis, we should be aware that the actual Pāli commentarial literature is only the tip of the iceberg. Starting from a basic kernel, new strata were added. The most recent stratum is the most malleable and tender, but gradually becomes crystallised, and when it turns into a fixed state, a new stratum is added. As time goes on, new layers overlap the old ones, making the latter more and more fixed. What was conceived as a commentary on an authoritative text in the past can itself become an authoritative text in the future which will require, in turn, a commentary. This, for instance, happened quite clearly in the Vedic tradition. As Timothy Lubin (2019) highlighted, the Brāhmaṇa texts are, for a large extent, commentaries of the *mantra*s. Nonetheless, they came to be considered as *śruti*, the Vedic revelation, namely primary texts rather than secondary. Therefore, we may note that not only the stylistic features of an *oeuvre* make it a commentary, but also the historical time.

The study of the exegesis is, therefore, a dynamic task since it should take into account periods in which the textual material was floating, despite that what came down to us is a fossilised version belonging to a certain historical time. Therefore, since the Pāli commentaries are a crystallised record in the exegetical process, we shall see how their value as a hermeneutical tool for the study of the Pāli canon is ambiguous, but their use is nonetheless necessary concerning some topics.

## 5.2 Pāli Commentaries: A Problematic, Albeit Necessary, Research Source

The actual Pāli commentaries are works usually dated from the V century AD onwards,[16] which, however, are supposed to have preserved older material. The claim made by the commentarial literature to be the result of an exegesis that was started centuries ago, even potentially started at the time of the Buddha, is problematic. We do not really know when it started. What we do know is that there are, at least, two recognisable strata of texts, named by Sodo Mori (1989b, 3-4) 'Indic older elements' and 'Sri Lankan newer elements'. These 'elements' are based upon historical and geographical data[17] which, however, provides little information about the chronology of certain types of exegesis. If, for instance, in a given piece of exegesis, historical or

**16** Cousins ([2013/2014] 2015, 390-1) even suggests the IV century AD as dating.

**17** According to Mori the most ancient Indian characteristics can be recognised from: 1) quotations from Indian texts (*Tipiṭaka*, *Milindapañha*, *Nettipakaraṇa*, *Petakopadesa*, etc.); 2) presence of Indian characters (the Buddha himself, followers, disciples, kings, Aśoka and his contemporaries etc.); 3) names of kingdoms, cities, rivers, mountains and, in general, Indian places. In a similar way, the more recent Sinhalese characteristics are exposed: 1) quotations from the literature of the *Sīhaḷaṭṭhakathā* (originated in Sri Lanka); 2) presence of people from ancient Sri Lanka (monks, kings, believers, ministers, etc.); 3) names of cities, areas, villages, rivers, mountains, monasteries and, in general, places in Sri Lanka. See Mori 1989b, 3-5.

geographical data do not occur, it would be difficult to even establish an approximate chronology. Furthermore, even if we find in a textual passage 'Indian elements', is it really safe to backdate the passage at stake to a period before the arrival of Buddhism in Ceylon? Although the answer may depend on the specific situation, generally speaking, we can answer in a negative way. The reason is that we cannot exclude *a priori* the existence of a network which would connect the island of Ceylon with the Indian mainland. Not only do we have the proof of a movement of texts from the north to the south and *vice versa*,[18] but also of people. The South Indian mainland could have played an important role in the development of Theravāda. As Oskar von Hinüber ([2013/2014] 2015, 356-8) highlights, not only was Buddhaghosa of South Indian origin, but also some of the people (three monks and one layman) who requested Buddhaghosa to compose the commentaries on the four principal Nikāyas had connections with South India.

Therefore, one of the major problems in dealing with Pāli commentarial literature is that, quite often, it is difficult to establish an approximate dating for the exegetical material recovered. The scholar is, indeed, in a sort of limbo. Since, theoretically, the Buddhist exegetical efforts started quite early, potentially even during the time of the Buddha, it would seem likely to find in the commentaries quite ancient interpretations. On the other hand, the final form in which the commentaries reached us is through compositions belonging to the V century AD, whose authors (who may have had the functions of compilers, redactors, editors and critics) could have affected it in ways that we do not know. Although the commentaries are based on older sources, we do not know to what extent they are faithful to them, given that we do not even have a single example of these older sources. What we can be sure of is that the authors were people belonging to their own historical time that were writing for an audience historically (and perhaps also geographically) determined. The Pāli commentarial literature is not a literature created for us. The Pāli commentaries are not speaking with us, but we are just eavesdropping on a conversation that they had with their old audience. Their purpose is to determine the Theravāda doctrine (especially the one of the Mahāvihāra)[19] at the time of their composition. The Pāli commentaries have their own agenda that is not the same as the academic scholar's one. Therefore, we have to listen to what they have to say, but trusting them only partially. The ambiguous value of the Pāli commentaries as a hermeneutical tool is reflected by the various positions that scholars had towards them. As soon as the first edition of the *Sumaṅgalavilāsinī* was published in 1886, Thomas W. Rhys Davids identified the importance of the commentary as an auxiliary tool to understand the canonical *Dīghanikāya*:

**18** The *Milindapañha*, for instance, was a text of North Indian origin (Norman 1983, 111) which found its own way into the Theravāda tradition. The **Vimuttimagga*, *contra*, was a text belonging to the Theravāda tradition (see Cousins 2012, 87) that arrived somehow in China, and that now survives in its entirety only in the Chinese version (*Jiětuō dào lùn* 解脱道論; T 1648).

**19** Almost all the Theravāda material we have is from the Mahāvihāra tradition (a notable exception is the **Vimuttimagga*, which is reasonably assumed as deriving from the Abhayagiri tradition; see Cousins 2012). However, we have no reason to believe that the other Sri Lankan sub-sects (viz. Abhayagiri and Jetavana) had a different canon (in this regard, see Bechert 1992, 96; Cousins 2012, 99; Anālayo 2013, 225, n. 43), whereas the authors of the actual Pāli commentaries overtly claim connections with the Mahāvihāra tradition, e.g. *Mahāvihāravāsīnaṃ desanānayanissitaṃ | Visuddhimaggaṃ bhāsissaṃ* (Vism 711); see Gethin 1998, 254; 2012, 14-17 and von Hinüber [2013/2014] 2015. This implies that the exegetical material is mainly an expression of the Mahāvihāra's understanding of the Buddhist canonical material.

> In the Dīgha we have the most essential points of Buddhism, the details of Arahatship, not only set out in full, but compared with the Brahman ideal on the one hand and with the ordinary morality of good layman on the other. The exposition is enforced from every variety of point of view, and with a wealth of illustration that renders it as interesting to the student of contemporary life as to the student of Buddhist ethics. On both sides – on the ethical terms and on the names of things in use in daily life – we are in constant want of Buddhaghosa's learning to help us to understand the exact meaning of what is said. For these reasons we have determined to give, as an auxiliary to our edition of the text of the dialogues, the text also of the whole of his commentary upon them. (Rhys Davids [1886] 1968, VII)

We may note that the importance of the *Sumaṅgalavilāsinī*, in the words of Rhys Davids, depends upon the contribution it can make to understanding the canonical text. It is not treated as an important text in itself. It has a relative importance, in the sense that its importance is related to the existence of another text. A more circumspect position is the one adopted in the present time by Richard Gombrich, who detected some systematic shortcomings in the commentarial literature that may affect the interpretation of the canon. The first one is the homogenisation of the tradition, that is the tendency of levelling out the discrepancies. The other two are the literalism and the loss of the historical context:

> This homogenization is the first of three systematic defects which I find in the Pali exegetical tradition. The second is excessive literalism, a failing that the Buddha himself foresaw and warned against. Once the texts had been formulated, their words were carefully preserved. Sometimes too much was read into them, and a technical significance was ascribed to some quite normal and innocent expression […] The third deficiency in the commentaries, from our point of view, is that they have largely lost the memory of the Buddha's historical context. (Gombrich 2009, 107)

Notwithstanding the warnings Gombrich provides in dealing with commentaries and, generally speaking, with exegetical texts, we should admit that the understanding of some topics depends upon the exegesis. As Rupert Gethin (2004, 202-3) highlighted, the method of how to practice meditation is not revealed in early texts (such as the *Sāmaññaphalasutta*), but the scholar should rely upon later, and often exegetical, texts. In the case of the procedure to develop the *manomayakāya*, *iddhividhā̃* and other *abhiññā*s, the situation is even worse. These extraordinary capacities often appear in early canonical texts in stock passages, a fact that does not lend further insight on the topic. Moreover, we may note that meditation was quite a common practice that is popular still today, whereas the attempt to develop these powers would sound a bit naïve to the people of our time.[20]

**20** At least, for the non-Buddhists. The beneficial effects of the meditation practice are, instead, recognised by both Buddhists and non-Buddhists. An example is the increasing practice of meditation in many fields of contemporary knowledge. In this regard, Giuliano Giustarini writes that "[i]n the past 50 years, Buddhist ideas and meditative techniques have been more and more applied in various fields including cognitive psychology, management, military training, post-traumatic clinical cases, self-help remedies, peacemaking strategies, environmental and sociological issues, etc." (2018, 1225).

We do not know about the state of affairs in the past, but we may note that at least the displaying of the capabilities to lay people was forbidden,[21] and then we may wonder if there were potential disincentives from focusing too much on these powers. Alternatively, or simultaneously, we may assume that the development of the extraordinary capacities was a kind of esoteric knowledge that was then transmitted secretly.[22] This might imply that the various kinds of information concerning the development of these powers that can be detected in our sources are only the tip of the iceberg. Although we cannot completely exclude the possibility that secret texts, or the materials related to the marvellous capabilities, were included in the actual Pāli commentaries. In any case, the exegetical works, and the Pāli commentaries in particular, are not only necessary, but are also the only sources that we have to detect the ancient method to develop extraordinary capacities.[23]

## 5.3 Conclusive Remarks

Hopefully, this chapter has shed light on some issues inherent to Pāli commentarial literature, which play a role when we evaluate the reliability of the exegetical information it provides. Nevertheless, the commentaries resulted to be fundamental sources for the diachronic study of the extraordinary capacities. Therefore, the commentaries will be both sources for the diachronic study of the extraordinary capacities and an object of research in itself. Given that their value for the understanding of the canonical material is debated, the approach adopted to use the commentaries as sources and simultaneously study them consists of gathering all exegetical accounts on the specific topic, highlighting differences and similarities. In this way, we refrain ourselves from limiting to *a priori* value judgement, using the commentaries according to their intrinsic nature of potentially valuable sources that still need a conclusive and overall systematic assessment. It is an impartial observation of how the commentaries 'behave' in providing exegeses. In the final analysis, it is almost impossible to reach an absolute and definitive truth on the nature of the commentaries considering the limitations of the present work. However, it will be noted that the existence of a recurring pattern not only helps us to evaluate the exegetical accounts referring to the canonical material, but also provides a basic commentarial behavioural pattern that can be useful when considering future studies.

**21** "O monks, the miracle of the *iddhi*s which is something beyond [the average reach of] human beings should not be shown to the householders" (*na bhikkhave gihīnaṃ uttarimanussadhammaṃ iddhipāṭihāriyaṃ dassetabbaṃ*; Vin II 112).

**22** Gethin (2004, 212, esp. n. 19) highlighted that the Buddhist texts mention some 'secret-books' (*gūḷha-gantha*), that have not been yet recovered.

**23** More recent sources studying the extraordinary powers are provided by the so called 'Esoteric Theravāda', to which Kate Crosby (2020) has relatively recently dedicated a book. These wondrous elements not only occur but are also well integrated in what has been defined as 'Pre-modern Theravāda meditation', namely the *borān kammaṭṭhāna* (translatable as 'ancient meditation'). This meditative tradition, although older than many modern practices, does not, however, seem to be reflected in the most ancient textual testimonies, thus leaving us with doubts about its potential relevance to our object of study in terms of methodology. However, evidence from the Esoteric Theravāda could suggest us that elements considered magical or extraordinary are not mere relics of an ancient past but still survive in some corners of society and play a part in modern and contemporary religious discourses and spiritual practices.

What I am referring to will be named the 'interpretative accretion process' in Chapter 7 (§ 7.4.4.1).

With the present chapter, Part I of the book, which introduces some preliminary remarks, ends. The background information provided so far will be tacitly assumed in Part II, which concerns the main core of the book. Therefore, I hope the information provided thus far in Part I should justify my direct approach and handling of the sources. This approach directly derives from the way I conceive the history of some *corpora* of texts (viz. Vedic texts and Pāli commentaries) and some doctrines (viz. *khaṇavāda* and *cittavīthi*). At the same time, Part I strengthens the theoretical premises and reasons to undertake the study of the extraordinary capacities in the way in which it will be done. May the reader forgive me if only now the main topics of the book will be treated, but I am convinced that the preparation for a race is as important as the race itself, if not more.