

## Pali Akkharika: A Children's Game?

by

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The term *akkharikā* occurs in the *Dīghanikāya*<sup>1</sup> and in the *Vinaya pitaka*<sup>2</sup> of the Pali Canon. It is interpreted to mean a children's game at the time the passages in which it occurs were composed, and is also adduced as evidence of a fairly advanced state of the art of writing during the Buddha's day. However as pointed out elsewhere,<sup>3</sup> while the evidence on the subject of writing early Buddhist texts (especially the semantic role of verbal roots employed to imply writing) does not warrant the conclusion as hitherto acquiesced in that writing "was sufficiently prevalent"<sup>4</sup> and that it "was widespread, known to adults and children of both sexes"<sup>5</sup> at the time in question, it has to be said that the meaning of the term *akkharikā* is itself dubious. In the course of this paper it will be noted that apart from the fact that *akkharikā* cannot be counted on as proof of an advanced state of the art of writing during the said period, it may not even be a children's game, as so far assumed.

*Akkharikā* may be translated as 'lettering' or 'letter-game'; "but all Indian letters of that date were syllables".<sup>6</sup> Georg Buhler, who was perhaps the first Indologist to comment on this term, has stated that "a game called *akkharikā* is mentioned repeatedly in the *Vinayapitaka* and the *Nikayas*; according to Buddhaghosa, the Commentator, its main feature was that letters were read in the sky"<sup>7</sup>. Buhler was cautious not to go beyond the traditional explanation of the term as accepted so far, which, in fact, he has given only in part. Buddhaghosa, besides supplying the information regarding one of its features (as given above by Buhler) - which, of course, need not be

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1. *Dighanikaya* I, 6.
  2. *Vinayapitaka* II, 10; III, 180.
  3. L. P. N. Perera, 'The Beginnings of Writing in Ancient India: A Re-Examination', *Malalasekera Commemoration Volume*, Colombo, 1974 (in print).
  4. T. W. Rhys Davids, *Buddhist India*, Sixth Indian Ed., Calcutta, 1955, p. 56.
  5. David Diringer, *The Alphabet*, Second Ed., London, 1940, p. 332.
  6. *PTS Dictionary*, s.v. 'Akkharikā'. *Akkharā* - Vedic *aksarā* (feminine) is not 'letter' but "syllable". v. *The Critical Pali Dictionary*, s.v. This is borne out at *Vinaya* IV, 22, by *Bhikkhupacittiya* Rule VII, as well. *Akkhara* (neuter) is, of course, a 'letter'. The instances where the term appears in the feminine gender show that the written letter was still being conceived in terms of its syllable content, Also v. D. J. Kalupahana, 'Akkara', *Encyclopaedia of Buddhism*, Vol. I p. 355 f.
  7. Buhler, *Indian Paleography*, Calcutta, 1959 Ed., p. 19.

## PALI AKKHARIKA : A CHILDREN'S GAME ?

understood to be its "main feature" - also states that *akkharikā* involves the drawing of letters on a playfellow's back, as well.<sup>8</sup>

It is also not accurate to say, as Buhler does, that *akkharikā* is mentioned "repeatedly" in the Vinaya and in the Nikayas. It is mentioned only twice in the Vinaya;<sup>9</sup> and, as far as the Nikayas are concerned, only in the section designated as the *Majjhima-sīlas* (Middle-length paragraphs on Moral Conduct) of the *Silakkhandhavagga* of the Dighanikaya.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, the Vinaya and the Dighanikaya passages in which the term occurs, separately constitute two sets of tracts - the Vinaya contexts being called *vividhampi anācāram* (various forms of wrong conduct) while the Dighanikaya contexts are referred to as *jūtapamādatṭhānānuyoga* (addiction to gambling resulting in remissness). The term also occurs in the Niddesaya.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, strictly speaking, there are only three references to *akkharikā* in the entire Canon. To say that it is mentioned "repeatedly" would give the wrong impression that it is to be found in varying contexts all over the Vinaya and in several Nikayas. We emphasize this fact as we wish to show presently that, as already stated, the references to *akkharikā* cannot be counted on as proof of an advanced state of the art of writing at the time in question. On the contrary, the paucity of references to *akkharikā* is of significance.

Rhys Davids, on the other hand, had been taking pains to be clearer regarding the matter. He is more accurate than Buhler. Nevertheless, with all deference to Rhys Davids, it has to be stated that neither was he nearer the truth. We quote him *in extenso*: "The oldest references to writing is in a tract called the *Sīlas*, embodies in each of the thirteen Dialogues which form the first chapter of the first division of the Suttantas, or conversational discourses of the Buddha. This tract must therefore have been already in existence as a separate work before these Dialogues were put together by the early disciples within the first century after the Buddha's death. The tract on the *Sīlas* may be dated, therefore, approximately about 450 B.C. The tract contains lists of things a member of the Buddhist Order would not do. And among these is a list of games, one of which is called *Akkharikā* (Lettering), explained as "Guessing at letters traced in the air, or on a playfellow's back." As the context gives a number of children's games, this was almost certainly regarded as such. And for children to have such a game, and to call it by the name "Lettering", shows that the knowledge of an alphabet was fairly prevalent at the time in question".<sup>11</sup> After citing further evidence on the subject from the Pali Canon. Rhys Davids concludes *inter alia* that the art of writing

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8. Sumangalavilasini, I, 86 - Samantapasadika,

9. *v. Supra*, fun. 1 et 2.

10. Nd. I 379.

11. *Op. cit.*, p. 55. Also of Rhys Davids, *Dialogues of the Buddha*, Part I, (SBB. Vol. II) London Reprint 1969, p. 11, fn. 2.

“was sufficiently prevalent to have been the basis of a game for children”.<sup>12</sup> He further adds that “a long period, probably centuries, must have elapsed between the date when writing first became known to the few, and the date when such a stage could have been reached”.<sup>13</sup> This position has been generally taken for granted by many a subsequent scholar.<sup>14</sup>

Firstly, the contention of Rhys Davids that “as the context gives a number of children’s games”, *akkharikā* too, was “almost certainly regarded as such” is not quite reasonable though *prima facie* it appears to be, for, (although not expressly stated), Rhys Davids himself does not seem to rule out the fact that the context gives certain games which cannot possibly be considered as those of children. It is very unlikely that Rhys Davids would have looked upon the entire list as consisting of children’s games only. The nature of the list is such, one may equally well say that *akkharikā* was an adults’ game. In fact, according to the elucidation supplied by the pali Commentarial tradition - and it is such elucidations that scholars have depended - of nineteen games mentioned (viz. *aṭṭhapada*, *dasapada*, *ākāsa*, *parihārapatha*, *santikā*, *khalikā*, *ghaṭikā*, *salākahattha*, *akkha*, *pangacīra*, *vankaka*, *mokkhacikā*, *cingulikā*, *pattālhaka*, *rathaka*, *dhanuka*, *akkharikā*, *manesikā* and *yathāvajja*),<sup>15</sup> perhaps more than half the number will have to be regarded as games of adults. If one may be guided by the observations of the *Samantapasadika* and the *Saratthadipani*, at least eight of these games, viz. *aṭṭhapada*, *dasapada*, *ākasā*, *santikā*, *khalikā*, *akkhā*, *akkharikā* and *manesikā* appear with some degree of certainty to be games of adults. Of course, there is nothing to preclude children from resorting to some of these games.

Secondly, assuming *akkharikā* to be a children’s game, and granting that the art of writing “was sufficiently prevalent” to have been made the basis of a long preceding period of development for writing, running into a few centuries, as done by Rhys Davids, for a children’s game like *akkharikā* to have evolved. We are told that certain recluses and brahmins (*eke bhonto samanabrāhmanā*)<sup>16</sup> and a particular recalcitrant group of disciples of the Buddha<sup>17</sup> indulged in *akkharikā*, amongst other amusements in the list - a thing that they should not have done according to the Buddhist point of view. If the *religieux* would resort to amusements like *akkharikā*, the probability is that such games were more the pastimes of grown-ups than of

12. *Buddhist India*, p. 56.

13. *loc. cit.*

14. e.g. David Diringer, one of the latest, in *The Alphabet*, p. 329 f.

15. Since some of these terms appear to have lost their true meanings by the time of the Commentators, and as a few of them have variant readings too, we leave terms untranslated to avoid misinterpretations. The interpretations of Rhys Davids (*Dialogues of the Buddha*, Pt. I, pp. 9 ff.) may be consulted, if necessary.

16. *Dighanikaya* I, 8.

17. *Vinaya* II, 10; III, 180.

## PALI AKKHARIKA : A CHILDREN'S GAME?

children. It is very likely, therefore, that *akkharikā* was something more than a mere children's game (*v. infra*).

*Akkharikā* was, perhaps, in actual fact, a game of the adults, at the time in question. Our evidence suggests that, whatever its origin be, *akkharikā* had become a pastime of grown-ups, for it was on this basis that *akkharikā* had been considered an unsuitable thing for a *bhikkhu* to indulge in. This may be inferred from the fact that *akkharikā* and the other games enumerated in the *Silakkhandhavagga* of the Dighanikaya - which has to be looked upon as our oldest context - have been classified as (forms of) gambling resulting in remissness (*jūtapamādatthānānuvoga*), which, for economic reasons alone, Buddhism would not approve of.<sup>18</sup> And the further fact that these games are referred to in the section entitled *Majjhimasāla* is perhaps not without significance. "Lettering" itself could not have been looked down upon by early Buddhism, for as Rhys Davids himself points out,<sup>19</sup> Buddhism considered writing to be a distinguished art, which, even *bhikkhunis* may learn.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, whether it be a children's or an adult's game, if, as the Commentator says, *akkharikā* involved the tracing of letters in the air or on a playfellow's back, it only serves to bring to the forefront with greater emphasis the novelty of writing.<sup>21</sup> In fact, if the Art of writing had such a long period of development before the fifth century B.C., its novelty would have disappeared by the time of the Buddha, and *akkharikā*, (if it was a form of "lettering"), would have lost its attractiveness and the hold on the society concerned. On the contrary, a true alphabet was perhaps emerging at this time in North India, as the interest evinced in *akkharikā* suggests.

In these circumstances, writing appears to have been something new at the time these passages were composed. The evolving of *akkharikā* as a game would have occurred at a time when writing first became known in the Gangetic Valley, and it is unnecessary to presume a long preceding period of development for the art of writing running into a few centuries, as done by Rhys Davids.

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18. Cf. *Jūtapamādatthānānuvoga bhogānam apāyamukham*, Dighanikaya III, 182.

19. *Op. cit.*, p. 55 f.

20. Vinaya IV, 7 et 305.

21. In present-day literate society, for instance, it cannot be said that children are interested in games like "lettering" in this sense, although occasionally they try to guess letters as a game.

On the basis of the available data we have already conjectured that (even if *akḥharikā* originated as a children's game) in actual fact *akḥharikā* has to be looked upon as a game for adults. It was from the latter standard that it had been measured by the Buddhist texts. We are confirmed in this conjecture by the Saratthadipani, a Tika to the Samantapasadika. From the Saratthadipani it appears that *akḥharikā* could also have another sense. In fact, it may be that *akḥharikā* was not at all "lettering" or a children's game, as implied by Buddhaghosa, and as understood by every scholar. The Saratthadipani states that a "method of knowing or prophesying a gain, loss, etc., (i.e. a form of prognostication) by duly cognizing a letter (or syllable) uttered by the questioner, i.e. by the person concerned, is also called *akḥharikā*": *pucchantassa mukhāgatam akḥharam gahetvā natthamutthilābhālābhādi jānana-kilā akḥharikā ti pi vadanti*.<sup>22</sup> It will be noted that although this is described as a *kīla* (gama), this appears to be more a concern of adult life than a children's game. And, as the identical statement occurs in the Tika to the Dighanikaya too,<sup>23</sup> this interpretation is not without significance.

The Tikas themselves embody earlier traditions,<sup>24</sup> and the Saratthadipani, in particular, "gives much information not available at present anywhere else".<sup>25</sup> The Tikas had their own claims to orthodoxy, as well.<sup>26</sup> Therefore, the foregoing statement means that :

- (a) *akḥharikā* could have two meanings :- (1) It was a children's game of "lettering" as suggested by Buddhaghosa and as accepted so far; and also (2) it referred to an oracular act, as stated by the Tikas. This conclusion is possible as the Tikas say that this oracular act is "also referred to (by some) as *akḥharikā*": *akḥharikā ti pi vadanti*.<sup>27</sup> This suggests that the authors of the Tikas were fully aware of the alternative interpretation.
- (b) *akḥharikā* could have either meaning (1) above, or meaning (2) above. In this instance, the Tikas were perhaps uncertain as to the correct meaning of the term. The phrase *akḥharikā ti pi vadanti* lends itself to this interpretation, as well. If this surmise be correct, the Tikas were presenting a meaning ignored by or unknown to the earlier Commentaries.

22. Saratthadipani, Part II, Ed. M. Medhankara Thera, Kandy, 1933, p. 712.

23. Dighanikaya Tika (Somavati Hevavitarana Tika Series), p. 90.

24. Cf. Malalasekera, *The Pali Literature of Ceylon*, London, 1928, pp. 192 ff.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 192.

26. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 193 f.

27. Of course, it is more easy to construe the statement of the Tikas as simply to mean that this particular oracular act had another name, while it is known as *akḥharikā*, too. If so, it is interesting to note that they do not give such other alternative name, which, they should have known, In any event, the matter is beside the point.

- (c) *akkharikā* could have only meaning (2) above. This interpretation will be valid if the phrase *akkharikā ti pi vadanti* be considered to have no special phraseological value beyond conveying a linguistically simple fact. It is a proposition too plain to need argument. Furthermore, it is significant that while the Tikas are said to contain *inter alia* "expositions of points in the *Atthakathā* or Commentories which need further elucidation for their correct interpretation",<sup>28</sup> in this instance the exposition may be said to consist of a disagreement with the *Atthakathā* regarding a term clearly explained in the latter. It may also be mentioned that a Tika does not consider it necessary to comment on every word in an *Atthakathā*. Its comments are only made if and when found necessary.

On the foregoing analysis it will be clear that weightage will have to be attached to meaning (2), i.e. to the interpretation as given by the Tikas. Accordingly, it appears that *akkharikā* was really the concern of adults, in which, of course, even bhikkhus may have evinced interest. The reasons for *akkharikā* to be included under *jūtapamadatthānānuyoga* can now be appreciated.

We have already conjectured that in the list of games appearing in the Vinaya and the Dighanikaya perhaps more than half were those of adults and based on the observations of the Samantapasadika and the Saratthādipani, we have singled out *Atthapada*, *dasapada*, *ākasā*, *santikā*, *khalikā*, *akkha*, *akkharikā* and *manesikā* as games of adults with some degree of certainty (*v. supra*). Now, it is also perhaps not without significance that *akkharikā* in the Canonical list is immediately followed by *manesikā* - the latter being generally understood as thought - reading (whatever it may mean) - thus bringing it more clearly into the category of prognostications, with which, as already stated *akkharikā* may be better identified. Furthermore *akkharikā* as interpreted by the Tikas is suggestive much more of the growing commercial interests in the urban life of North India at the time in question,<sup>29</sup> than the meaning offered by Buddhaghosa. It is small wonder that *akkharikā* was serious enough to be treated under the *Majjhimasālas*. *Akkharikā* means, therefore, not the written letter but the spoken syllable, which would, incidentally, as a phonetic division, naturally precede the written letter in the history of writing.<sup>30</sup>

28. Malalasekera, *op. cit.*, p. 192.

29. For some observations regarding this subject, *v.* article referred to in fn. 3, above.

30. Cf. J. Vendryes, *Language, A Linguistic Introduction to History*, 3rd Impression London, 1949, p. 53 f.

We would like to refer at this stage to the *Mahātaṇhāsamkhayasutta* of the Majjhimanikaya where a list of games specifically referred to as “children’s games” - *kumārakānaṃ kilapanakani* - is given. The context states that a child, having grown up and with faculties developed would indulge in games known as children’s games, and proceeds to give the list: *sa kho so bhikkhave kumāro . . . vuddhimanvāya indriyānaṃ paripākamanvāya yāni tāni kumārakānaṃ kilāpanakāni tehi kilāti: seyyathidaṃ: vaṅkaṃ ghaṭikaṃ mokkhacikaṃ ciṅgulakaṃ pattālhakaṃ rathakaṃ dhanukaṃ.*<sup>31</sup> Seven of the games included in the lists appearing in the Dighanikaya and in the Vinaya, it will be noted, are mentioned here, and now the most important point emerges, namely, that *akkharikā* is among the games omitted. Rhys Davids, who thinks that, *akkharikā* was “almost certainly”<sup>32</sup> a children’s game, makes no comment on this omission, although he has occasion elsewhere<sup>33</sup> to refer to the list in the Majjhimanikaya. Furthermore, though not noted by Rhys Davids, the list as appearing in the Majjhimanikaya is repeated *mutatis mutandis* in the Anguttaranikaya too,<sup>34</sup> where again this list is cited as considering of children’s games. The omission of *akkharikā* from this list, in our view, is most significant.<sup>35</sup> In a context making specific reference to children’s games there should be good reasons for the omission of a particular game, which, elsewhere had been generally included among games supposed to be of children. The *Mahātaṇhāsamkhayasutta*, it may be noted, in this context is concerned purely with the question of conception, the birth, and the growth of a child, and therefore the list of children’s games it gives is perhaps more accurate than the lists in the tracts of the Dighanikaya and the Vinaya where the children’s games are obviously jumbled up with adults’ games, however old the tracts themselves may be.

Considering all these circumstances, it is at least doubtful now whether *akkharikā* could mean a children’s game involving “lettering”. Even if it be taken for granted that “the knowledge of an alphabet was fairly prevalent at the time in question”<sup>36</sup> the mention of *akkharikā*, therefore, does not help us to prove that the art of writing was so advanced, as very often assumed, towards 450 B.C. *Akkharikā* perhaps had nothing to do with the subject.

31. Majjhimanikaya I, 266.

32. *Op. cit.*, p. 55.

33. *Dialogues of the Buddha*, Pt. I, (SBB. Vol. II), 1969, p. 11, fn. 1.

34. Anguttaranikaya, Dasamanipata, Upasakavagga.

35. Also *cf. supra*, list of games singled out as probably of adults.

36. Rhys Davids, *Buddhist India*, p. 55.