mantā: Gerund or Instrumental?
A critical survey of Theravada commentarial exegeses

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The term mantā has wide attestations in the Pali canon. Nonetheless, the precise meaning of this term still remains to be discovered. It sometimes occurs as an isolated term while it is also used as a precedent of compounds. However, Pali commentarial exegeses that have been provided by the Theravada fraternity for this term are not satisfactory.

It is clear that the Pali commentators felt an uncertainty about the exact meaning of this term. Accordingly, they have commented on this term in two ways in the Pali commentaries. Out of those, the most popular interpretation for mantā is 'mantā means wisdom.' As this translation suggests, mantā is a synonym for wisdom. It should be noted that this interpretation has been manipulated by Mahaniddesa, a canonical commentator. However, in Sanskrit literature and in Prakrit literature, a corresponding term is untraceable. Thus, it is not unjustifiable to reach a conjecture that the aforementioned interpretation is a new import to the commentarial literature done by Pali exegetes. In other words, it is an 'ahistorical' interpretation. In accordance with the second interpretation for mantā, it is an absolutive gerund. Most of the scholars who have translated this term into English have been influenced by the first interpretation.

This paper critically discusses the more archaic and accurate meanings of mantā attempting to reach a reliable conclusion for the emergence of such a discrepancy even in some Pali canonical texts, scanning all available source materials related to Buddhist studies such as Pali canonical accounts, Prakrit attestations, commentarial exegeses, Sub-commentarial (Tikā) occurrences, Vedic and Upanishad texts, and Buddhist hybrid Sanskrit sources. Sanskrit/ Pali and Prakit lexicons will also be examined when necessary.

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