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Textual genesis, Sanskrit, and the early transmission of Buddhist dhammasattha in
Burma and Southeast Asia

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Nineteenth century commentators such as Rost, Fuehrer, and Forchhammer suggested the possibility that the extant Pali and vernacular Buddhist dhammasattha texts of Burma, in Rhys Davids' words, "preserv[ed] to us an invaluable, if only imperfect, record of the lost Buddhist laws of India". Yet scholarship has neglected to examine in adequate detail the emergence of the Burmese dhammasattha tradition and its South and Southeast Asian vectors of transmission. This issue remains important, however, not only for the hypothesis of the preservation of an earlier Indic Buddhist non-Vinaya oral or written law in Southeast Asian textual materials, or of the often remarked upon but never sufficiently elucidated relationship between dhammasattha and Sanskrit dharmaśāstra. Also, an examination of dhammasattha textual genesis aids our understandings of the character and function of early Southeast Asian written law (and its later transformations) and of 1st millennium C.E. regional Buddhisms, Buddhist languages and literatures, and their points of contact. This paper will revisit the question of the beginnings of Pali and vernacular Buddhist dhammasattha literature in Burma and Southeast Asia up to circa 1300 C.E. in light of the available manuscript and epigraphic evidence from the region. Drawing on selected texts from a corpus of over 400 Pali, vernacular, and bilingual dhammasattha manuscripts the author has recently documented and collected from libraries and monastic collections throughout Burma, as well as on epigraphic, historical, legal, and literary sources from Burma, Lanka, Java, Siam, Lān Nā, and Cambodia, it will discuss the genesis of Buddhist dhammasattha in Burma, its early literary, jurisprudential, and ideological affinities, and the extent of its relatedness to Sanskrit dharma, artha, and nīti Brahmanical genres. This will also entail a brief consideration of the evidence for and against the relevance of written law and dharmaśāstra/dhammasattha among Buddhist communities elsewhere in Southern and Central Asia during the 1st millennium C.E.

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