

## 8b

## Mahā'padāna Sutta

The Discourse on the Harvests of Great Acts | D 14

Theme: The lineage of the buddhas and the Buddha's life<sup>1</sup>

Translated &amp; annotated by Piya Tan ©2015

## Sutta Notes

(A modern commentary)

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0 INTRODUCTORY NOTES ON "BUDDHA," "BUDDHA," "BODHISATTVA," "BODHISATTVA"

**0.1 "The Buddha"** (with initial capital), as a rule, refers to Gotama Buddha, or, in some contexts to Mahāyāna Buddhas in general, while "**buddha**" (lower case) or "buddhas" (lower case, common noun) refers to any buddha of the 3 periods<sup>2</sup> (including Gotama, where the context applies).

When a specific Buddha, such as Gotama, is referred to, as in **Mahā'padāna S**, it is spelt with an initial capital. In this translation, "Buddha" with an initial capital, as a rule, refers to Siddhattha Gotama (Skt Siddhārtha Gautama).

On the definition of *buddha*, see SD 36.2 (2). On the past buddhas and *kappa*, see SD 36.2 (3).

**0.2 "The Bodhisattva,"** as an anglicized term with initial capital, refers to Gotama Buddha or Siddhattha in his pre-awakening days. This is the equivalent of the Pali term *bodhi, satta*, or anglicized as "Bodhisatta" (but this form is not found in any standard English dictionary). In certain context, "Bodhisattva" refers to the Mahāyāna usage. The term "**bodhisattva**" (lower case) refers to any of the historical buddhas (including Gotama, where applicable) before their awakening.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> On the various approaches to Buddhism, see (17).

<sup>2</sup> I.e., of the past, the present and the future.

<sup>3</sup> On use of anglicization and modern language, see, SD 26.11 (3.3.1).

## 1 Sutta summary

### 1.0 SUTTA CHAPTERS

#### 1.0.1 The Sutta

1.0.1.1 **The Mahā’padāna Sutta** or the Discourse on the Great Legend is the 14<sup>th</sup> sutta of the Dīgha Nikāya. It gives an account of the Buddha’s hagiographical teachings to the monks at Sāvattihī. The Buddha recounts his meetings with the preceding 7 buddhas,<sup>4</sup> and describes their lives in brief, except for that of the Buddha Vipassī.<sup>5</sup>

1.0.1.2 **The Pali text** of the Mahā’padāna Sutta is easily available today.<sup>6</sup> A version is preserved in Chinese translation as the first Sūtra in the Dharmaguptaka recension of the Dīrgh’āgama.<sup>7</sup> A Sanskrit version—the **Mahā’vadāna Sūtra**—has also been reconstructed from fragments, published in the SHT<sup>8</sup> and the “Sanskrit fragments” (SF).<sup>9</sup> Some of these texts are available online from Sutta Central.<sup>10</sup>

#### 1.0.2 The 2 teachings

1.0.2.1 **Teaching-wise**, the **Mahā’padāna Sutta** is broadly divided into two unequal parts: the 1<sup>st</sup> teaching and the 2<sup>nd</sup> teaching, that is, the two occasions that the Buddha addresses the monks in the Sutta:

**The 1<sup>st</sup> teaching** [§§1.1-1.15] is the opening of what is called **the “birth chapter”** (*jāti khaṇḍa*) in the Burmese and European manuscripts. It is so called probably because “birth” (*jāti*) is here broadly used to refer to the arising of the 7 buddhas and related information about them.

1.0.2.2 When the monks marvel and wonder at the Buddha’s knowledge of past lives, he informs them that his knowledge arises from his penetration of the “**dharma-element**” (*dhmma,dhātu*) [4] as well as being informed by **the devas**. [1.0.4.18]

1.0.2.3 **The 2<sup>nd</sup> teaching** [§§1.16-3.37] by the Buddha covers the rest of the Sutta, that is, beginning with the closing half of Chapter 1 [§1.16-1.42] and ending with the Conclusion [§§3.46-3.37]. The 2<sup>nd</sup> teaching is further divided into two unequal parts:

(1) **The Vipassī story**. This is the longest continuous **canonical biography of Vipassī** or any buddha that we have. It begins with the Bodhisattva’s descent from Tusita, followed by his life as bodhisattva and then as buddha, up to his recitation of the *ovāda pātimokkha* [§§1.16-3.33].

The importance of this **Vipassī story** is that it forms the basis for the life of Gotama Buddha that we are so familiar with [9]. Such a Buddha biography (that of Gotama) has been examined elsewhere.<sup>11</sup>

(2) **Gotama Buddha’s visit to Suddh’āvāsa** [§§3.34-3.45]. This unique account is only found here in the Mahā’padāna Sutta. This account is significant in at least two ways: (1) it mentions non-returners in Suddh’āvāsa who are disciples—hence, witnesses to the arising—of the 7 buddhas [8.2.4; 13], and (2) it

<sup>4</sup> On the term “buddha” and the Buddha’s name, see Introductory n (0.1).

<sup>5</sup> For a Pali version of the Sutta, see [Sutta Central](#).

<sup>6</sup> This translation is from the Pali texts of the Pali Text Society, UK (Ee), the Myanmar or Burmese Chatṭha Saṅgīti Tipiṭaka (Be), the Buddha Jayanti Tipiṭaka (BJT) of Sri Lanka (Ce), and the Royal Siamese Tipiṭaka (Ce). The Pali text of the Sutta given by Sutta Central is from Be, but with the text numberings removed, which makes it difficult to refer to. For the original Be numbered version of the Sutta, view or download from [here](#).

<sup>7</sup> Chin versions: 大本經 *Dà běn jīng* [DA 1](#) (T 1.1b11), 佛說七佛經 *Fó shuō qī fō jīng* [T 2](#) (T1.150a3), 毘婆尸佛經 *Pí pō shī fō jīng* [T 3](#) (T1.154b5); 七佛父母姓字經 *Qī fō fù mǔ xìng zì jīng* [T 4](#) (T1.159a24); also [EA 48.4](#) (T2.790/-T125.84.4). See SD 49 Biblio for other information.

<sup>8</sup> Sanskrithandschriften aus den Turfanfunden [Sanskrit Manuscripts Discovered in Turfan]: Waldschmidt 1953: SHT 3, 768, 685 (94-119V), 690,916 165.41, 412.34, 1592, 2009,2032, 2033, 2034, 2172, 2446,2995; also cf ix p393 ff. SHT iv 165.14 is identified in SHT viii p119 | SHT vi 1592 is identified in SHT viii p209. For full Skt text. see [SF 36](#). For Skt refs, see SD 49.15 (Biblio) under SHT.

<sup>9</sup> Fukita 1982, 1985a, 1985b, 1987a, 1987b, 1987c, 1988a. The abbreviation “SF” is used in Sutta Central to refer to “Sanskrit fragments” in SHT, etc. For details, see SD 49.15 (Biblio) under Fukita.

<sup>10</sup> For Chin versions, see (1.0.1.2) n. Skt fragments [SF]: SF 32 (Fukita 1987b), SF 250 (Waldschmidt 1953), [SF 36](#) (Fukita 1993 full Skt), SF 28 (Fukita 1982), SF 33 (Fukita 1987b), SF 29 (Fukita 1985a), SF 296 (Wille 2006: 98, 94, 144), SF 30 (Fukita 1985b), SF 34 (Sukita 1988a), SF 56 (Hartmann 1991:198-216), SF 31 (Fukita 1987a), Uighur fragment (Shōgaito 1998:375-378). Source: <https://suttacentral.net/>.

<sup>11</sup> See **A miraculous life of the Buddha**, SD 52.1.

completes the Buddha's journey in all samsara, as he has never visited Suddh'āvāsa (a realm inhabited only by non-returners). [13]

### 1.0.3 Episodes and chapters

The **Mahāpadāna Sutta** is divided, by episodes or sets of episodes, in 9 chapters and the conclusion, as follows:

<u>Title</u>	<u>Highlights</u>	<u>References</u>
<u>THE 1<sup>ST</sup> TEACHING:</u>		
Chapter 1: The past lives chapter <sup>12</sup>	(1) The 7 buddhas; (2) Vipassī; (3) <i>dhamma, dhātu</i>	§§1.1-1.16
<u>THE 2<sup>ND</sup> TEACHING: Life of Vipassī</u>		
Chapter 2: The bodhisattva chapter	The buddha's birth: its nature and related events	§§1.17-1.32
Chapter 3: The destiny chapter	The 2 destinies; the great man and his marks	§§1.33-1.42
Chapter 4: The quest chapter	The 4 signs; renunciation	§§2.1-2.17
Chapter 5: The awakening chapter	Vipassī's awakening; key teachings	§§2.18-2.22
Chapter 6: The "hesitation" chapter	Reflection of the Dharma and teaching it	§§3.1-3.11
Chapter 7: The teaching chapter	The 2 chief disciples; the 3 communities	§§3.12-3.26
Chapter 8: The sangha chapter	The great commission; <i>ovāda pātimokkha</i>	§§3.27-3.33
<u>THE 3<sup>RD</sup> TEACHING:</u>		
Chapter 9: The Suddh'āvāsa chapter	The devas' witness; the past buddhas	§§3.34-3.45
Conclusion: The dharma-element	<i>Dhamma, dhātu</i> and the buddha's knowledge	§§3.46-3.47

### 1.0.4 Chapter summaries

#### **1 THE "7 BUDDHAS" CHAPTER** [§1.1-1.15]

1.0.4.1 This Chapter opens with Chapter 1, on the 7 buddhas—Vipassī, Sikhī, Vessabhū, Kakusan-dha, Koṇāgamana, Kassapa, and Gotama—this is the "1<sup>st</sup> teaching" [1.0.4.2]. The Buddha recounts the lives of the past 6 buddhas and of his own [8.2.4], telling them about their epochs; their social classes [§1.5]; their clans [§1.6]; their lifespans [§1.7]; their bodhi trees [§1.8]; their pairs of chief disciples [§1.9]; their assemblies [§1.10]; their foremost monk attendant [§1.11]; their parents and their royal cities [§1.12]. [8.2.5; 10.2.1]

#### **2 THE BODHISATTVA CHAPTER** [§§1.16-1.32]

1.0.4.2 Then follows the beginning of the "2<sup>nd</sup> teaching," dealing with a summary of information on Vipassī [1.16]. This is followed by even more details—by way of biographical episodes—on the last birth of Vipassī, that is, events prior to his birth [§§1.17-1.19], his birth mother [§§1.20-1.24], and his miraculous birth [§1.25-1.32].

#### **3 THE DESTINY CHAPTER** [§§1.33-1.42]

1.0.4.3 The next section [§1.33] mentions the brahmin soothsayers' examining the child bodhisattva, and predicting that he will meet one of **2 destinies** [9.3]. This is because the royal child shows that he has **the 32 marks of the great man** [§§1.34-1.36]. The prince is well loved by all [§1.37] and has a lovely voice [§1.38]. He is named **Vipassī** and the reasons for this are given [§§1.39-1.41]. The king builds 3 luxurious palaces for Vipassī so that he lives a life that would in due course make him a great king [§1.42].

#### **4 THE QUEST CHAPTER** [§§2.1-2.17]

1.0.4.4 The second chapter relates how prince Vipassī goes with a charioteer on a joy-ride in the royal gardens and sees **the 4 signs** [§§2.1-2.14]: an old man, a sick man, a dead man, and a renunciant. Each of these sights are separated by "many years, many hundred years, many thousand years." [11.2].

<sup>12</sup> Be calls this "the talk related to rebirth" (*pubbe.nivāsa.patisamyutta kathā*). This Chapter contains the Buddha's 1<sup>st</sup> teaching (on the 7 buddhas) [§§1.4-1.12] and the beginning of the 2<sup>nd</sup> teaching, on Vipassī [§1.16].

1.0.4.5 On seeing the 4<sup>th</sup> sign—that of **the renunciant**, Vipassī decides right there to renounce the world, too [§2.15]. He is followed by the renunciation of “a multitude of 84,000 living beings” from the royal capital, Bandhumatī [§2.16], but he decides to wander alone and live a solitary spiritual life in quest of full awakening [§2.17]. [10.2.2]

## 5 THE AWAKENING CHAPTER [§§2.18-2.22]

1.0.4.6 The awakening chapter records how Vipassī contemplates on “decay and death,” and is determined to seek their ending. He realizes how decay and death arise by reflecting on **a 10-link conditionality** [§2.18] and its 10-link dependent arising [§2.19]. Then, working backwards, he realizes the reverse of the 10-link conditionality [§2.20] and its 10-link dependent ending [§2.21]. He applies all this to contemplating the rise and fall of the 5 aggregates of clinging [§2.22; 10.2.3].

1.0.4.7 The narrator does not seem to directly mention **Vipassī’s awakening**. It is clear that what is described in Chapter 3 is itself the process of the great awakening. This is confirmed by the fact that Vipassī next wonders to whom he should first teach his newly found wisdom, as recorded in the following chapter. [10.1.3]

## 6 THE “HESITATION” CHAPTER [§§3.1-3.11]

1.0.4.8 This chapter records Vipassī reflecting on how difficult the Dharma (the truth of reality) is, and that only the wise who are able to see specific conditionality and dependent arising can be liberated [§3.1]. He wonders how difficult and troubling this would be. It should be noted that no word related to “hesitate” is found here [2.3], but merely a contemplation on the Dharma [§3.2].

1.0.4.9 Brahma, thinking that the Buddha is hesitating to teach the Dharma, goes before him and invites him to do so [§3.3]. The Buddha immediately tells Brahma that he *has* wondered to whom he should teach the Dharma first [§3.1.1], and was reflecting on the Dharma’s profundity [§3.5] and the difficulties that the world would face to learn and practise this Dharma [§3.4].

1.0.4.10 Brahma urgently insists that the Buddha teach the Dharma, making up to three requests [§§3.3.3, 3.6, 3.7]. The Buddha, responding to Brahma’s concern, surveys the world, noting that there are those who would understand the Dharma—comparing the world to a lotus pond with 3 kinds of lotuses [§3.8]. Brahma exults with two verses [§3.9] and the Buddha responds with an udana [inspired utterance] [§3.10]. Brahma leaves gratified [§3.11]. [10.1.4]

## 7 THE TEACHING CHAPTER [§§3.12-3.26]

1.0.4.11 Vipassī decides that his first pupils should be **Khaṇḍa and Tissa**, who are spiritually ready to be the first two chief disciples [§§3.12-3.14]. First, he gives them **a progressive talk** [§3.15], which leads to their refuge-going [§3.16], and, in due course, attaining arhathood [§3.17].

1.0.4.12 As in Vipassī’s renunciation [1.0.4.5], here, too, “a multitude of 84,000 living beings”—the “second multitude”—from Bandhumatī, following the examples of Khaṇḍa and Tissa, renounce the world [§3.18]. Vipassī gives them a progressive talk and gains the Dharma-eye [§3.19]. They go for refuge and renounce the world [§3.20]. Vipassī admits them, and instructs them further [§3.21], so that, in due course, they, too, attain arhathood [§3.22].

1.0.4.13 The “first multitude”—who renounce following Vipassī—hearing of his awakening, return to him, and they too, given a progressive talk, attain the Dharma-eye [§3.23], request to go forth and are admitted [§3.24], and with further instruction [§3.25], attain arhathood [§3.26]. [10.1.5]

## 8 THE SANGHA CHAPTER [§§3.27-3.34]

1.0.4.14 When the monastic community at Bandhumatī has grown to 6,800,000 [16], Vipassī reflects that he should send them forth into the world, and that they should gather together once every 6 years for the recitation of the monastic code (*ovāda pāṭimokkha*, “admonition code”)—technically known as the “observance” (*uposatha*) [2.6] [§3.27]. Brahma, reading the Buddha’s mind, again intervenes and eagerly invites the Buddha to do just that [§3.28].

1.0.4.15 The Buddha then assembles all the monks and announces his reflection [§3.29] and Brahma's supplication [§3.30]. Then, Vipassī proclaims the monks to go forth, and to meet in conclave every 6 years [§3.31].

1.0.4.16 The gods themselves eagerly await the coming of the “observance” day, announcing the passing of the years, until it is the time for the conclave [§3.32]. Then, Vipassī himself recites the “admonition code” [§3.33]. [10.1.6]

### 9 THE SUDDH'ĀVĀSA CHAPTER [§§3.34-3.45]

1.0.4.17 The Sutta narrative now returns to our Buddha Gotama's time (that is, our time, too), and he relates how he decides to visit **the Sudd'āvāsa**, the realm of the non-returners [§3.34; 13]. There, the devas (or brahmas, as they are sometimes called) approach the Buddha in large groups, each announcing from the time of one of the 7 buddhas [§§3.35-3.44], including Gotama's own time [§3.45]. [10.1.3.2]

### 10 CONCLUSION: THE DHARMA-ELEMENT [§§3.46-3.47]

1.0.4.18 The Sutta closes with the Buddha reiterating that his knowledge of the past buddhas are the result of his “having penetrated the dharma-element” [4] and from information given to him by the devas, too. [§3.46] [1.0.2.2]. The audience of monks rejoice in Gotama's teaching [§3.47].

**Table 1.0.4. The 7 buddhas and their attributes**

Sanskrit	Vipassī Vipaśyī	Sikhī Śikhī	Vessabhū Viśvabhū	Kakusandha Krakucchanda	Konāgamana Kanakamuni <sup>13</sup>	Kassapa Kaśyapa	Gotama Gautama
				An auspicious aeon <sup>14</sup> ( <i>bhadda, kappa</i> ) (BA 252)			
<b>Aeon</b>	91 <sup>st</sup> from now	31 <sup>st</sup> from now	31 <sup>st</sup> from now	In this aeon	In this aeon	In this aeon	In this aeon
<b>Class</b>	noble	noble	noble	brahmin	brahmin	brahmin	noble
<b>Clan</b>	Koṇḍañña	Koṇḍañña	Koṇḍañña	Kassapa	Kassapa	Kassapa	Gotama
<b>Life-span</b>	80,000 yr	70,000 yr	60,000 yr	40,000 yr	30,000 yr	30,000 yr	100 yr
<b>Tree<sup>15</sup></b>	<i>pāṭalī</i>	<i>puṇḍarīka</i>	<i>sāla</i>	<i>sirīssa</i>	<i>udumbara</i>	<i>nigrodha</i>	<i>assattha</i>
<b>Chief disciples</b>	Khaṇḍa & Tissa	Abhibhū & Sambhava	Soṇa & Uttara	Vidhūra & Sañjīva	Bhiyyosa & Uttara	Tissa & Bhāradvāja	Sāriputta & Moggallāna
<b>Arhat assembly</b>	6,800,000 10,000 80,000	100,000 80,000 70,000	80,000 70,000 60,000	40,000	30,000	20,000	1,250
<b>Attendant</b>	Asoka	Khemaṇ, kara	Upasanta <sup>16</sup>	Buddhija	Sotthija	Sabbamitta	Ānanda
<b>Father</b>	King Bandhuma	King Aruṇa	King Suppatīta	Aggidatta	Yaññadatta	Brahma-darra	King Suddhodana
<b>King</b>	(Father)	(Father)	(Father)	Khema	Sobha	Kikī	(Father)
<b>Mother</b>	Bandhu-matī	Pabhāvatī	Yasavatī	Visākhā	Uttarā	Dhanavatī	Māyā
<b>Birth-place</b>	Bandhu-matī	Pabhāvatī	Anopamā	Khemavatī	Sobhavatī	Bārāṇāsī	Kapila-vatthu

<sup>13</sup> Or, Koṇākamuni.

<sup>14</sup> On the length and nature of an aeon (*kappa*), see SD 2.19 (App).

<sup>15</sup> For their common names, see respective tr texts.

<sup>16</sup> Ee Ke *Upasannaka*.



### 1.0.5 The 12 acts of the Buddha

1.0.5.1 Later Buddhist teachers and theoreticians have made lists of the key “acts” or deeds (Skt *kārya*; P *kāriya*).<sup>17</sup> There is, however, no such list in the suttas or early Buddhist teachings. However, from the episodes of Vipassī’s life as detailed in **the Mahā’padāna Sutta**, and from the sutta teachings, we can list the follow 12 key “acts of the buddha”:

(1) the descent from Tusita	§1.17
(2) the conception	§1.18
(3) the nativity (birth)	§§1.26-1.27
(4) the youthful life of pleasures	§1.42
(5) the 4 signs	§§2.1-2.14
(6) the great renunciation (and quest)	§2.15
(7) the self-mortification	None [§§2.18-2.22, on conditionality]
(8) the great awakening	§2.22 reflecting on the 5 aggregates of clinging
(9) the turning of the Dharma wheel	§3.12 teaches to the pair of chief disciples
(10) the great commission	§§3.27-3.31
(11) the admonition code ( <i>ovāda pātimokkha</i> )	§3.32 the admonition code of the arhats
(12) the final nirvana	None [ <b>Mahā,parinibbāna Sutta</b> , D 16 (SD 9)]

1.0.5.2 Here are some brief and salient comments on the significance of these 12 acts for the purpose of Dharma-based discussion regarding our own Dharma life and spreading it in our own times.

(1) **The descent from Tusita** [§1.17]. The heavens and heavenly life are the fruits of good karma, but we need to descend from such comforts to confront true reality so that we are spiritually free, even from heaven itself.

(2) **The conception** [§1.18]. A human birth is the best field of spiritual growth and learning as we face the visissitudes of life, and learn to make the right choices that conduce to the spiritual life and awakening.

(3) **The nativity** [§§1.26-1.27]. To be born means to be present in the moment, to seize the moment, and to free it, just as life is the breath, and we need to take it in, and having done so, to let it go.

(4) **The youthful life of pleasures** [§1.42]. Life must be lived as it is, experiencing both the body and the mind, so that we truly understand the nature of pleasure and pain. The inexperienced life is not lived.

(5) **The 4 signs** [§§2.1-2.14]. As we move through life, our inner vision of outer reality becomes clearer as we begin to see irrefutable patterns of realities that we need to connect and to which we should relate to see the bigger picture.

(6) **The great renunciation** [§2.15]. Pleasure is only truly enjoyable if we are able to let it go; pain goes away all by itself when we do not try to own it. From the moment of birth, we have been letting go of our breath, our body and our thoughts. That’s how we grow. We can try to hold our breath but that would be suffering.

(7) **The quest.** After renouncing the world, Vipassī Buddha meditating alone on conditionality (dependent arising and ending) and the 5 aggregates [§§2.18-2.22] attains awakening without any quest. Gotama, on the other hand, spends time with two teachers, and 6 years of self-mortification, as recorded in **the Ariya Pariyesanā Sutta** (M 26), SD 1.11.

(7) **The self-mortification.** The Vipassī story and the Mahā’padāna Sutta do not mention any asceticism. In its place, there is dependent arising and dependent ending [§§2.18-2.22]. Understanding conditionality, Vipassī is liberated. There is the pain of ritual and the ritual of pain; both need to be understood so

<sup>17</sup> Later Buddhism has 2 interesting lists. (A) The 8 stages of the Buddha path: (1) descent from Tuṣita, (2) entry into the womb, (3) birth, (4) renunciation, (5) subduing Māra, (6) becoming Buddha, (7) turning the Dharma wheel, (8) parinirvana (*Buddhism A-Z*, R B Epstein, 2003:32); (B) The 12 acts of the Buddha (*buddha, kārya*): (1) descent from Tuṣita, (2) entry in the womb, (3) taking birth, (4) proficiency in the arts, (5) enjoyments of consorts, (6) renunciation, (7) asceticism, (8) going to the *bodhi,maṇḍala* (bodhi tree area), (9) subduing Māra, (10) enlightenment. (11) turning the Dharma wheel, (12) parinirvana (*Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism*, 1024:1087).

that we free our minds from the rut of negative habits and suffering, so that we stop biting our own tail like a uroboros.<sup>18</sup>

(8) **The great awakening.** The Sutta records Vipassī awakening through reflecting on conditionality of the 5 aggregates [§2.22]. For many, “awakening” or “enlightenment” is clever wordplay that drugs the mind into thinking that the word’s the thing. A hint of what awakening is like can be felt when we truly rise, even momentarily, above our negative emotions, and see ourselves and the world with the same lovingkindness, and consider the impermanence in both.

(9) **The turning of the Dharma wheel.** With liberating wisdom, comes the compassion that empowers us to help liberate others. However great the compassion, it must always be tempered with wisdom. For this reason, Vipassī chooses the two wisest people he knows to be the first to hear the Dharma he has awakened to, and to become his pair of chief disciples [§3.12].

(10) **The great commission** [§§3.27-3.31]. To live the spiritual life fully, we must go forth in two ways. The first is to go forth from the stifling crowd into the bright space of liberation as a true individual. The second is to go forth into the crowd that is the world and touch lives with radiant joy so that they can see and move against the madding crowd, even far away from it.

(11) **The ovāda pātimokkha** [§3.32]. This is the admonition code of the arhats, who are steeped in the Dharma spirit. They need no rules for the good life because they are incapable of breaking any. The precepts and the moral life are the twin bridges over troubled waters. They tame and train our body and speech so that we move effectively on the path of personal cultivation towards liberating wisdom.

(12) **Entering final nirvana.** Even buddhas die: their bodies decay and their lives end. This is the nature of impermanence that defines all life, worldly or awakened. The death of a buddha is to be celebrated, not mourned, as the final proof of the truth of the Dharma. If we do not get over the buddha’s death, we have not understood the Dharma, and will desperately seek ways to deny death and delude ourselves. The Mahā’padāna Sutta does not mention any passing away. The subject is fully examined in such discourses as **the Mahā,parinibbāna Sutta** (D 16 @ SD 9). [8.1.6.2]

## I SIGNIFICANCE OF THE SUTTA

### 2 Sutta highlights

#### 2.1 SUTTA SIGNIFICANCE

**2.1.1** The first chapter (*vagga*) of Dīgha Nikāya (called “the collection on moral virtue,” *sīla-k,khandha*) is characterized by debates. The second chapter—called **the “Great Chapter”** (*mahā vagga*)—contains texts relating to the Buddha’s life. In the Pali canon, the Mahā’padāna Sutta is the 14<sup>th</sup> in the Dīgha Nikāya, and **the first text of the second chapter**. The Sutta records an account of **the 7 buddhas**, that is, our Gotama Buddha and six preceding buddhas [8.2].

However, the details regarding the life of the first of these 7 buddhas, **Vipassī**, are given in some detail. In fact, these descriptions serve as the model for the later **Buddha legend**, with which we are most familiar with today. [9]

**2.1.2** The Mahā’padāna Sutta tells us that Vipassī Buddha **awakens** by reflecting on **conditionality** [7.1.1], that is, the dependent arising of the 5 aggregates, and their dependent ending [7.1.2]. The dependent arising described in the Sutta is a ten-link causal chain rather than the standard 12-link cycle. This suggests that the Sutta is probably preserving the doctrine that predates the classical formulation.

**2.1.3** The Commentary on the Mahā’padāna Sutta closes by saying that it is only an **abridged** version of the 3 recitals (*bhāṇavāra*) [Header (1) n]. It can be expanded into 21 recitals or even 2600 recitals. Consequently, it is said to be the “king of suttas” (*suttanta,rājā*).<sup>19</sup>

<sup>18</sup> On **the uroboros**, see SD 23.3 (1) & SD 49.2 (4.3.2.3).

<sup>19</sup> *Sabbam pi cha-b,bīṣati,bhāṇavāra,sataṃ hoti. Tepiṭake buddha,vacane aññaṃ suttaṃ cha-b,bīṣati,bhāṇavāra,-sata,parimāṇaṃ nāma n’atthi, suttanta,rājā nāma ayaṃ suttanta’ti veditabbo.* (DA 2:480,9 f). The Dīgha Nikāya itself is 64 recitals (*bhāṇavāra*). On the expanding of texts, see Hinuber, *A Handbook of Pali Literature*, 1996: §§70, 144.

## 2.2 MONKS DISCUSSING AND THE BUDDHA INTERVENING

### 2.2.1 The Buddha's 3 teachings

2.2.1.1 THE 1<sup>ST</sup> TEACHING [1.1-1.6]. The **Mahā'padāna Sutta** is an example of a discourse where the Buddha teaches the Dharma in response to two on-going discussion of the monks. The Sutta opens with the first discussion before the Buddha's small hut under the kareri tree [§1.1]. They are discussing **the nature of past lives** [§1.2]. The Buddha intervenes and helpfully adds onto their discussion by telling them about **the 7 buddhas** [8.2] and, then, details on the first of them, Vipassī [§§1.3-1.14]. After that, the Buddha retires to his hut. [§1.12.3]

2.2.1.2 THE 2<sup>ND</sup> TEACHING [§§1.17-3.33]. This is the much longer teaching by Buddha to the assembled monks, who are wondering about how the Buddha knows about past lives [2.2.2]. Here, the Buddha relates a detailed sequential life of the first of the 7 buddhas, **Vipassī**, from his birth, to his awakening, and ending with his allowing the great commission and the Pātimokkha recitation. [1.0.3]

2.2.1.3 THE 3<sup>RD</sup> TEACHING [§§3.34-3.47]. This is mostly a long teaching that is given *abridged* in the Pali texts, but laid out in full in this translation. It relates the Buddha's visit to *Suddh'āvāsa* (the Pure Abodes, the world inhabited only by non-returners). The Mahā'padāna Sutta records the Buddha as visiting only *Avihā*, the lowest of the 5 abodes [13].

The deities of the higher abodes (*Atappā*, *Sudassā*, *Sudassī*, and *Akaniṭṭhā*) then descend to *Avihā* to pay homage to the Buddha.<sup>20</sup> Groups of these deities declare their familiarity with the 7 buddhas, and how these deities have attained non-return through these buddhas' teachings. Hence, this is called "the *Suddh'āvāsa* chapter" [§§3.34-3.45].

The 3<sup>rd</sup> teaching closes with the Buddha reiterating how he knows about past lives. This section also forms the conclusion to the whole Sutta. [§3.46-3.47]

**2.2.2 How the Buddha knows about past lives.** As soon as the Buddha has left, the monks marvel amongst themselves at the Buddha's vast knowledge of past lives, wondering if he knows it himself or the gods inform him [§1.13]. The Buddha emerges from his rest and joins the monks' discussion again [§1.14]. Going with the flow of the discussion, the Buddha then tells them that he both knows all about past lives—having penetrated the dharma-element (*dhamma, dhātu*) [4]—and that the gods inform him, too [§1.15]. The Buddha then gives them the 2<sup>nd</sup> teaching [1.0.2.3], which covers the rest of the Sutta.

**2.2.3 The buddha's divine ear.** In the first instance, the Sutta tells us, "Now, the Blessed One, with his purified divine ear, surpassing that of humans, heard this conversation of the monks." [§1.2]. In other words, the Buddha knows beforehand what the monks are discussing, but he still asks them about their discussion, in order to naturally fit into the flow of things.

The above description of the Buddha's foreknowledge and the Buddha interrupting a discussion form a stock passage.<sup>21</sup> It is interesting that although the Buddha has this foreknowledge, he does not impress this fact on the gathered monks. He sits before them just like any of them, but naturally as their teacher, teaching them in a most congenial way. We see here an example of the "miracle of teaching" (*anusāsani pāṭihāriya*).<sup>22</sup>

## 2.3 THE "HESITATION" OF BUDDHAS

### 2.3.1 Setting of the "hesitation"

2.3.1.1 One of the most often misunderstood or misconstrued episodes in the Buddha's biography is that he "hesitates" to teach the Dharma after his awakening [1.0.4(6)]. The following points in the "hesitation" narrative are worth noting:

<sup>20</sup> Skt and Chin versions—**Mahā'vadāna Sūtra** [1.0.1.2]—depict the Buddha as arriving in *Aviha*, and then progressively ascending through each of the higher abodes, meeting the respective inhabitants of each abode, and finally returns to *Jambudvīpa* (ancient India).

<sup>21</sup> Eg, **D 1,1.4/1:2** (Buddha to the monks); **M 77,5/2:2** (Buddha to the wanderer *Sakul'udāyi*), **108,6/3:8** (the brahmin *Vassa,kāra* to *Ānanda*), **119,2/3:89** (Buddha to the monks); **U 2.2/11** (id), **3.8/31**; **J 4/1:120** (id).

<sup>22</sup> We are reminded here of the 3 kinds of miracles: psychic powers, mind-reading, and teaching. See **Kevaḍḍha S** (D 11,8.1:214), SD 1.7.



- (1) The first thought that Vipassī has after his awakening is: “Now, to whom should I teach the Dharma?” [§3.1.1]
- (2) Then, he reflects on depth and sublimity of the Dharma [§3.1.2], not easy to attain, especially by those who have worldly attachments, who do not see conditionality [§3.1.3], so that they are unlikely to attain nirvana [§3.1.4].
- (3) Vipassī’s reflection is then put into verse, essentially highlighting that the Dharma is “against the current” (*paṭisota, gāmī*) of the world. Naturally, an awakened and wise being would see such realities for what they are: this is his first natural response [§3.2]. The natural conclusion would be for Vipassī to be “inclined to living at ease” [§3.2.4].

2.3.1.2 From the Vipassī’s story, we can tease out **3 reasons for his apparent hesitation**, that is,

- (i) the depth of the Dharma [§3.1.2];
- (ii) the difficulty of the worldly in seeing the Dharma [§3.1.3]; and
- (iii) the natural state of living at ease [§3.2.4].

(i) The Dharma’s depth is *not* a burden for buddhas and saints, but a *joy* because they have already tapped its depth, as someone who has reached his destination. Indeed, a buddha or saint would rejoice in being able to share this liberating truth to others. This, in an important way, gives weight to the second reason.

(ii) Not everyone in the world may be able to understand the Dharma. However, there are those who, with some spiritual maturity and readiness, will be able to understand. There are those with “little dust in their eyes.” Even those with dust in their eyes are only temporarily blinded. It is possible, if the teacher is patient and skilled to remove the dust, but the student must be ready to see, and willing and able to accept what he sees. This kind of student needs the help of at least some skillful means.

(iii) The benefit of being awakened and liberated is that we would be in a natural state of joyful ease. We do *not need* to do anything. Whatever effort we assert for the benefit of others is out of the ordinary, so to speak. But with great wisdom comes great compassion: this is also a natural state of things for the awakened. They see and know the sufferings of others on account of craving and ignorance. It is a matter of time they would reach out to others in compassion.<sup>23</sup> [3.2.6.2]

### **2.3.2 Natural response**

2.3.2.1 Vipassī’s apparent “hesitation” to teach may appear as embarrassing for those of us who think or believe that an all-compassionate being like a buddha should, without a thought, declare his newly-discovered Dharma to the world, ready or not. Sadly, the Buddha-Dharma would then very much be like any other religion, or any other world religion.

2.3.2.2 We can say that here Vipassī is thinking in terms of the world of beings out there. Are they ready to hear the Dharma that will challenge their ways, that goes against the very grain of worldliness itself, that would clearly rub the wrong way? Certainly not. It would certainly be unwise for anyone to declare his wisdom to a world that is unable to understand, much less, practise, the Dharma. The most natural and right response would be to do nothing, at least, for the moment.

2.3.2.3 We should note, from the Sutta, that Vipassī, “Thinking thus, bhikshus, the mind of the Blessed One, Vipassī. the arhat, fully self-awakened, inclined to living at ease,<sup>24</sup> rather than teaching the Dharma.” [§3.2.4]. The text does not say that Vipassī has made a final decision *not* to teach—it was just a reflection on the Dharma. It is a passing thought of wise concern, of not rushing into a vital enterprise, such as teaching the Dharma to the world.

**2.3.3 Bodhisattva mind, buddha mind.** It may further be asked: But why, when the Bodhisattva had long ago made an aspiration to reach Buddhahood in order to liberate others, he is now inclined towards living at ease? The answer is clear enough: the Bodhisattva’s mind is still unawakened, and, as such, is unable to see the whole and real picture of the world.

<sup>23</sup> On these 3 reasons, see also Jones 2009:91-94.

<sup>24</sup> “Inclined to living at ease,” *appossukkatāya* = *appa* (“little”) + *ussukka* (“striving for”), meaning “little zeal”; ie “careless, unconcerned; living at ease, inactive” (V 2:188; D 2:176 = M 3:175 ≈ D 2:177 = M 3:176; M 1:450; Sn 43; Nc 91 = Ap 9; Thī 457, 477; Dh 330). Comys: *Appossukkatā* means the lack of desire to teach (SA 1:197).

However, after awakening, Vipassī or any buddha, would fully realize the weight of defilements in the minds of worldly beings, and of the Dharma's profundity and spirituality. He is now able to see right through the world's veils of craving and ignorance into the true nature of the unawakened beings.

### **2.3.4 Brahma's supplication (1)** [2.5.2; 14]

2.3.4.1 The commentator, Buddhaghosa, gives a very interesting explanation for the buddha's apparent "hesitation" to teach the Dharma at first. He proposes that the buddha wants Brahmā to entreat him to teach, so that beings who venerate Brahmā (whom we know today as "Almighty God"<sup>25</sup>—and most religious people do—would recognize the Dharma's value and desire to listen to it.<sup>26</sup>

2.3.4.2 Brahma plays an interesting and important role here in the service of the buddha and his Dharma. This is the closest that early Buddhism comes to conceiving a God-idea. The Buddhist God or Brahma is truly all compassionate, and is always concerned with the world's welfare, as far as his powers permit. For even He is subject to the world he lives in, subject to space and time.

2.3.4.3 Brahma, patiently watching and eagerly expecting the Buddha to teach the Dharma to the world, thinks that the Buddha has decided not to teach, and so invites him to do so [§§3.3, 3.9]. It should be noted that the Buddha does not utter a word here: he is merely reflecting on the Dharma.

**3.3** [Be §66] Then, bhikshus, Mahā Brahmā,<sup>27</sup> having known with his own mind the reflection in the mind of the Blessed One, Vipassī, [37] thought:

‘Alas, the world is lost! Alas, the world is destroyed, now that the mind of the Tathagata, the arhat, the fully self-awakened one, inclines to living at ease, not to teaching Dharma!’

It should be noted here that although Brahma is able to read the Buddha's mind, he is unable to actually know the Buddha's intention. He is more concerned for the world, that it should hear the Buddha out. It is a dramatization of what is missing at that time, and of what is to come. This is what we, as the reader of this account of an ancient drama, is able to watch and learn.

2.3.4.4 Brahma, in other words, feels or sees the flow of thoughts in the Buddha's mind, and tries to stop it before that thought comes to its conclusion, before he actually decides *not* to teach. This is the Buddha's own compassion manifesting itself—or appearing to us—as Brahmā in the Buddha's mind. It is a story for our edification.

Imagine the contrary scenario, where the Buddha does not seem to “hesitate” at all. He at once teaches the Dharma, as a matter of course. The point is we have reason to value the Dharma more, otherwise. We cannot assume that all buddhas would teach the Dharma, and would teach it in a manner that the world would really hear it, that we would today still be able to hear it.<sup>28</sup>

### **2.3.5 The buddha looks within**

2.3.5.1 When the buddha looks out into the world, he sees the Dharma as profound and the world as frivolous. The yawning chasm seems impossible to bridge. However, in time, the buddha looks within himself and his own awakening [§3.10]. He sees the Dharma, which shows the true reality of everything. He is like a wise and adept doctor who sees a raving epidemic, understand its causes, knows its ending, and acts to eradicate that epidemic. Such a liberating wisdom shines a light of compassion on the world. In that light, the buddha will naturally act to teach and liberate beings, and to do so even after his death.

Here again we see the primacy of the Dharma, even above the buddha himself. As **the Gārava Sutta** (S 6.2) shows, the Buddha places the Dharma above even himself.<sup>29</sup> It is the Dharma that empowers him.

<sup>25</sup> See eg **Kevaḍḍha S** (D 11,80.3), SD 1.7.

<sup>26</sup> SA 1:197 f; MA 2:176 f on **Ariya Pariyesanā S** (M 26), SD 1.11.

<sup>27</sup> Throughout **Mahā'padāna S**, he is mentioned only as *mahā, brahmā*, whereas in the parallel passages in **Ariya Pariyesanā S** (M 26), SD 1.11, **Bodhi Rāja, kumāra S** (M 85), SD 55.2, **Brahmāyācana S** (S 6.1), SD 12.2, and **Vinaya** (V 1:4-7), he is called *brahmā sahampati* throughout. This may attest to the fact that **Mahā'padāna S** is older than these texts: see (14.2.1).

<sup>28</sup> For the 3 possible reasons that the Buddha “hesitates,” see Jones 2009b:91-94.

<sup>29</sup> S 6.2 (SD 12.3).

With the Dharma, there is no buddha, and the buddha is the skilled person who is able to propagate the Dharma and change the lives of those who are willing and ready for the Dharma [§3.8].

We can see here the buddha's compassion responding to an inner Brahma, that is, his concern for the world's welfare—which he is wont to do anyway. A fully awakened buddha arises in the world to teach the Dharma, when the conditions are right [9.2.1.1]. The buddha then teaches us how to internalize the Dharma, how to let the Dharma work by itself within us, as it has with the buddha. The buddha now raises his finger to point out the way to us. Buddhas are showers of the way (Dh 276).

### 2.3.6 No Pali word for “hesitate”

2.3.6.1 A note that helps us to read Buddhism in a beneficial way. One of the challenges of reading Buddhism in English is when we impose our own categories and foreign notions into the Buddhist text so that its import is misconstrued or distorted. When we use the word “**hesitate**” and its various grammatical forms in connection with the buddha's reflections immediately after his awakening, we delude ourselves into imagining that he actually has doubts (*āsāṅkati*, *kaṅkhati*, *vicikicchati*, *vilambati*) or that he actually tarryes (*vilambati*, *cirāyati*)<sup>30</sup> so that he decides not to teach the Dharma. None of these ideas rightly describe the Sutta narrative, and none of these words are found therein.

Indeed, throughout the Sutta narrative, there is no word either for “doubting” or for “tarrying.” In other words, the buddha is neither having doubts about the Dharma nor has he made any decision not to teach. He is merely contemplating on the Dharma. And we must add, the newly awakened Buddha—especially in the case of Gotama Buddha<sup>31</sup>—is simply resting from the ascetic strain and physical exertion leading up to the great awakening.

2.3.6.2 Finally, even if the Buddha does seem to tarry (rather than hesitate) in teaching the Dharma, it is simply like a newly qualified surgeon who examines his surgical tools and reflects on his learning and skills. Or, this same surgeon, spends some mindful time looking and examining his patient before actually operating. In a good sense, this is a truly human aspect of the Buddha who does not rush into things with a stressful urgency, like some evangelist who is zealous to harvest souls.

2.3.6.3 It is the nature of buddhas and saints to spend their time in spiritual ease (*appossukka*), especially without having to face the challenges of teaching the Dharma. In simple terms, why do something when you don't have to do it. However, there are occasions when some things *need* to be done—the Buddha would, of course, do it, no matter how challenging.

2.3.6.4 A good example recorded in **the (Anuruddha) Upakkilesa Sutta** (M 128), when the Buddha tries to quell the quarrel between two groups of monks at Kosambī. The unruly monks actually tell the Buddha off, that he should not interfere, but go on “living at ease.”<sup>32</sup> However, here, there is an undertone of **irony**, as the speakers are *not* themselves living at ease!

The Buddha himself uses the expression in an openly ironic sense when he finally reassures Māra that he (the Buddha) will pass into parinirvana in 3 months' time. Māra has been pestering the Buddha to pass away, now that the fourfold assembly—the monks, the nuns, the laymen and the laymen of all the 4 levels of sainthood—are complete and present. “Be at ease, bad one!” the Buddha tells Māra, “It will not be long before the Tathāgata's parinirvana. With the passing of three months from now, the Tathagata shall enter parinirvana.”<sup>33</sup>

2.3.6.5 The expression “**living at ease**” (*appôssuka*), meaning, “care-free, unconcerned,”<sup>34</sup> then, is not a negative one, but refers to a strategic and wholesome withdrawal from the world. One can be safe from

<sup>30</sup> These definitions are from Buddhadatta's English-Pali Dictionary: svv doubt (v) and tarry (v),

<sup>31</sup> For our Gotama Buddha's 7-year quest (esp the 6 years of painful asceticism), see SD 49.4 (5). On the Buddha's first 7 weeks, see SD 26.1 (5) + SD 63.1. On the newly awakened Buddha's emaciated state, see Reflection R421, “Pain in stone,” 2015.

<sup>32</sup> M 128,4-6 (SD 5.18). A similar response by the Buddha at the same place but with a different story is found in **(Udāna) Nāga S** (U 4.5), SD 81.5.

<sup>33</sup> D 2:106,18 = 114,29 = S 5:262,18 = A 4:311,25 = U 64,21; ie, respectively, **Mahā,parinibbāna S** (D 16,3.9/-2:106,18; 3.37/2:114,20); **Cetiya S** (S 51.10/5:262,18); **Bhūmi,cāla S** (A 8.70/4:311,25); **Āyu,saṅkhār'ossajjana S** (U 6.1/64,21).

<sup>34</sup> *Appôssuka* or *appossuka* (mc) = *appa* (“little”) + *ussakka* (“striving for, looking for, moving ahead”).

Māra by living at ease and in safety by restraining our senses, “living at ease and keeping silent,” like a tortoise, withdrawing all its limbs, as taught in **the Kummôpama Sutta** (S 35.240).<sup>35</sup>

On a simple level, this simply means being mindful and keeping to the precepts. On a deeper level, this refers to the attaining of dhyanas, as stated in **the Nava Bhikkhu Sutta** (S 21.4).<sup>36</sup> For an unawakened seeker, it refers to a wholesome state of being, resolved on inner peace and spiritual training. For a saint, this refers to living a naturally peaceful and blissful life. The expression finds its most dramatic application in the story of Brahmā’s supplication.

### 2.3.7 Wordplay

2.3.7.1 There is a wordplay in the phrase *pamuñcatu saddhaṃ*, which can be translated either as<sup>37</sup>

(1) “let them declare [ascertain] their faith!” [§3.10]; and

(2) “let them abandon their ancestor worship (*saddha*; Skt *śrāddha*).”<sup>38</sup>

This ambiguity becomes especially significant when we note that the Mahābhārata describes how Brahmā introduced the Vedic ancestor worship or *śrāddha* (13.91).<sup>39</sup> Assuming that this myth predates the Buddha, we can see that here the Buddha is clearly rejecting such an elaborate, costly and meaningless ritual. Hence, “Let them abandon their ancestor worship!”<sup>40</sup>

2.3.7.2 The best explanation for the account of Brahmā’s supplication is that the Buddha himself or the sutta compilers are using Brahmā, the High God of creation to the brahmins, to boost the prestige of the Buddha and his Dharma in the eyes of Brahmā’s worshippers. Although the brahmins claim that they came from Brahmā’s mouth, here we have Brahmā himself piously bowing before the Buddha—it is clear who is the superior! In short, this is early Buddhist propaganda, which worked so well that, in due course, Brahmā’s position in the brahminical pantheon became insignificant. [14].

In other words, the episode of Brahmā’s supplication is not a problem of whether the Buddha hesitated or not—this does not matter, as he would sooner or later teach, anyway. It is really about Brahmā himself. The story is to dramatically convert, as it were, the brahminical High God, Brahmā, to the Buddha Dharma. Sadly, the brahmins, would, in due course, turn the tables on the Buddhists, and try to convert the Buddha himself to Hinduism.

2.3.7.3 The Hindu doctrine of “incarnations” or *avatāra* probably originated as early as the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE. However, it was during the Bhagavatism phase of Vaishnavism, in the Gupta period (330-550 CE), that the avatar doctrine gained prominence. By the 8<sup>th</sup> century CE, the Buddha was regarded by the Hindus as the 9<sup>th</sup> and penultimate incarnation of the Hindu god, Viṣṇu, several Puranas.<sup>41</sup> However, not all Vaishnavas accept the Buddha as such, believing instead that Bāla Rāma is the 8<sup>th</sup> incarnation and Krishna as the 9<sup>th</sup>.<sup>42</sup>

In this myth, the “Buddha” is made to act to delude those who already deserved punishment for their bad deeds. Deceived by the “Buddha’s” false teachings, these individuals renounced the Vedas and traditional Hinduism, and so were punished in hell or in inferior births. In a number of later texts, however, Viṣṇu’s “Buddha” avatar interpreted more positively teaching compassion and non-violence.<sup>43</sup>

<sup>35</sup> S 35.240/4:178 (SD 19.17).

<sup>36</sup> S 21.4/2:277 (SD 72/13).

<sup>37</sup> Cf K R Norman 2001:293 n663, 429 n1146.

<sup>38</sup> See (**Saddha**) Jāṇussoṇi S (A 10.1) + SD 2.6a (2).

<sup>39</sup> According to the myth, Brahmā gave the instructions to his son, the sage Atri, who then passed it down to his own son, the sage Nimi.

<sup>40</sup> For details, see SD 12.2 (3).

<sup>41</sup> John C Holt, *The Buddhist Viṣṇu: Religious transformation, politics, and culture*. NY: Columbia Univ Press, 2013:14.

<sup>42</sup> Nanditha Krishna, *Book of Vishnu*, Penguin UK, 2009.

<sup>43</sup> John Braisted Carman, *Majesty and Meekness: A comparative study of contrast and harmony in the concept of God*, Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B Eerdmans Publishing, 1994:211 f.



## 2.4 THE ADMISSION OF DISCIPLES

### 2.4.1 The admission of the 2 chief disciples

2.4.1.1 Soon after Vipassī has awakened as a buddha, he chooses **Khaṇḍa** the royal prince and **Tissa** the purohit's son as his first pair of disciples [§3.12]. After receiving due instructions in the Dharma by Vipassī himself, they gain the Dharma-eye [§3.15]. We are then told that the two go for **the 2 refuges** (*dve, vācika*) [2.4.4]—there is no “sangha jewel” (*saṅgha, ratana*) yet—and for admission as renunciants [§3.16.3]. Vipassī, after admitting them, further teaches them the Dharma, as a result of which they become arhats [§3.17].

2.4.1.2 Clearly here, with Vipassī as the only buddha and arhat around, he would have to ordain the two candidates himself. Although there is no mention of the mode of ordination of the two chief disciples, we can surmise that they are admitted by **the “Come, bhikkhus!” (*etha bhikkhave*) formula**,<sup>44</sup> or something similar. Since they have yet to attain arhathood, the ordination formula would further have this admonition:

“Well taught is the Dharma. Live the holy life for the utter ending of suffering!”

(*Svākkhāto dhammo, cara brahma, cariyam, sammā dukkhassa anta, kiriyāyāti.*) (V 1:12,23)<sup>45</sup>

And so they become Vipassī's pair of chief disciples (*agga, sāvaka, yuga*) [§§3.16-3.17].

2.4.1.3 It should be noted here that there is no mention of the group of 5 monks (*pañca, vaggiya*), the first disciples of Gotama Buddha, as prominently presented in **the Dhamma, cakka Pavattana Sutta** (S 56.11).<sup>46</sup> In fact, in Gotama's biography, the pair of chief disciples gains the Dharma-eye and join the community only after the great commission, the going-forth of the 60 arhats as missionaries<sup>47</sup> and the Buddha meeting with king Bimbisāra and the establishment of the first park monastery, the bamboo grove (a gift of the king), at Rājagaha.<sup>48</sup>

2.4.1.4 Such is **a de facto admission** of the early monks into the monastic community. They are members of the noble community (*ariya, saṅgha*) by virtue of the fact that they have already attained the Dharma-eye [7.4], that is, at least streamwinning, if not once-return or even non-return, that is, they are on the sure path to self-awakening. Hence, they are de facto renunciants. The arhats, as a rule, upon attaining that state, would request for admission into the community.<sup>49</sup> Recognizing this fact, the Buddha simply pronounces the key-word of acceptance into the community—“Come!” (*sg ehi*; pl *etha*).

**The de jure admission** of candidates into the “conventional order” (*sammuti saṅgha*) of unawakened renunciants was introduced only after the de facto spiritual sangha of saints has been well established.<sup>50</sup> It serves as a sort of spiritual recruiting service, an open programme, for the training of those who are willing and able to attain at least streamwinning, and who can live a disciplined life without exploiting the laity.

However, as evident from monastic history, many candidates—such as the group of 6 monks (*chab, baggiya*)<sup>51</sup>—abuse the system and fail to attain any liberating stage. However, those who do find liberation through this “open programme” are, fortunately, much more numerous.<sup>52</sup>

<sup>44</sup> This is the pl form of the formula. The sg form has the words, *ehi bhikkhu*, “Come, bhikkhu!” See foll n.

<sup>45</sup> For the *ehi bhikkhu* admission, see SD 45.16 (1.2).

<sup>46</sup> Gotama's first disciples (*sāvaka*) are Aññā Koṇḍañña, Vappa, Bhaddiya, Mahānāma, and Assaji: see (S 56.11) + SD 1.1 (1.3). **Buddha, varṇsa**, too, mentions the group of 5 only in the account of Gotama Buddha (B 18, 286, 291), but not in any other buddha. On the awakening of the 5 monks, see **Anatta Lakkhaṇa S** (S 22.59), SD 1.2 (1.3) & SD 45.16 (1.1).

<sup>47</sup> See **The great commission**, SD 11.2.

<sup>48</sup> See SD 11.2(11). On Sāriputta and Moggallāna, see Piya Tan, *The Buddha and His Disciples*, Singapore: The Minding Centre [2002], 2013 ch 5.

<sup>49</sup> However, there are famous cases where their premature death prevents such a transaction, as in the cases of Bāhiya Dāru, cūriya and Pukkusaṭi: see **Sabba Kamma, jaha S** (U 3.1), SD 39.3 (1.4.5).

<sup>50</sup> See **Pabbajjā: A very short history**, SD 45.16.

<sup>51</sup> This group of 6 monks are led by Assaji and Punabbasu, who clearly resort to the sangha for a parasitic of convenience and luxury (SD 11.1 (5)), as is often the case today SD 17.8 (1.6.1.1).

<sup>52</sup> See eg SD 17.8 (1.6.1.1).



### 2.4.2 The admission of the 84,000 “living beings”

2.4.2.1 When the pair of chief disciples, Khaṇḍa and Tissa, renounce the world under Vipassī, “a multitude of 84,000 beings” (*mahā,jana.kāyo catur-āsīti,pāṇa,sahassāni*) from Bandhumatī, too, decide to renounce the world after them [§3.18]. This is called “**the renunciation of the 84,000 (2)**” because earlier on, when the bodhisattva Vipassī renounces the world, he is followed by “a multitude of 84,000 beings” from Bandhumatī, too. This is “the renunciation of the 84,000 (1)” [§2.16]. Both groups receive the same going-forth (*pabbajjā*) and ordination (*upasampadā*).

2.4.2.2 This second group of 84,000 living beings—the “84,000 (2)” —also go for **the “2 refuges”** (*dve,vācika*) [2.4.4], as there is no sangha-jewel yet [§3.20.3]. Their admission (going-forth and ordination) into the sangha is highly significant as now, with them, there is, for the first time (in the buddha-epoch, *buddha,kāla*), the noble sangha (*ariya,sangha*), that is, the sangha jewel, thus completing the “3 jewels” (*saraṇa-t,taya*). [§§3.18-3.22]

2.4.2.3 In the Gotama Buddha story given in **the Nidāna,kathā** of the Jātaka, we find a similar number: **80,000 individuals**, which is very close to the “84,000 renunciants” of the Mahā’padāna Sutta [§2.16]. In the account of the “4 signs,” the worried king proclaims that none of the individuals of the 4 signs should be seen by the Bodhisattva, and he posted guards everywhere to ensure that none of the 4 kinds of individuals is seen by the Bodhisattva. Then, surprisingly, each of the 80,000 relatives assembled declare that whether the Bodhisattva become buddha or king, they would each give a son to serve in his retinue [11.1.3.3].

### 2.4.3 The admission of the 84,000 “renunciants”

2.4.3.1 When the bodhisattva Vipassī renounces the world [§2.15], “a multitude of 84,000 living beings” (*mahā,jana.kāyo catur-āsīti,pāṇa,sahassāni*) who are the inhabitants of Bandhumatī, too, decide to renounce with him. This is known as “**the renunciation of the 84,000 beings (1)**” [§2.16]. However, since Vipassī is still then unawakened, he does not admit these renunciants into any community (there is no community yet).

In fact, as a renunciant in quest of awakening, Vipassī finds that being followed around by such a huge crowd unhelpful. So he dismisses them, and they all go their own way [§2.17]. Nothing more is mentioned about these “living beings.” Vipassī continues his quest for awakening alone.

2.4.3.2 In due course—after the admission of the 84,000 (2)—these 84,000 (1), hearing that Vipassī has awakened as the buddha, they then return to see him, and Vipassī teaches them the Dharma [§3.23], and they become streamwinners, go for **the 2 refuges** and ask for admission [§3.24.3]. Vipassī admits them [§3.25], and in due course, they become arhats [§3.26].

### 2.4.4 The jewels and the refuges

2.2.4.1 The Mahā’padāna Sutta mentions the **2 refuges** (*dve,vācika*) on three occasions, that is, as being taken by the pair of chief disciples [§3.16.3], by the 84,000 (1) [§3.20.3] and the 84,000 (2) [§3.24.-3]. These occasions are, of course, not unique, as they have also been recorded in the case of Gotama Buddha, too. However, only one case is recorded as such.

In the case of Gotama Buddha, his first **lay disciples** are the two merchants and brothers, Tapussa and Bhallika, who take the twofold or “two-worded” (*dve,vacikā*) refuges.<sup>53</sup> The first to go for **the 3 refuges** (*saraṇa-t,taya*) are Yasa’s father,<sup>54</sup> Yasa’s mother and Yasa’s ex-wife.<sup>55</sup> They are, in other words, the first disciples to go for refuge in the 3 jewels.

## 2.5 THE GREAT COMMISSION

**2.5.1 To go forth and to gather.** When the monastic community at Bandhumatī has grown to 6,800,000 (*aṭṭha,saṭṭhi,bhikkhu,sata,sahassam*) [16], Vipassī reflects that he should permit them to go forth into the world (*anujāneyyam caratha cārikam*), that is, **the great commission** [§3.27.3], and that there should a **Patimokkha recitation** (*pātimokkh’uddesa*) in conclave at Bandhumatī every 6 years [§3.27.4].

<sup>53</sup> Mv 1.4.5 (V 1:4), SD 11.2.

<sup>54</sup> Mv 1.7.10 (V 1:16 f), SD 11.2.

<sup>55</sup> Mv 1.8.3 (V 1:18), SD 11.2.

**2.5.2 Brahma's supplication (2)** [2.3.4; 14]. Brahma, learning of this, joyfully approves of it and invites Vipassī to give these allowances [§3.28]. And so Vipassī assents to the great commission and the Pātimokkha recitation [§§3.29-3.31]. This is the second time that Brahma intercedes and invites the buddha to make a spiritually significant decision. The first time is his inviting Vipassī Buddha to teach the Dharma [14].

**2.5.3 Pātimokkha recitation.** This means that Vipassī Buddha assents to the monks' going forth into the world. After every 6 years, the monks should gather in conclave for a recitation of the Pātimokkha or monastic code, which consists of **the ovāda pātimokkha** or “admonition code,” that is, the buddha's advice on the duties of monastics and the unawakened renunciants [2.6].

**2.5.4 Missiology.** Interestingly, this is a kind of counterpoint to the “going-forth” from the home life or renunciation, when its goal, awakening, has been achieved. This is the essence of early **Buddhist missiology**: to be on the move, and moving around with inner peace that radiates boundlessly all around, so that the masses notice it and are drawn to it, as in the story of Assajī and Sāriputta: see SD 42.8 (1.2).

**2.5.5 The devas' announcements.** The devas eagerly announce the passing of each year, in anticipation of the Pātimokkha recitation. At the end of the 6<sup>th</sup> year, the devas announce that the monks are to meet in conclave at Bandhumaṭṭi. When the monks have assembled, the buddha himself recites the Pātimokkha. [§§3.32; 2.6]

This interesting episode clearly suggests that the devas, the gods of the heavens—and Mahā Brahmā, the highest of them, too—show a keen interest in the spiritual affairs of humans, and actually participate in significant ways to ensure that the world is morally harmonious.

The reason is simple enough: the heavens would be empty in a matter of time should immorality rule the world. The unenlightened gods, it seems, encourage and enjoy the offerings and worship that theistically inclined humans offer them. For, they know that gods would die if humans stopped worshipping them. What does this tell us about the gods?

## 2.6 THE OVĀDA PĀTIMOKKHA

**2.6.1 The admonition code.** The *ovāda pātimokkha* or “admonition code” [§3.33] is the buddha's advice on the duties of monastics, both the saints and the unawakened. The commentary to **the Dīgha, nakha Sutta** (M 74) notes that the end of the Sutta is marked by Māgha Pūjā or Sangha Day, with the “four-limbed assembly” (*catur-aṅga sannipāta*) of (1) *ehi, bhikkhu* arhats (2) with the sixfold powers (3) who convened unannounced (4) on the full-moon day of the month. The Buddha then admonishes them with the *ovāda, pātimokkha* (Dh 183-185), thus:<sup>56</sup>

Not doing anything bad, | cultivating the good [the wholesome],  
purifying one's own mind— | this is the teaching of the buddhas. (Dh 183)<sup>57</sup>

Patience and forbearance | are the supreme austerity,  
nirvana is supreme, say the buddhas.  
Truly, one is not a renunciant, | who harms another,  
nor is one a recluse, who harms another. (Dh 184)<sup>58</sup>

Neither abusing nor injuring, / and restraint in the Pātimokkha [the monastic code],  
and moderation in food, | and a remote bed and seat,  
and devotion to the higher mind<sup>59</sup>/ this is the teaching of the buddhas.<sup>60</sup> (Dh 185)<sup>61</sup>

<sup>56</sup> See SD 16.1 (6).

<sup>57</sup> Dh 183 || Dh:Patna 357 (19.16) || Uv 28.1 || Mvst 3:420.

<sup>58</sup> Dh 184 || Dh:Patna 359 (14.1) || Uv 26.2.

<sup>59</sup> “The higher mind” (*adhicitta*) is meditation leading to spiritual liberation.

<sup>60</sup> These 2 half-lines are as at Dh 185ef. Here *āyoga* is used fig, meaning “occupation, exercise, exertion, practice, cultivation,” as in “and exertion in the higher mind [meditation]” (*adhicitta ca āyogo*, D 14,3.33/2:50,2\* = U 43,9\* = Dh 185e = Tha 591c), which Comys explain as: “*adhicitta* means the higher mind that is regarded as the 8 attainments (the 4 form and 4 formless dhyānas)” (*Adhicitte'ti aṭṭha, samāpatti, saṅkhāte adhicitte. Āyogo'ti payoga, karaṇam*, DhA 3:237), “devotion to cultivating the realization of the 7 attainments” (*aṭṭhannam samāpattīnam adhigamāya bhāvanā'nuyogo*, UA 253), “the cultivation of calm and insight” (*samatha, vipassanāsu anuyogo bhāvanā*, ThaA

**2.6.2 The Vinaya.** The Mahā'padāna Sutta, in its Vipassī narrative, presents the *ovāda, pātimokkha* as the monastic code for arhats. In fact, all Vipassī's disciples—6,800,000 of them, we are told [§3.27]—are arhats. The *ovāda, pātimokkha* or the “admonition code” [§3.33] is not a set of rules, but verses of teachings that embody the spirit of the Dharma.

Every 6 years, Vipassī recites this admonition code to the assembled arhats at Bandhumatī. Since these disciples are all arhats, they do not need rules as they are incapable of breaking any such rules.<sup>62</sup> This is because an arhat has completely uprooted all motivational roots of karma, that is, not only greed, hate and delusion, but also the deeper roots of lust, repulsion and ignorance.

This understanding is diametrically opposed to a false view held by some later Buddhists, including our own times, who claim that whatever their “perfect” guru does—meaning breaking any precepts of training or morality—they are not culpable because they are “perfect” gurus. This is a serious wrong view that will invariably bring about great harm and suffering to that person and to a lot of people, and also give Buddhism a bad name.<sup>63</sup>

If a teacher (or anyone) were to break any precepts, especially to do so habitually, it only reflects a mind that is defiled. In other words, that person is, in fact, unawakened, and is certainly not perfect at all. We should wisely avoid such a person, and educate others to be aware that such acts are wrong and bad, and how karmic fruit will act upon us, even after we are awakened.<sup>64</sup>

### 3 *Apadāna*

#### 3.1 THE MEANING OF MAHĀ'PADĀNA

##### 3.1.1 *Mahā*

3.1.1.1 The compound *mahā'padāna* of the Sutta title, Mahā'padāna Sutta, is resolved as *mahā* + *apadāna* (cf Skt *avadāna*). It is called *mahā*, “great,” because it gives us details of the lives of the 7 buddhas—these are *great* stories, both in content and in length. It is about a subject of *great* interest and significance to us who love the Dharma, as it tells us about those who discover and teach us that Dharma.

3.1.1.2 That the **Mahā'padāna Sutta** is located in the **Mahā, vagga** of the Dīgha Nikāya is probably because of the prefix *mahā*- in the Sutta title. Where there is a sutta whose title is prefixed with *mahā*-, there is often also sutta whose title is prefixed with *cūla*- (“lesser”). However, there is no such counterpart for the Mahā'padāna. Hence, it is more probable that the *mahā*- qualifies *apadāna*—“the great” *apadāna*—rather than the Sutta itself that is “great.”<sup>65</sup>

##### 3.1.2 *Apadāna* as narrative

3.1.2.1 The word *apadāna* (Skt *avadāna*) comes from the prefix *apa* (meaning “away from”) + √DĀ (to divide, share). It literally means “cutting off, break,” but the idiomatic meaning applies here, meaning, “cutting, mowing, reaping, harvesting.” By extension, it also means “exploit, result, work (especially acts of merit).”<sup>66</sup> Hence, the phrase *mahā'padāna* is more fully known as “the harvesting of great acts of merit,” or simply as “the great acts.” We can thus render the Sutta title more colourfully and helpfully as “the discourse on harvests of great acts.”<sup>67</sup>

3.1.2.2 *Apadāna*, then, is also a **genre**, a type of story—*about the buddhas, present and past*. We have the story of **Vipassī** that is lengthy enough to be a linear narrative. The Sutta narratives of the other five past buddhas are similarly structured like that of Vipassī, in terms of mentioning their respective times,

2:252); also V 2:135,29, 144,33\*; M 1:124,27 (Comy is silent), 487,8 (Comy glosses as *payoga*, “preparation, undertaking, practice, action,” MA 3:198).

<sup>61</sup> Dh 185 || Uv 31.50.

<sup>62</sup> See **Beyond good and evil**, SD 18.7 esp (8).

<sup>63</sup> See **Cult Buddhism**, SD 34.5.

<sup>64</sup> The awakened may not create new karma (Sn 235), but old karma may fruit when the conditions are right, even to the awakened: see SD 4.13 (2.3).

<sup>65</sup> For a discussion on the role of *mahā*- and *cūla*- in sutta titles, see **Satipaṭṭhāna S** (D 22, M 10), SD 13.1 (2).

<sup>66</sup> For details, see CPD: *apadāna* & DP: *apadāna*<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>67</sup> Further, see Amano 2005.

classes, clans, life-spans, bodhi tree, chief disciples, assemblies, foremost monk attendants, parents and royal cities [§§1.4-1.12].

The structure and details of Vipassī's biography parallels so closely that of our Gotama Buddha, that we can surmise that the latter—at least its structure—is based on that of the former. However, the Gotama story differs, often in important details, from those of Vipassī.

3.1.2.3 For example, the events attending Vipassī occurred in a distant past when the human lifespan was 80,000 years, which significantly multiplied the length of events, compared to those of Gotama. While many of the details of the two buddhas parallel one another, or even appear identical, the following **key differences** in “the 12 acts of the Buddha” [1.0.5] are worth noting:

- (1) There is no mention of the youthful life of pleasures for Vipassī.
- (2) For Vipassī, the 4 signs appear periodically over a long period [§2.1-2.14], while those of Gotama appear very closely together, even within the same day.<sup>68</sup>
- (3) Vipassī renounces immediately after he sees the 4<sup>th</sup> sign, that of the renunciant [§2.15]. The sutta account of Gotama's renunciation is less dramatic,<sup>69</sup> but the commentarial account tells us that he stole away in the night, along with other interesting details.<sup>70</sup>
- (4) There is no mention of asceticism or self-mortification in the Vipassī story.
- (5) Vipassī's awakening occurs almost undramatically with his meditations [§2.18-2.22]. Gotama, at the time of awakening and the 7 after-weeks, is dramatically emaciated.<sup>71</sup> Both, however, reflect on conditionality (dependent arising and ending) as part of their awakening process.<sup>72</sup> [§§2.18-2.22]
- (6) Only a “certain Mahā Brahma” (*aññataro mahā, brahmā*) appears to Vipassī twice: during the “hesitation” [§§3.3-3.11] and announcement for the Pātimokkha recitation [§3.28]. It is Brahmā Sahampatī who appears to Gotama here, but only to supplicate him to teach the Dharma.<sup>73</sup> Gotama institutes a more regular Pātimokkha recital<sup>74</sup> and the Vinaya.<sup>75</sup>
- (6) Vipassī first teaches his pair of chief disciples [§§3.16-3.17], while Gotama teaches the group of 5 monks.<sup>76</sup>
- (7) Vipassī neither introduces monastic training-rules (*sikkhāpada*) nor allows the monastics to ordain others, while Gotama does.

<sup>68</sup> In the Gotama story, the Dīgha *bhāṇaka*-s say that they happen on the same day (J 1:59,31-32; BA 280). On their significance, see **Sukhumāla S** (A 3.38), SD 5.16(19.4.2), SD 63.7; see also **Mada S** (A 3.39/1:146 f), SD 42.13; & SD 1.11 (3.2).

<sup>69</sup> The suttas recount the young Gotama as going forth right before his weeping parents: **M 26**,14/1:163 = **36**,13/-1:240 = **85**,11/1:93 = **D 4**,6/1:115 = 5.6/1:129 = **S 1.20**,4/1:9. See SD 1.11 (2.1).

<sup>70</sup> In the **Jātaka Nidāna, kathā**, Māra appears to Gotama, promising him glory as a world monarch (J 1:63). Māra, however, is absent from the Vipassī story. On Māra, see **Mahā, parinibbāna S** (D 16,3.4/2:103), SD 9; **Māra Tajjanīya S** (M 50), SD 36.4 (2.3); **Māra** SD 61.8.

<sup>71</sup> See **Mahā Siha, nāda S** (M 12,52.3+n), SD 49.1. On the emaciated Buddha, see SD 49.4 (5.4) + Fig 28. See also Norman 1983b:36 f. On the newly awakened Buddha's emaciated state, see Reflection R421, “Pain in stone,” 2015.

<sup>72</sup> On the Buddha's awakening process in terms of: dependent arising, **Mahā Sakyamuni Gotama S** (S 12.10), SD 14.3; Vipassī (D 14,2.18-2.22, dependent arising + 5 aggregates), SD 49.8; the 3 knowledges, **Bhaya Bherava S** (M 4,27-33), SD 44.3, (**Deva**) **Saṅgāravā S** (M 100), SD 10.9; the 4 focuses of mindfulness, (**Magga**) **Paṭipatti S** (S 47.31), SD 47.22; sensual desires, **Cūḷa Dukkha-k, khandha S** (M 14), SD 4.7, **Kāma, guṇa S** (S 35.117), SD 88.6; feeling, (**Vedanā**) **Pubba S** (S 36.24), SD 110.2; the world, **Pubb'eva Sambodha S** (A 3.101), SD 14.6a; gratification, dangers and escape (the 5 aggregates), (**Khandha**) **Paṭisallāna S** (S 22.26), SD 48.12, the elements, (**Dhātu**) **Pubbe Sambodha S** (S 14.31), SD 29.17, the 4 bases of success, **Iddhi, pāda S 2** (A 5.68), SD 106.16, (**Iddhi, pāda**) **Ñāna S** (S 51.9), SD 106.17, of abandonment of bad thoughts, **Dvedhā Vitakka S** (M 19,2-23), SD 64.1.

<sup>73</sup> On Brahmā Sahampatī's supplication, see SD 12.1. On Brahmā's nature, see **Te, vijja S** (D 13,80-81/1:251 f), SD 1.8.

<sup>74</sup> On the Pātimokkha recital, see **Gopāka Moggallāna S** (M 108,11), SD 33.5. Cf (**Samudda**) **Upasatha S 1** (A 8,20/4:204-206), SD 59.2.

<sup>75</sup> On how the buddhas prolong their teachings (*sāsana*), see **Mv 1.3** (V 3:7-9).

<sup>76</sup> See **Dhamma, cakka Pavattana S** (S 56.11), SD 1.1.



- (8) There is no mention of Vipassī's parinirvana. Gotama's last days and moments are recorded in **the Mahā,parinibbāna Sutta** (D 16), SD 9.<sup>77</sup>

### 3.2 APĀDĀNA AS A GENRE

#### 3.2.1 Stories of the past

3.2.1.1 An *apadāna* is a story of the past, like a *jātaka*—we can translate both as “birth-story,” but they significantly differ in function. While *jātaka* stories, as a rule, relate to stories, often instructive, centering the Bodhisattva (Gotama Buddha in a past life), *apadāna* stories, as a rule, are narrative accounts of the heroic deeds of the Buddha's disciples, leading to their arhathood, like the commentarial stories of the Thera,gāthā, “the elders’ verses,” and the Therī,gāthā, “the elder nuns’ verses.” [3.2.2.2].

3.2.1.2 What is unique here is that the Mahā'padāna Sutta is both a sutta (as a rule, an *apadāna* story is not called a *sutta*, but an *apadāna*) [3.2.2], and it is about the buddhas, that is, the 7 buddhas, especially Vipassī, the first of the 6 past buddhas, and Gotama Buddha himself. It is likely that this was the only time that the word is so applied, and after that time, *apadāna* is used specifically as a genre for past stories of arhat disciples of the Buddha. If this is the case, then the Mahā'padāna Sutta is a relatively old sutta, compiled during the Buddha's own life-time or in the few after-centuries.

#### 3.2.2 The Apadāna, a late work

3.2.2.1 **The Apadāna** (literally, “the harvest”) [3.1.2], “Heroic Tales” (cf Skt *avadāna*) of the past lives of the great arhats, is the 13<sup>th</sup> book of the Khuddaka Nikāya. This collection includes the hagiographies (sacred stories) of 547 monks and 40 nuns, all of whom became arhats under Gotama. The text contains two introductory chapters in verse.

3.2.2.2 The 1<sup>st</sup>—**the Buddhāpadāna**, is a series of encomiums, praising the merits and perfections of the Buddha, and accounts of the past lives when they gained them. The 2<sup>nd</sup> chapter—**the Pacceka.buddh-āpadāna**—deals with the pratyeka or solitary buddhas, who, as a rule, do not teach.

3.2.2.3 The Apadāna lists 35 past buddhas, in contrast to the 24 listed in the Buddha,vaṃsa. Clearly, the Apadāna stories presuppose the 24 buddhas and include 15 more, which probably reflected a growing trend to see the buddhas more imaginatively, and also as a way of resolving the problem of Gotama's death.<sup>78</sup> This is one of the reasons why the Apadāna is regarded as one of the latest books of the Pali canon.

3.2.2.4 The 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> chapters of the Buddhāpadāna recount stories of **arhat monks and nuns**, including those well known to us. Each story focuses on a particular act, even a very small one—such as offering a flower to a buddha—and how such an act becomes the basis, in due course, of the person attaining arhathood itself.

3.2.2.2 While the Apadāna,<sup>79</sup> as a genre, is regarded generally as *late*, the Mahā'padāna Sutta, as an *apādāna*, is relatively early, even the earliest *apadāna* work. Both are, however, canonical works. While the Mahā'padāna Sutta is mostly narrative, the Apadāna stories are mostly didactic and inspirational, like the Jātakas. The Apadāna is also the last canonical work to receive its own commentary, **the Visuddha.-jana,vilāsini** (ApA), of unknown authorship.<sup>80</sup>

3.2.2.3 The Apadāna is like an appendix to **the Thera,gāthā and the Therī,gāthā**, since it connects together the past and present lives of the elder monks and nuns. Their commentaries also contain the Apadāna verses of those elders. The last two poems of the Therī,gāthā are, in fact, of an Apadāna nature.<sup>81</sup>

<sup>77</sup> For a comy listing of “differences amongst the buddhas,” see BA 296-299 (which is at the work's very end)

<sup>78</sup> On problems related to the Buddha's death, see SD 9 (9.2).

<sup>79</sup> Ed M E Lilley, London: PTS: vol 1 1935, vol 2 1927. On the Apadāna, see Norman 1983b:89-84.

<sup>80</sup> Gandha.vaṃsa, however, attr ApA to Buddhaghosa (JPTS 1886:59, 68). See Norman 1983b:146 f.

<sup>81</sup> The verses of Isi,dāsī (Thī 400-447) and of Sumedha (Thī 448-522): see Norman 1983b:77.



## 4 *Dhamma, dhātu*

### 4.1 DENOTATIONS

#### 4.1.1 Best known definition

4.1.1.1 The best known sense of *dhamma, dhātu* (Skt *dharma, dhātu*) is in its translation as “dharma-element” or “realm of reality,” or even “dharma-realm.” This sense has two important usages. Its best known usage is ontological (what exists externally) and psychological (internal realities), encompassing everything that is or has the potential to be an object of cognition, and refers to what is perceived by the mind.

4.1.1.2 *Dhātu* here sometimes refers to the “boundary” or “delimitation” that separates one dharma (state)—here meaning one sense-object—from another. In other words, this is what defines an object of experience, which, as such, defines our experience in terms of seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching and thinking.

4.1.1.3 The most comprehensive definition of this sense of *dhamma, dhātu* is found in **the Sabba Sutta** (S 35.23). There it is defined as the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind; their respective (external) sense-objects and their respective (internal) sense-consciousnesses: these are the so called “18 elements” (*aṭṭhārasa dhātu*).<sup>82</sup>

Philosophically, this is all that we are or there is (ontological reality), and this is all we can know (epistemological reality). The Sutta declares that this is “the all” (*sabba*). To seek reality and knowledge beyond this would only be “vexing” because it is beyond our ken (*avisaya*).

Specifically, then, *dhamma, dhātu* refers only to the mind’s perception of things (*dhamma*), that is, states and events. We have noted that the Buddha declares his wisdom and awakening arise from his penetration of the dharma-element [12.4.2]. More broadly, it refers to the 18 elements. This latter idea is more developed in the Abhidhamma [4.2].

### 4.2 ABHIDHAMMA SENSE.

4.2.1 The Abhidhamma definition is basically the same as that of the sutta given above [4.1.1.3]. Here, the 5 senses and their respective objects are regarded as physical. The mind, and the objects of the 6 senses (the 5 physical senses and the mind) are regarded as mental, except for the mind-object, which may be either physical or mental.

4.2.2 In our perceptual process, it is the mind-element (*mano, dhātu*) that performs the function of advertence (*avajjana*), or attending, to the object at the start of a process of sense-consciousness. It further does the function of receiving (*sampaticchana*) the sense-object. The mind-consciousness (*mano, viññāṇa*) performs the function of investigation (*santīraṇa*), determining (*voṭṭhapana*) and registering (*tad-ārammaṇa*). This is the basis for human conscious perception.

However, here, technically, *dhamma, dhātu* is only the “mind-object,” what is sensed by the mind, what it takes as its object. Or, simply, this is what the mind really is at any moment. It is only one of 6 kinds of objects that the mind works on and becomes, so to speak. In this sense, the Abhidhamma sense of *dhamma, dhātu* is a very limited one, as it refers to only a particular object in the whole process of human cognition.<sup>83</sup>

### 4.3 THE SUTTA SENSE

#### 4.3.1 Occurrences of the term.

4.3.1.1 The sutta definition of *dhamma, dhātu* is a simple one, referring to the Buddha’s way of knowing things, especially of past lives. It is important that we do not confuse this term with the later more developed senses of *dhamma, dhātu*, used in a more philosophical sense of how we know things (epistemology) and the nature of existence (ontology) [4.2.2].

<sup>82</sup> S 35.23 (SD 7.1); M 3:26,10.

<sup>83</sup> See 14.10-10. This Abhidhamma teaching here explains the cognitive process, but does not explain reality in the sutta sense. However, where the Abhidhamma and the suttas deal with proper knowing, their meanings overlap. On early Buddhist analysis, see SD 26.1 (3). On the cognitive process (*viññāṇa, kicca*), see SD 19.14 (2).

Nor should it, in any way, be confused with the cosmological and imaginative notion of an all-embracing cosmic principle in Mahāyāna, which reminds us of the Vedic *ṛta*. Such an idea comes close to that of some kind of universal essence or soul.

4.3.1.2 The term *dhamma, dhātu* appears twice in the Mahāpadāna Sutta. On both occasions, it is used by the Buddha to refer to his knowledge of past lives. The first occasion is in the Buddha's response to the assembled monks' question regarding how he knows so much about past lives [§1.15]. The second occasion is at the Sutta closing [§3.46], when the Buddha reiterates about his knowledge of past lives.

4.3.1.3 The Majjhima Commentary gives 2 glosses: (1) the nature of Dharma (*dhamma, sabhāva*); (2) the Buddha's knowledge that is omniscience (*sabb'aññutā, ñāṇa*) (MA 3:113). In a disciple, the Dharma-element refers to seeing conditionality without any obscuration (*paccay'ākārassa vivaṭṭa, bhāva, dassana, samattham sāvakā, pāramī, ñāṇam*, SA 2:66). However, *dhamma, dhātu* here "should not be confused with the same term used to signify the element of mind-objects among the 18 elements [eg S 14.1-10], nor does it bear the meaning of an all-embracing cosmic principle that the term acquires in Mahāyāna Buddhism." (M:NB 1261 n614).<sup>84</sup>

### 4.3.2 How the Buddha knows

4.3.2.1 The Buddha explains to the monks that his ability to know past lives in two ways. The first is because "the Tathagata has indeed well penetrated the dharma-element" (*dhamma, dhātu suppaṭividdha*) [§§1.15, 3.46]. At the close of the **Abhaya Rāja, kumāra Sutta** (M 58), too, the Buddha tells Abhaya that whatever question that is put before him, he has its answer ready at once, without any hesitation. This is because he has "well penetrated the dharma-element."<sup>85</sup>

4.3.2.2 The Commentaries explain *dhamma, dhātu* as the inherent nature of things. This is called "omniscience" (*sabb'aññuta, ñāṇa*). The Buddha has well penetrated it; he has it in hand—therefore, whatever he wishes, will be fulfilled for him.<sup>86</sup>

In the Dhamma, saṅganī Commentary, Buddhaghosa explains that the Buddha's "virtuosity in teaching" (such as explaining the dhyanas and their various factors) (*desanā, vilāsa*) is on account of his having thoroughly penetrated the dharma-element. Hence, the vastness of his knowledge, on account of which he is skillful in arranging his teaching, with his remarkable art of embellishing and presenting it.<sup>87</sup> (DhsA 179)<sup>88</sup>

In a disciple, as we have noted [4.3.1.3], the Dharma-element refers to seeing conditionality—that is, the interconnectedness of things, especially mental events—without any obscuration, SA 2:66).

4.3.2.3 More specifically, the knowledge of past lives is technically known as "**the knowledge of the recollection of past lives**" (*pubbe.nivāsānussati, ñāṇa*). This is the knowledge with which the Buddha and the arhats (but not all of them) are able to recall their own past lives and those of others. This is a sort of "narrative" recall, a recollection of events that occur to us and to others. This is the first of a set of 3 or 6 superknowledges of the buddhas and the full-fledged arhats.<sup>89</sup>

4.3.2.4 Another related knowledge is known as "**the knowledge of the arising and passing away of beings**" (*cutūpapāta, ñāṇa*) or simply, "the divine eye" (*dibba, cakkhu*). This is the kind of knowledge by which the Buddha or the arhat is able to correctly know how someone has fared on account of his karma.

<sup>84</sup> See also Nett 64 f, Vism 486 f, where *dhamma, dhātu* seems to be used in the sense of a mental state as an irreducible element (M:H 2:64 n1). Cf Dhs 67, 69; Vbh 72, 87, 89.

<sup>85</sup> M 58, 11/1:396 (SD 7.12).

<sup>86</sup> *Dhamma, dhātūti dhamma, sabhāvo. Sabb'aññuta-ñ, ñāṇass'etaṃ adbhivacanāṃ. Taṃ bhagavatā suppaṭividdhaṃ, hattha, gataṃ bhagavato. Tasmā so yaṃ yaṃ icchatī, taṃ taṃ sabbam thānaso 'va paṭibhātīti* (MA 3:113 at M 1:396; cf VA 1:136; DA 2:426; AA 4:83).

<sup>87</sup> *Yassā pana dhamma, dhātuyā suppaṭividdhattā desanāvilāsappatto nāma hoti—sā tathāgatassa suṭṭhu paṭivid-dhā—tasmā ñāṇa, mahattatāya desanā, vidhānesu kusalo desanā, vilāsa-p, patto satthā yaṃ yaṃ āṅgaṃ labbhati tassa tassa vasena yathā yathā icchatī tathā tathā desanāṃ niyāmetīti .... Ayam desanā, vilāso nāma,* (DhsA 179).

<sup>88</sup> For other senses of *dhamma, dhātu*, incl *dharma, dhātu*, see SD 17.8a (4.5.3).

<sup>89</sup> **The 3 knowledges** (*te, vijjā*) are (1) retrocognition, (2) knowledge of the birth and death of beings according to karma (the divine eye), (3) knowledge of the destruction of the mental influxes. **The 6 superknowledges** (*cha-l-abhiñ-ñā*) are (1) psychic powers, (2) the divine ear, (3) mind-reading, (4) retrocognition, (5) the divine eye, (6) knowledge of the destruction of the mental influxes. For refs, see SD 1.8 (2.2.3).

With this knowledge, they are able to know the moral character and destinies of beings, and in that way, are able to effectively help and guide them towards liberation.

4.3.2.5 Both these knowledges can only be gained through the mastery of the 4<sup>th</sup> dhyana, the highest of the form dhyana.<sup>90</sup> This is when the mind is completely free of the body, and is able to freely function on its own in a morally “beautiful” way, that is, to be well empowered to do good for oneself and for others. Indeed, if we are unawakened, but excellent meditators who have mastered the 4 dhyanas, we will still lose these powers, if we lead immoral lives. This is what happened to Devadatta, who is said to have tried to usurp the Buddha’s position at the head of the sangha, and even tried to kill him.<sup>91</sup>

4.3.2.6 If we understand the “Dharma element” (*dhamma, dhātu*) as meaning “the inherent nature of things,” or the knowledge of it, then, any arhat may have it, too, or is able to cultivate it. Such knowledge refers to the natural knowledge of true reality and mental powers related to the liberated mind. In the **Sampasādanīya Sutta** (D 28), Sāriputta uses the term, “the drift of the Dharma” (*dhamm’ anvaya*), which is clearly a synonym for *dhamma, dhātu*.<sup>92</sup> [12.4.2.2]

## 5 The Buddhas’ assemblies

### 5.1 THE 4-LIMBED ASSEMBLY

#### 5.1.1 Definitions

5.1.1.1 The word *sannipāta* is resolved as *saṃ* (“together”) + *ni* (“down”) + *√pat*, “to fall,” giving the sense of “coming together for the same purpose,” that is, a coincidence (S 4:68), a congregation (D 2:5). Here, in the Mahāpadāna Sutta, it refers to an “assembly” of arhats. Clearly, this is no ordinary gathering, as each of the 7 buddhas has his own [§1.10].

5.1.1.2 Apparently, this kind of assembly is more specifically and better known as “**the 4-limbed assembly**” (*catur-aṅgika sannipāta*) [5.1.1.3]. The best known of such an assembly is that of the 1,250 monks,<sup>93</sup> the disciples of Gotama Buddha himself [§1.10(7)]. The number 1,250 is common enough in refers to gatherings of monks, such as when king Ajāta, sattu visits the Buddha, as recorded in the **Sāmañña-phala Sutta** (D 2)<sup>94</sup> and the **Sela Sutta** (M 92).<sup>95</sup>

5.1.1.3 The Majjhima Commentary to the **Dīgha, nakha Sutta** (M 74) helpfully notes that at the end of this discourse to Dīgha, nakha and his attainment of streamwinning, the Buddha descends from Mount Vulture Peak and goes to the Bamboo Grove (near Rājagaha). There, he sits before a special gathering of disciples known as “**the 4-limbed assembly**” (*catur-aṅgika, sannipāta*), so called because:

- (1) It is the full moon observance day of the month of Māgha;<sup>96</sup>
- (2) 1,250 monks<sup>97</sup> have assembled spontaneously (*dhammātāya*), unprompted (*anāmantitāni*);
- (3) They are all arhats of the sixfold superknowledges (*cha-l-abhiññā*);<sup>98</sup> and

<sup>90</sup> See **Dhyana**, SD 8.4 (5.4.3).

<sup>91</sup> See **Devadatta**, SD 71.4. See also Piya Tan, *The Buddha and His Disciples*, Singapore, 2013:ch 7.

<sup>92</sup> D 28,1-2 (SD 14.14).

<sup>93</sup> On the “4-limbed assembly” of Māgha Pūjā, see **Dīgha, nakha S** (M 74), SD 16.1 (6).

<sup>94</sup> **D 2**,1.1 + 10.3 (SD 8.10).

<sup>95</sup> M 92,2.1 (SD 45.7a).

<sup>96</sup> This full-moon often coincides with the last day of Chinese New Year, locally known as Chap Goh Meh (or more universally as **Yuan Xiao Jie**), or Lantern Day (not to be confused with the lantern festival of the 8<sup>th</sup> Chinese moon or Mooncake Festival). It is the day when traditional Chinese hold a special ancestral puja, have a second reunion dinner (the first one being on the new year’s eve). On the following day, after a fortnight’s break, working family members return to their work. The month of Māgha has 30 days, usu falling across Jan-Feb. **Visākha Pūjā** or “Buddha Day” (traditionally said to be on the full-moon day of May) commemorates the Buddha’s nativity, awakening and parinirvana. **Āsālha Pūjā** or “Dharma Day” commemorates the teaching of the first discourse: see SD 1.1 (3). For the ancient Indian year, see SD 1.1(1)n.

<sup>97</sup> **Mahāpadāna S** (D 14), too, mentions these 1,250 monks and that they are all arhats (D 14,1.10/2:6) + SD 49.8 (5.1.1.2). On the 1,250 monks of Gotama Buddha, see SD 16.1 (6).

- (4) They have all been personally admitted by the Buddha with the formula “Come, bhikshu!” (*ehi, bhikkhu*). (MA 3:209)

5.1.1.4 On this occasion—which we today know as **Māgha Pūjā** or “Sangha Day”—is the first plenary assembly of the early arhats. As the traditional or conventional monastic code has not yet been instituted, the Buddha recites the well-known “admonitory code” (*ovāda pāṭimokkha*) to them. There is no need for any conventional Pātimokkha because all the monks here are arhats who have destroyed their mental influxes. In other words, they are free from all mental defilements, and will never break any moral precept.

In fact, it is probable that all the buddhas’ assemblies (*sannipāta*) have these same 4 limbs, all identical in feature, differing only in the number of monks (all arhats) attending them. Once again, we need to remind ourselves that these are no ordinary gatherings, but special assemblies, with the 4 limbs. They seem to occur at least once in a buddha’s life (thus far), but never more than three times.

### **5.1.2 The Buddhavaṃsa and its commentary**

5.1.2.1 Neither the Mahāpadāna Sutta itself nor its commentary gives us any details about what an “assembly” (*sannipāta*) is. We need to turn to a later work, **the Buddha,vaṃsa**, which elaborates on this point. In fact, the Buddhavaṃsa mentions, in some helpful detail, the various assemblies of not only the 7 buddhas, but all the 25 listed in the work.

5.1.2.2 From the Buddhavaṃsa commentary, we learn that all the 7 buddhas hold such a four-factored assembly at least once in their lives, but no more than thrice. If this practice applies to the 7 buddhas, it would certainly apply to all the 25 buddhas mentioned in the Buddhavaṃsa, too.

### **5.2 VIPASSĪ’S 3 ASSEMBLIES**

#### **5.2.1 The occasions of the 3 assemblies**

5.2.1.1 The same admonitory code [5.1.1.3] was uttered by Vipassī before each of his own 3 assemblies, that is, those of 6,800,000 monks (arhats), of 100,000 monks, and of 80,000 monks [§1.10(1)]. Apparently, only the assembly of the 6,800,000 is mentioned in the Sutta, along with the recitation of the Pātimokkha verses by Vipassī [§3.33].<sup>99</sup>

These 3 assemblies are clearly are much larger than and different from the respective assemblies at the Buddha’s 3 teaching occasions when there is “breakthrough” (*abhisamaya*). These are special occasions when the Buddha gives teachings to a massive congregation of humans and non-humans, especially divine beings. Apparently all those who hear the Dharma on such an occasion attain streamwinning, which is what the term *abhisamaya* means. [7.5.3.1]

5.2.1.2 **The Buddha,vaṃsa** confirms the fact that Vipassī’s 3 assemblies are those for the recital of the Pātimokkha. The first assembly (6,800,000 monks) is just that occasion, when the Buddha recites the admonitory Pātimokkha. The second assembly (100,000) is after they have just renounced and seen the Buddha performing the twin wonder.<sup>100</sup>

The third assembly is when Vipassī’s three half-brothers have pacified border unrest, and obtained excellent gains, with which they attended the Blessed One. They lead him to the city, where they hear the Dharma. As a result, they go forth. This assembly of 84,000 (80,000, according to the Buddhavaṃsa) is in the Khema deer park, when the Buddha recites the Pātimokkha. (BA 239)

5.2.2 It should be noted that, unlike the 4-limbed assembly of Gotama Buddha [5.1.1.3], which met only once,<sup>101</sup> the assembly of Vipassī’s arhats occurs every 6 years [§§3.27.4, 3.32.6]. Like Vipassī, prob-

<sup>98</sup> The sixfold powers (*chaḷ-abhiññā*) are: (1) psychic powers, (2) the divine ear, (3) mind-reading, (4) retrocognition, (5) the divine eye, and (6) the knowledge of the destruction of the mental influxes (arhathood): see SD 1.8 (2.2.3). As a set, (4)-(6), form the 3 knowledges (*te,vijjā*), also descriptive of an arhat.

<sup>99</sup> The Skt version (ed Fukita), too, mentions only *one* assembly, but of 6,200,00 monks (*dvā.ṣaṣṭa,bhikṣu,śata,-sahasrāṇi*) for Vipassī’s Prāṭimokṣa recitation, comprising only Dh 184 in Sanskrit (§16).

<sup>100</sup> On the twin wonder (*yamaka pāṭihāriya*), see SD 27.5b (3.1.2).

<sup>101</sup> The reconstructed Skt version, **Mahāvadāna Sūtra**, gives the numbers as follows: “the first great assembly is of 6,200,000 monks, the second 100,000, and the third 80,000 monks” (*eko mahā,sannipāto dvā,ṣaṣṭa,bhikṣu,śata,-sahasrāṇi | dvitīyo mahā,sannipāto bhikṣu,śata,sahasram tṛtīyo mahā,sannipāto ’śītir bhikṣu,sahasrāṇi*). See SF 36, in Fukita 1993. On the problem of the number of monks at Vipassī’s first assembly, see Fukita 1987c (SF 33) (Japanese).



ably Sikhī and Vessabhū, too, have only a few assemblies for Pātimokkha recitals. They do not teach the Dharma frequently, or initiate efforts to preserve it; nor do not admit any unawakened followers, so that there is no conventional Vinaya.<sup>102</sup> As a result, their dispensations do not last long, but end when the last of their arhat disciples die.

**5.2.3** Regarding the buddhas of our auspicious aeon (*bhadda,kappa*), Kakusandha, Koṇāgamana, Kassapa and Gotama have all diligently taught the Dharma, and compassionately allow unawakened followers to be admitted initiated.<sup>103</sup> These four buddhas instituted the Vinaya for the discipline and training of monastics. They also initiated efforts to preserve the teaching so that the Dharma is available to their followers, and is handed down right to our own days, for our benefit.

## II THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PAST BUDDHAS

### 6 Vipassī's life and significance

#### 6.1 LIFE OF VIPASSĪ

**6.1.1 The Mahā'padāna Sutta** (D 14), after giving us an overview of the attributes of the 7 buddhas [§§1.4-1.12], goes on to give a comprehensive linear narrative of the life of Vipassī Buddha up to his recitation of the Pātimokkha [§§1.17-3.33]. This passage may be said to be the highlight of whole Mahā'padāna Sutta, giving us the only canonical linear narrative of a buddha that very well applies, mutatis mutandis [with the necessary adjustments], to our own Gotama Buddha, too, whose biography is very much lacking in the suttas.

**6.1.2** The life of Vipassī Buddha is, in fact, almost identical in form with that of our Buddha Gotama, differing only in the names and some narrative details. On account of the apparent lack of a detailed narrative of the Buddha's biography in his own words, it is generally presumed that it closely parallels that of other buddhas. Hence, the story of Vipassī is an important canonical source of the Buddha's life.

#### 6.2 THE VIPASSĪ STORY AND THE BUDDHAVAMSA

**6.2.1** The stories, especially of the buddhas, in the Mahā'padāna, the Mahā,vagga of the Vinaya, the Buddha,vamśa, and the Jātaka Nidāna—our main sources of the Buddha's biography as we have it today—and the Buddhist Sanskrit sources, are all probably drawn from a common source of biographical material. However, it is also probable that, the Mahā'padāna Sutta being older, is the source of the miraculous stories and details of **the Buddhavamśa**.<sup>104</sup>

**6.2.2** Although the Buddhā'padāna Sutta is the likely source of the miraculous accounts and details found in the Buddhavamśa, the former restricted itself wholly promoting the buddha doctrine. The Buddhā'padāna Sutta shows that the buddhas are unique not as persons, but as a type: they are fully self-awakened beings who realize the same liberating Dharma.

**The Mahā,vagga** of the Vinaya go on to stress the importance of the Vinaya for the survival and growth of the sangha and teaching of the Dharma so that the dispensation (*sāsana*) will last long. **The Buddhavamśa**, on the other hand, takes a different turn, to introduce something new and post-Buddha: a developed bodhisattva doctrine, that reached its greatest growth in the Mahāyāna. Understandably, the Buddhavamśa is one of the latest additions to the Pali canon, perhaps much later than even the Apadāna, which still upheld the buddha doctrine.

#### 6.3 MAHĀ'PADĀNA SUTTA AND THE MAHĀVASTU

##### 6.3.1 Earliest Sanskrit buddha biography

**6.3.1.1** We have noted that the Pali *apadāna* has its equivalent in the Sanskrit as *avadāna*. The two terms are almost synonymous as a genre [3.1+3.2]. The way that *apadāna* is used in the Mahā'padāna

<sup>102</sup> On Vipassī, Sikhī and Vessabhū, see **Mv 1.3** (V 3:7-9), which discusses how to prolong the teaching (*sāsana*). See also J 1:43; DhA 1:84, 3:236.

<sup>103</sup> On Kakusandha, Koṇāgamana, and Kassapa, see **Mv 1.3** (V 3:7-9), which discusses how to prolong the teaching.

<sup>104</sup> See Norman 1983b:78 f.



Sutta —relating the story of buddhas—is akin to the style of the Sanskrit **Mahāvastu Avadāna** (as the work is fully titled).

6.3.1.2 The Mahāvastu is the earliest Sanskrit biography of the Buddha. It is located in the Vinaya of the Lokottara, vādin branch of the more liberal Mahāsaṅghika school. As such, it belongs to the literature that forms the foundation for the Mahāyāna.<sup>105</sup>

6.3.1.3 The Mahāvastu’s location in the Lokottaravāda Vinaya suggests that the buddha-biography is used to authenticate the Vinaya before it became a separate collection in itself. In this way, the Mahāvastu closely parallels the Mahāvagga of the Pali Vinaya.<sup>106</sup>

### **6.3.2 A common tradition**

6.3.2.1 Considering that both the Mahā’padāna Sutta and the Mahāvastu Avadāna have predominantly miraculous accounts and attributes of the buddhas, they probably drew their materials from a common tradition before the Indian schism, which probably occurred around 400 years after the Buddha.<sup>107</sup>

6.3.2.2 Although both the Mahā’padāna Sutta and the Mahāvastu relied on the same ancient source, this does not mean they presented materials from that source in the same way. On the contrary, both the works take diametrically opposing directions. The Mahā’padāna Sutta gives more emphasis on the Dharma, using the buddha stories only as incidental support for the existence and endurance of the Dharma.

The Mahāvastu, on the other hand, presents the buddha in a fabulous “other-worldly” (*lokōttara*) way, in tune with their inclination to see the Buddha in supernatural terms. In due course, such an idea gained momentum heading into an imaginative explosion of new Buddhas, cosmic Bodhisattvas and exotic Paradises, worthy of being new religions in their own right.

## **6.4 BHAGAVĀ ARAHAM SAMMĀ, SAMBUDDHO**

### **6.4.1 How buddhas are addressed**

6.4.1.1 Throughout the Mahā’padāna Sutta, we often see the Buddha or the narrator addressing Vipassī as “the Blessed One [the lord], *Vipassī*, the arhat, fully self-awakened” (*vipassī bhagavā araham sammā, sambuddho*). In **Recital 1**, we have some 20 occurrences of this, and in **Recital 3**, there are some 26 occurrences. In **Recital 2**, Vipassī is addressed as the “prince” (*kumāra*) or “bodhisattva” (*bodhisatta*). This sacred mode of address also applies to the names of the other buddhas.

6.4.1.2 In fact, whenever a buddha’s name is uttered, it is also couched in the phrase, “the Blessed One [Lord] ... the arhat, fully self-awakened.” The names of the other buddhas, too, are also uttered in the same respectful and reflective way. None of the buddhas are ever addressed by name.

### **6.4.2 Purposes of the practice**

6.4.2.1 The buddhas’ names are, of course, **sacred names**. This, however, is not the only reason a buddha is never addressed by name. It is true that a buddha is deeply respected, even posthumously, and —just as amongst traditional Asians, elders and seniors are never addressed by name, but by proper appellations or titles—a buddha, too, is often addressed in the suttas couched in the deferent phrase.

6.4.2.2 An important **social reason** for this respectful mode of address is that this practice places a social distance between the sacred person or respected individual and the world or others. In other words, we should not fraternize with such individuals.

One reason for this is so that we do not create any opportunity for moral lapses, especially, say, in an unawakened monastic. Another reason is that we are reminded to relate to the other person as a teacher or an elder worthy of respect.<sup>108</sup>

<sup>105</sup> See Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism: Mahāvastu.

<sup>106</sup> V 1:1 ff. See Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism: Mahāvagga.

<sup>107</sup> Traditionally, it is said that the schism occurred as a result of the rise of “18 schools,” but the historical reality was probably more complicated. See Oxford Dictionary of Buddhism: Eighteen Schools of Early Buddhism.

<sup>108</sup> In traditional Buddhist (even Asian) societies, such a social distance is a safeguard to prevent fraternizing between monastics and the laity, or amongst the monastics themselves. When Buddhism first came to the West, the absence of such a safeguard of social distance between monastics or priests on one side, and the laity or followers on the other, encouraged scandals with disastrous and protracted effects. See **Bad friendship**, SD 64.17 esp (4.1.3).

6.4.2.3 Then, there is a **spiritual purpose** behind this practice, and this is the most significant reason for using such a mode of address. The name of a buddha, or even the word *buddho* itself, when properly uttered or held in mind, serves as a means of recollecting the Buddha (*buddhānussati*), which is an important one of the traditional methods of meditation.<sup>109</sup>

For such a meditation to work properly, we need to show a proper deferent attitude towards that person who embodies the Dharma (such as the Buddha) or who represents or teaches the Dharma, especially during religious observances (such as a precept day) or during any kind of spiritual retreat. In a sense, this is also keeping to the spirit of the 3<sup>rd</sup> precept, that of showing respect to another's person.

## 7 Vipassī and his teachings

### 7.1 VIPASSĪ'S AWAKENING PROCESS

7.1.1 The “awakening chapter” of the Mahāpadāna Sutta [§§2.18-2.22] details for us the actual mental process of Vipassī's awakening in terms of the teachings he systematically gives us. These teachings are listed as follows:

	<u>Teaching</u>	<u>Significance</u>
§2.18	The 10-link specific conditionality (1)	The nature of causes and effects (arising)
§2.19	The 10-link dependent <u>arising</u> ( <i>pavatti</i> ) <sup>110</sup>	The cyclic arising of causes and effects
§2.20	The 10-link specific conditionality (2)	The nature of causes and effects (ending)
§2.21	The 10-link dependent <u>ending</u> ( <i>nivatti</i> )	Breaking the cycle of conditionality
§2.22	The 5 aggregates of clinging	The flux (rise and fall) of our body and mind

7.1.2 The teaching of **conditionality** (*paccayatā* or *hetu,paccayatā*) is a key early Buddhist teaching that explains the nature of our mind-body existence, the working of our mental processes, and how we can understand them, so that we attain spiritual liberation. An essential idea behind conditionality is that every thing arises from many causes and effects. Conversely then, if any of these causes or effects were removed or nulled, then the whole chain of conditionality is broken.

7.1.3 This key principle that underlies conditionality is the **one-factor dependent arising formula**, containing the essence of what is called specific conditionality.<sup>111</sup> It is stated in this way:

*Yathā idam tathā etam, yathā etam tathā idam.*

Just as this is, so is that. Just as that is, so is this. (Sn 203 = Tha 396)<sup>112</sup>

7.1.4 We can see this principle in the oldest dependent arising (*paṭicca,samuppāda*) formula which is perhaps the “**one-factor dependent arising**,” mentioned in the Buddha's first discourse in connection with Koṇḍañña's attainment of streamwinning:

*Yam kiñ ci samudaya.dhammam,  
sabbam tam nirodha.dhammam.*

Whatever is of the nature to arise,  
all that is of the nature to cease.

(V 1:11; D 1:110, M 3:280; S 4:47, 214, 330, 5:423; A 4:143 f)

### 7.1.5 Significance of the 10-link dependent conditionality

7.1.5.1 The Mahāpadāna Sutta describes Vipassī as awakening through gaining insight into a 10-link *forward* dependent arising [§2.18] and the essential 10-link dependent arising [§2.19]—both traditionally known as the “direct” cycles or *anuloma*—and the 10-link dependent ending [§2.20] and the essential 10-link dependent ending [§2.21]—both known as the “reverse” cycles (*paṭiloma*). **The 10-link dependent conditionality** (referring to both the arising and ending cycles) has two interesting aspects:

<sup>109</sup> For a traditional list of meditation methods, see *Bhāvanā*, SD 15.1 (Fig 8.1). See also *Buddhānussati*, SD 15.7.

<sup>110</sup> The Skt forms of this pair—*pavatti* and *nivatti*—are *pravrtti* and *nivrtti* (which transcribes into Pali as *pavutti* and *nivutti*, but these forms are not found in the suttas. However, the pairs are effectively synonymous.)

<sup>111</sup> On specific conditionality (*idap,paccayatā*), see SD 5.16 (2).

<sup>112</sup> See Sn:P n11:11ab.

(1) In the 10<sup>th</sup> link, where name-and-form condition consciousness, “**this consciousness returns again to name-and-form**” (*paccudāvattati kho idaṃ viññāṇaṃ nāma, rūpamhā, nāparaṃ gacchati*) [§2.19], Understandably, this loop does not feature in dependent ending, because the cycle is broken. [7.1.5.2]

(2) It ends with the **consciousness** link. In other words, the 10-link dependent arising formula omits craving and ignorance, the last two links of the 12-link formula. In an important way, these 10 links are complete in themselves, because they serve to show how the cycle of suffering is broken in this life itself. As such, nothing has actually been omitted. Rather, the two new links—*craving* and *ignorance*—have been added to show how the cycles extends from the past, and, if not broken, further extends into the future ad infinitum. [7.1.5.3]

7.1.5.2 In the 10-link dependent arising, consciousness and name-and-form mutually condition one another. This makes good sense, as the abridged **dependent arising** shows how the cycle works within the *same* life to keep the person going in circles, even in the same life-time. When we become conscious of an experience, we must “name” it, and in so doing, we give it “form.” Then, we identify or project this experience when we think it happens again.<sup>113</sup>

7.1.5.3 So, our consciousness is actually fed with this same old data, which, in turn, keeps our consciousness going, caught in an existential loop, a samsaric rut. Craving keeps us looking for the same or familiar experience when we see it as delightful, and ignorance keeps us from knowing what is really happening, but blindly reacting to our sense-experiences with craving. We simply must keep on naming and forming “things,” and that’s all we are *conscious* of. We see the rise and fall of things but we rarely *understand* it, or quickly forget it and fall back to our old ways. Hence, although craving and ignorance are not specifically mentioned, they are insidiously present in the whole process, driving us on and on like a sinister puppet-master.<sup>114</sup>

7.1.5.4 The 10-link cycle (which covers a single life, a synchronic cycle) is possibly an old, even the oldest, version of the dependent arising formula that predates the classical 12-link formula (which covers three consecutive lives, our past, present and future).<sup>115</sup> The 10-link model is certainly as old as the 12-link model, as it is mentioned, for example, in **the Nāgara Sutta** (S 12.65).<sup>116</sup> However, with the more common use of the three-life dependent conditionality model, the 10-link model is less mentioned, as it is implicit in the 12-link model. In other words, it is just as valid and vital as when it is first formulated by the Buddha.

The 10-link cycle seems sufficient in itself, if we examine our mental processes and experiences within one life-time. However, it is incomplete when we consider what we do now has consequences that continue to affect us even after the present mind-body continuum has ceased. Unawakened, we are doomed to repeat our mistakes and relive our past over and again.

7.1.5.5 Our past karma keeps accumulating with our actions of mind, speech and body. They build up and store their potential energy ready to spring forth at any time when the conditions are right. We have become creatures of habits of our own creation, helplessly admiring ourselves in the mirror of craving in the hued half-light of ignorance. As long as we are unawakened, we become our karma, a lion-headed, goat-bodied and serpent-tailed chimaera<sup>117</sup> that keeps swallowing us whole, voiding us, and then we are whole ever again like chained Prometheus.<sup>118</sup>

When we clearly see for ourselves how this painful drama replaying in a loop, we at once surfeit of it. It makes no sense to think that this is our only life, that it all ends with death. We have not even begun to

<sup>113</sup> On the looped dependent arising, see SD 5.16 (5.1).

<sup>114</sup> On the uroboros, see SD 23.3 (1); SD 49.2 (4.3.2.3).

<sup>115</sup> On the 12-link dependent arising, see SD 5.16.

<sup>116</sup> **Nāgara S** (S 12.65, §§5-9 + §§13-17) + SD 14.2 ( ).

<sup>117</sup> In Greek mythology, a fire-breathing female monster with a lion’s head, a goat’s body, and a serpent’s tail. As a figure, it also refers to something we hoped or dreamed about but will never be able to attain: an imagery of unsatisfactoriness.

<sup>118</sup> On the Prometheus myth, see SD 1.4 (2.1.7(7)), SD 36.2 (8.1), SD 23.3 (2), SD 36.2 (8),

learn our life's lessons. We are merely repeating our mistakes, and getting better at it. We can only begin to learn when we attain the path, at least streamwinning—we can and should do this in this life itself.<sup>119</sup>

**7.1.6 The corollaries of conditionality.** There are 3 important **corollaries** (related significance) of the truth of conditionality. If we understand and accept that our existence and all life—even inanimate states—are all subject to conditions (*paccaya*), or the workings of a network of causes and effects (*hetu*,-*paccaya*), then, we should also appreciate the following **liberating truths**:

- (1) There is no single cause to anything; everything has many causes, many effects; hence, there is also no “first cause.”
- (2) If there is no first cause, then, there is no Prime Mover, no external agency that creates or controls us; no eternal or almighty God. Whatever exists must exist in time. Nothing that exists can be permanent or eternal.
- (3) If things have many causes and effects, and there is no first cause, then every thing must change, decay, become other. Change gives meaning to our lives.
- (4) If we understand change—that every *thing* must change, then we will also understand that there is no essence—no enduring self, eternal soul, abiding essence—in any *thing*. This is the universal principle of life and existence. If we understand and accept this, then we understand what life is, and accept it as it is, just as we are. The path to liberation starts here.

## 7.2 IMPERMANENCE

### 7.2.1 The centrality of impermanence

7.2.1.1 Vipassī's awakening experience is summarized by these words of **the *yaṃ kiñci samudaya*, -*dhmma* formula**, which goes thus :

**“All that is of the nature of arising is of the nature of ending.”**  
(*Yaṃ kiñci samudaya, dhammāṃ sabbantaṃ nirodha, dhamman'ti*)

The same formula is used for each occasion of disciples' attaining the Dharma-eye [7.5], that is, as follows:

The chief disciples Khaṇḍa and Tissa	[§3.15.2]
The 84,000 living beings (2)	[§3.19.2]
The 84,000 renunciants	[§3.23.2]

7.2.1.2 The *yaṃ kiñci samudaya, dhamma* formula presents impermanence as the process of “rise and fall” (*udaya-b, baya*), that is, coming into being (as causes) [§2.12.2] and passing away (as effects) [§2.21.2], which, in turn, become causes, and so on. This is essentially the cycle of samsara, with the universal characteristics of being impermanent (*anicca*), unsatisfactory (*dukkha*) and non-self (*anattā*).

7.2.1.3 In the **Dīgha, jānu Sutta** (A 8.54), the Buddha presents the last of the 4 accomplishments in spiritual welfare as that of wisdom (*paññā, sampadā*), defined thus:

#### 15 (4) What is the accomplishment of wisdom (*paññā, sampadā*)?

Here, Vyagghapajja, the son of family is

wise, possesses wisdom directed<sup>120</sup> to the rising and falling away (of phenomena)<sup>121</sup>  
that is noble and penetrative, leading to the complete destruction of suffering.<sup>122</sup>

This, Vyagghapajja, is called the accomplishment of wisdom. (A 8.54), SD 5.10

Here, the Buddha admonishes even an ordinary lay follower, actively involved in the affairs of family and the world, to observe and reflect on impermanence as the “rise and fall” of events and things.

7.2.1.4 The benefits of such a practice, habitual and mindful, brings about streamwinning in this life itself, as declared by the Buddha in all of the 10 suttas of **the Okkanta Saṃyutta** (S 25). The first Sutta in

<sup>119</sup> For the 12-link full dependent conditionality associated with Vipassī, see **Vipassī S** (S 12.4) + SD 49.9 (4).

<sup>120</sup> On directed cultivation, see further **Bhikkhuṇī Vāsaka S** (S 47.10/5:154-157), SD 24.2 (1.2).

<sup>121</sup> On watching the rise and fall of feeling, see (**Aññathatta**) **Ānanda S 1** (S 22.37/3:37 f), SD 33.11.

<sup>122</sup> For its significance, see (**Sotāpanna**) **Nandiya S** (S 55.40), esp SD 47.1 (1.1.3.3).

this chapter, **the (Anicca) Cakkhu Sutta** (S 25.1) says that whether we are guided by faith or by wisdom, if we properly practise the perception of impermanence, we will surely attain streamwinning in this life itself:

4.2 He is descending into the certainty of rightness [the fixed course to rightness], descending into the plane of true individuals;<sup>123</sup> he has gone beyond the plane of the worldlings.

4.3 He is incapable of doing any intentional deed by which he might be reborn in hell, or in the animal birth, or in the preta realm. He is incapable of dying without having attained the fruit of streamwinning.<sup>124</sup> (S 25.1), SD 16.7

### 7.2.2 The 5 aggregates of clinging

7.2.2.1 **The Mahā'padāna Sutta** (D 14) records Vipassī Buddha himself as reflecting on the “rise and fall” of the 5 aggregates of clinging (*pañca-k,khandha*), thus:

Such is <b>form</b> ;	such is the <u>arising</u> of form;	such is the <u>passing away</u> of form. <sup>125</sup>
Such is <b>feeling</b> ;	such is the <u>arising</u> of feeling;	such is the <u>passing away</u> of feeling.
Such is <b>perception</b> ;	such is the <u>arising</u> of perception;	such is the <u>passing away</u> of perception.
Such are <b>formations</b> ;	such is the <u>arising</u> of formations;	such is the <u>passing away</u> of formations.
Such is <b>consciousness</b> ;	such is the <u>arising</u> of consciousness;	such is the <u>passing away</u> of consciousness. <sup>126</sup>

(§2.22)

Practising in this way, says the Sutta, the bodhisattva Vipassī attains to arhathood, that is, awakening.

7.2.2.2 The efficacy of **the perception of impermanence in the 5 aggregates** is due to the fact that the 5 aggregates are what constitute our whole existence in terms of body and mind. **The body** aspect is embodied in form, which can be reflected either as the 4 elements (earth, water, fire, wind), or as the 5 physical faculties (*pañc'indriya*) of eye, ear, nose, tongue and body. **The mind** aspects are in the non-physical aggregates, that is, feeling, perception, formations and consciousness. They are all reflected as being conditioned and impermanent.<sup>126</sup>

## 7.3 THE PROGRESSIVE TALK

### 7.3.1 Teaching the world

7.3.1.1 Vipassī Buddha, as recorded in the Mahā'padāna Sutta, invariably teaches only those who are ready to attain arhathood. **The Buddha,vaṃsa**, however, says,

(1) <i>Asīti,vassa,sahassāni āyu buddhassa tāvade tāvatā tiṭṭhamāno so tāresi janataṃ bahum</i>	Eighty thousand years was the Buddha's life-span. Remaining for that long, he caused many people to cross over.	B 32
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(2) <i>Bahū deva,manussānaṃ bandhanā parimocayi maggāmaggaṃ ca ācikkhi avasesa,puthujjane</i>	Many devas and humans, he freed from bondage, and showed the path and the not-path to the remaining worldlings.	B 33
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7.3.1.2 Neither the Buddhavaṃsa nor its commentary elaborates on who exactly Vipassī teaches, that is, whether they become monastics or take the refuges as lay disciples. From **B 32-33**, we know that Vipass-

<sup>123</sup> “True individuals,” *sappurisa*, also “superior persons,” “virtuous persons,” “ideal persons”; often syn with “no-ble disciples,” *ariya,sāvaka*, but here clearly includes those, although not yet on the path, but are assured of it, viz the faith-follower and the truth-follower. The qualities of the *sappurisa* are given in **Sappurisa S** (M 113/3:37-45), SD 29.6; see also **D 33**,2.2(6)/3:252, **34**,1.8(7)/3:283; **M 110**,14-24/3:23 f; **A 7.64**/4:113, **8.38**/4:144.

<sup>124</sup> *Abhabbo taṃ kammaṃ kātuṃ yaṃ kammaṃ katvā nirayaṃ vā tiracchāna,yonim vā petti,visayaṃ vā uppajjeyya. Abhabbo ca tāva kālaṃ kātuṃ yāva na sotāpatti,phalaṃ sacchikaroti.* This is the Sutta's key statement and clearly refers to what, after the Buddha's time, is referred to as a “lesser streamwinner” (*culla,sotāpanna, cullaka,-sotāpanna*). See **Entering the stream**, SD 3.3(6).

<sup>125</sup> *Iti rūpaṃ iti rūpassa samudayo iti rūpassa atthaṅgamo.*

<sup>126</sup> For a detailed study of the 5 aggregates, see SD 17. For a brief intro, see **Dve Khandhā S** (S 22.48), SD 1.7.1a.



sī teaches the Dharma to benefit many devas and humans, so that they are “**freed from bondage**,” which clearly refers to arhathood.<sup>127</sup>

7.3.1.3 **B 33** also says that Vipassī “**showed the path and the not-path**” to “many devas and humans.” Of course, we can take the phrase “the path and the not-path” (*maggāmagga*) in a non-technical sense to mean that he teaches the right way to practise the Dharma, and the wrong things to avoid.

However, since the Buddhavaṃsa is a late text, the verse composers probably know the technical sense of the phrase, and use it so. The phrase is found in **the Ratha Vinīta Sutta** (M 24), where it is part of the 7 stages of purification (*satta,visuddhi*). From the context, this phrase probably refers to streamwinning.<sup>128</sup>

That’s about what we can deduce from the suttas, which is not much. The point, however, remains that Vipassī Buddha does teach, but not as diligently and successfully as Gotama. When Vipassī and his immediate arhat disciples die, the teaching also ended with them.

### 7.3.2 The “progressive talk” pericope

7.3.2.1 When Vipassī teaches a suitable candidate or candidates, he always starts off with a “progressive talk” (*ānupubbi,kathā*). The “progressive talk” pericope comprises the following:

The Blessed One, Vipassī, the arhat, fully self-awakened, gave them **a progressive talk**—that is to say, he spoke

on giving,

on moral virtue and

on the heavens,

and proclaimed the danger, vanity and disadvantage of sensual pleasures,

and the advantage of renunciation.

*dāna*

*sīla*

*sagga*

*kām’ādīnava*

*nekkhamm’ānisaṃsa*

[§§3.15, 3.19, 3.23.2]<sup>129</sup>

7.3.2.2 Here is a list of suttas in which Gotama Buddha uses the progressive talk:

<b>Ambaṭṭha Sutta</b>	D 3,2.21/1:110	SD 21.3
<b>Kūṭa,danta Sutta</b>	D 5,29/1:148	SD 22.8
<b>Mahā’padāna Sutta</b>	<b>D 14</b> ,3.15.2/2:41 + 3.19/2:43 + 3.23.2/2:44	SD 49.8
<b>Upāli (Gaha,pati) Sutta</b>	M 56,18/1:380	SD 27.1
<b>Brahm’āyu Sutta</b>	M 91,36/2:145	SD 63.8
<b>(Licchavī) Sīha Sutta</b>	A 8.12/4:186	SD 71.5
<b>(Vesālīka) Ugga Sutta</b>	A 8.21/4:210	SD 70.3
<b>(Hatthi,gāmika) Ugga Sutta</b>	A 8.22,5/4:213	SD 45.15
<b>Suppabuddha Kuṭṭhi Sutta</b>	U 43/49	SD 70.4;
<b>The Vinaya</b>	V 1:16 (§10, to Yasa)	SD 11.2(7)
	V 1:16 (to Yasa’s father), 1:18 (to Yasa’s mother and ex-wife), 1:19 (to Yasa’s 4 friends); 1:20 (Yasa’s 50 friends), 1:23 (the 30 youths), 1:37 (to Bimbisāra and entourage), 1:181 (80,000 village heads), 2:156 (Anātha,piṇḍika), 2:192 (a would-be assassin of the Buddha sent by Ajāta,sattu).	

## 7.4 THE TEACHING PECULIAR TO THE BUDDHAS

7.4.1 The purpose of **the progressive talk** [7.3.2.1] is clearly stated in its pericope. After the list of teachings given, the pericope goes on to say:

When the Blessed One, Vipassī, the arhat, fully self-awakened, perceived that their minds were ready, pliant, hindrance-free, elevated and lucid,

<sup>127</sup> The mental influxes (*āsava*) are also called “bonds” (*yoga*) [§1.10(1) n].

<sup>128</sup> M 24,15/1:150 + SD 28.3 (3.1).

<sup>129</sup> See SD 21.6 esp (1); SD 46.1 (4.1); SD 30.8 (3.4.2): Skillful means of speech.

then, he explained to them the teaching peculiar to the Buddhas,<sup>130</sup> that is to say, **suffering, its arising, its ending, and the path.**<sup>131</sup> [§§3.15, 3.19, 3.23.2]<sup>132</sup>

**7.4.2 The progressive talk** is given in a manner to prepare the audience for a deeper spiritual experience. This is done by progressively freeing the listeners minds from the mental hindrances.<sup>133</sup> Once the listeners' minds are "ready, pliant, hindrance-free, elevated and lucid," then the Buddha teaches his peculiar Dharma talk, that is, on the 4 noble truths (*buddhānaṃ sāmukkaṃsikaṃ dhamma,desanā*) [§3.23.2].

**7.4.3** This is an occasion when the Buddha teaches the 4 noble truths directly to the laity; for stock passage, see

<b>The Vinaya</b>	V 1:11 (Aññā Koṇḍañña) [7.5.2.2]; V 1:16 (the youth Yasa) [7.5.2.2]; V 1:16 (Yasa's father, the seth houselord); V 1:18 (to Yasa's mother and former wife); V 1:19 (Yasa's 5 friends); V 1:20 (Yasa's 50 friends); V 1:23 (to the group of 30 lucky youths, <i>bhadda, -vagga</i> ); V 1: 37 (to 12 "myriad" ( <i>nahuta</i> ) of brahmins and householders of Magadha, headed by Bimbisāra); V 1:40 (Sāriputta) [7.5.2.2]; V 1:181 (Bimbisāra's 80,000 village headmen); V 1:226 (Belatṭha Kaccāna, between Rajagaha and Andhaka, vinda).	
<b>Ambaṭṭha Sutta</b>	D 3,2.21/1:110 (to Pokkhara, sāti),	SD 21.3
<b>Kūṭa, danta Sutta</b>	D 5,29/1:148 (to Kūṭa, danta)	SD 22.8
<b>Mahā'padāna Sutta</b>	D 14,3.11/2:41 (to prince Khaṇḍa and Tissa the chaplain's son), 14.3.15/2:43 (a crowd of 84,000), 14.3.19/2:44 (another similar crowd)	SD 49.8
<b>Upāli (Gaha, pati) Sutta</b>	M 56,18/1:379 f (to Upāli)	SD 27.1
<b>Brahm'āyu Sutta</b>	M 91,36/2:145 (to Brahmāyu)	SD 63.8
<b>(Licchavi) Upāli Sutta</b>	A 8.12,9/4:186 (to general Sīha)	SD 71.5
<b>(Vesālī) Ugga Sutta</b>	A 8.21,5-6/4:209 (to the houselord Ugga of Vesālī)	SD 70.3
<b>(Hatthi, gāmaka) Ugga Sutta</b>	U 5.3/49 (to the leper Suppabuddha).	SD 70.4

## 7.5 THE DHARMA-EYE

### 7.5.1 Occurrences of *dhamma, cakkhu*

7.5.1.1. The term "**Dharma-eye**" (*dhamma, cakkhu*) occurs in the *yaṃ kiñci samudaya, dhamma* formula [7.2.1.1], which is the culmination and fruit of the whole progressive talk [7.3.2] process. When we carefully attend to the progressive talk, our minds become free of the mental hindrances, and settle down calm and clear, and ready for the Buddha's teaching on the 4 noble truths. When we truly understand these truths, then the Dharma-eye arises in us.

7.5.1.2 This Dharma-eye passage occurs thrice in the Mahā'padāna Sutta, that is, at the end of the whole process of the progressive talk given to the pair of chief disciples, Khaṇḍa and Tissa [§3.15.2], to the 84,000 beings (2) [§3.19.2], and to the 84,000 renunciants (who first renounced after the bodhisattva Vipassī at §2.6) [§3.23.3].

7.5.1.3 **The Dharma-eye—or the *yaṃ kiñci samudaya, dhamma*—formula** is stock, and occurs in the following places:

<b>The Vinaya</b>	V 1:12	ordination for Vappa + Bhaddiya
	1:13	ordination for Mahānāma + Assaji
	1:16	Yasa's streamwinning; refuge-going for Yasa's father
	1:18	refuge-going for Yasa's mother and ex-wife
	1:19	ordination for Yasa's 4 friends

<sup>130</sup> *Buddhānaṃ sāmukkaṃsikaṃ dhamma, desanā*. This is an occasion when the Buddha teaches the 4 noble truths directly to the laity: see (7.3).

<sup>131</sup> This is stock: V 1:15, 2:156, 192; D 1:110, 148, 2:41; M 1:379; A 3:184, 4:186, 209; U 49.

<sup>132</sup> See SD 21.6 esp (1); SD 46.1 (4.1); SD 30.8 (3.4.2): Skillful means of speech.

<sup>133</sup> The 5 mental hindrances (*pañca, nīvaraṇa*) ar: (1) lust for sensual pleasures, (2) ill will, (3) sloth and torpor, (4) restlessness and remorse, and (5) spiritual doubt. See *Nīvaraṇa*, SD 32.1.

	1:20	ordination for Yasa's 50 friends)	
	1:23	ordination for the 30 youths	
	V 1:180 f	refuge-going for 80,000 village heads	
<b>Ambaṭṭha Sutta</b>	D 3,2,21	refuge-going for brahmin Pokkhara,sāti	SD 21.3
<b>Kūṭa,danta Sutta</b>	D 5,29	brahmin Kūṭa,danta attains Dharma-eye	SD 22.8
<b>Mahā'padāna Sutta</b>	<b>D 14,3.15.2</b>	ordination of Khaṇḍa & Tissa	
	3.19.2	ordination of the 84,000 beings	
	2.23.3	ordination of the 84,000 renunciants	SD 49.8
<b>Upāli (Gaha,pati) Sutta</b>	M 56,18	houselord Upāli attains Dharma-eye	SD 27.1
<b>Dīgha,nakha Sutta</b>	M 74,15	wanderer Dīgha,nakha attains Dharma-eye	SD 16,1
<b>Brahm'āyu Sutta</b>	M 91,36 f	brahmin Brahm'āyu goes for refuge	SD 63.8
<b>Cūla Rāhul'ovāda Sutta</b>	M 147,9	countless devas gain Dharma-eye	SD 70.7.
<b>(Licchavī) Sīha Sutta</b>	A 8.12/4:186	general Sīha attains Dharma-eye	
	SD 71.5		
<b>(Vesālīka) Ugga Sutta</b>	A 8.21/4:210	houselord Vesālīka Ugga attains Dharma-eye	SD 70.3
<b>(Hatthi,-gāmika) Ugga S</b>	A 8.22/4:213	houselord Hatthi,gāmaka Ugga attains Dharma-eye	SD 45.15
<b>Suppabuddha Kuṭṭhi S</b>	U 43	leper Suppabuddha	SD 70.4.

In all these cases, they all attain one of the 4 stages of sainthood: streamwinning, once-return, non-return and arhathood.

### 7.5.2 Meanings of *dhamma,cakkhu*

7.5.2.1 The usage of *dhamma,cakkhu* in early Buddhism seems rather fluid, where it can qualify any of the 3 learners (sekha), that is, the streamwinner, the once-returner or the non-returner, and rarely, if we can deduce from the context, it refers to even the arhat. As a rule of thumb, we may say that generally, *dhamma,cakkhu* refers to the attaining of the fruit of streamwinning (sotāpatti,phala). [7.5.2.2]

7.5.2.2 The most common usage of *dhamma,cakkhu* is that it refers to **the fruit of streamwinning (sotāpatti,phala)**. This is especially clear from the numerous cases recorded in the Mahā,vagga of the Vinaya, recounting the awakening of the first disciples.

**Yasa**, for instance, gains the Dharma-eye while listening to the Buddha teaching (V 1:16). However, both the Jātaka Nidāna (J 1:82) and the Visuddha,jana Vilāsinī (the Apadāna commentary) (ApA 87), reporting the same incident, say that Yasa gains the fruit of streamwinning.

The same overlapping of “Dharma-eye” and “fruit of streamwinning” is found in the reports we have of **Añña Koṇḍañña**,<sup>134</sup> and of **Sariputta**.<sup>135</sup> In other words, in such cases, where the Vinaya or suttas use *dhamma,cakkhu*, the commentaries gloss it as *sotāpatti,phala*, and explain it as “vision into dharmas” (*dharmesu vā cakkhu*), or as “the Dharma-made eye” (*dhamma,mayaṃ vā cakkhum*) (DA 1:237). [7.5.1.1]

7.5.2.3 **The Aṅguttara Commentary**, however, explains *dhamma,cakkhu* as “the eye that is the path of streamwinning on account of grasping the nature of the 4 noble truths.”<sup>136</sup> It is safe here to say, then, the commentaries generally gloss *dhamma,cakkhu* as *sotāpatti*, “streamwinning,” either its path or its fruition.

7.5.2.4 The Vinaya records the Buddha himself as using the phrase *dhamma,cakkhu* more broadly as referring to “the learner’s knowledge” (*sekha,nāṇa*, V 1:17,21). The term “learner” refers to any of the three kinds of saints—the streamwinner, the once-returner or the non-returner—who is not yet an arhat or non-learner (*asekha*), that is, an adept.

The Abhidhamma, similarly, sees *dhamma,cakkhu* as referring to any of the first three supramundane paths.<sup>137</sup> It is a name for the 3 paths (*tinnam maggānam etam adhivacanam*, DA 1:237). These are the paths of the learners (*sekha*), those not yet arhats, the non-learners (*asekha*).

<sup>134</sup> V 1:11; S 5:420-424; J 1:82; ApA 87.

<sup>135</sup> V 1:40; J 1:85; ApA 90.

<sup>136</sup> *Dhamma,cakkhum ti catu,sacca,dhamma,pariggāhakam sotāpatti,magga,cakkhu* . (AA 2:356)

<sup>137</sup> *Heṭṭhimā magga-t,taya,saṅkhātānā nāṇam dhamma,cakkhum nāma*. (DhsA 306)

Hence, we can surmise that, in the suttas, the word *dhamma, cakkhu* very likely refers to streamwinning, while in the Abhidhamma works, it can refer to any of the stages of the learner, that is, streamwinning, once-return or non-return.

7.5.2.5 Often, we see the “progressive talk” pericope [7.3.2], as the Buddha’s way of mentally preparing his audience for his special teaching, that is, the 4 noble truths [7.4]. Hearing and understanding this, the audience gains the Dharma-eye, that is, they gain one of the learners’ stages of streamwinning, once-return or non-return.

Then, the listener or listeners would usually request for admission into the community, and is admitted. They continue their practice in solitary retreat of meditation, and then emerge as arhats. In other words, we see the *dhamma, cakkhu* here as a prelude or preparation for arhathood.

7.5.2.6 Sometimes, as in the case of **Rāhula**, as recorded in **the Cūḷa Rāhul’ovāda Sutta** (M 147), there is no mention of any progressive talk. Instead, the Buddha explains to Rāhula the 5 aggregates (form, feeling, perception, formations and consciousness) in terms of the 3 characteristics (impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and non-self).

At the end of the teaching, it is said that “through non-clinging, the venerable Rāhula’s mind is liberated from the influxes” (*āyasmato rāhulassa anupādāya āsavehi cittaṃ vimuccī*).<sup>138</sup> The destruction of influxes (*āsava-k, khaya*) is, of course, arhathood [§1.10(1) n]. The Sutta then concludes by noting that “to those countless thousands of deities, there arose the dust-free stainless Dharma-eye.”<sup>139</sup>

### 7.5.3 The awakening process

7.5.3.0 Here, we will briefly examine the role and context of the arising of the Dharma-eye in the awakening process of disciples. The Mahā’padāna Sutta reports, in almost identical words, the awakening process of three groups of people—Khaṇḍa and Tissa [§3.14], the 84,000 (2) [§3.18] and the 84,000 renunciants [§3.23]. Here is a summary of their awakening process:

	<u>Chief disciples</u>	<u>84,000 beings (2)</u>	<u>84,000 renunciants</u>
(1) received the progressive talk [7.3.2]	§3.15.1	§3.19.1	§3.23.2
(2) taught the 4 noble truths	§3.15.2	§3.19.2	§3.23.3
(3) <b>the Dharma-eye arises</b> ( <i>yam kiñci ...</i> )	§3.15.3	§3.19.3	§3.23.4
(4) streamwinning: “having seen the Dharma”	§3.16.1	§3.20.1	§3.24.1
(5) refuge-going	§3.16.2+3	§3.20.2+3	§3.24.2+3
(6) admission: going-forth and ordination	§3.17.1	§3.21.1	§3.25.1
(7) Dharma instructions	§3.17.2	§3.21.2	§3.25.2
(8) arhathood	§3.17.3	§3.22	§3.26

7.5.3.1 It should be noted here that number (3) above refers to the Buddha’s teaching the Dharma to a massive audience on each occasion. **The Buddha, vaṃsa** says that there are three such occasions of spiritual “breakthrough” (*abhisamaya*)<sup>140</sup> (B 26.2-4) [7.5.3.2], that is, the attaining of streamwinning or Dharma-eye for numerous humans and other beings. Details of these breakthroughs are given in **the Buddha, -vaṃsa Commentary**.

The first breakthrough (*paṭhamābhisamaya*) is at the teaching of **the Dhamma, calla Pavattana Sutta** (S 56.11),<sup>141</sup> the first sermon, when “180,000,000 brahmas” (deities of the form realm) with the elder Aññāsi Koṇḍañña at the head (*aññāsi. koṇḍañña-t, therā-p, pamukhānaṃ aṭṭhārasannaṃ brahma, koṭī-nam*).<sup>142</sup>

<sup>138</sup> M 147,8/3:280,10 (SD 70.7).

<sup>139</sup> *Tāsaṃ ca anekānaṃ devatā, sahaśśānaṃ virajāṃ vīta, malaṃ dhamma, cakkhuṃ udapādi ...* followed by the *yam kiñci samudaya, dhammaṃ* formula, which closes the Sutta. In Ency Bsm 4:480 (Dhammacakkhu), Upali Karunaratna misreads M 4:280,8-10. Although the article has some useful refs, it should be read with some reservations.

<sup>140</sup> On *abhisamaya*, see SD 40.9 (5).

<sup>141</sup> **Dhammacakka Pavattana S** (S 56.11), SD 1.1. Koṇḍañña is the only human who attains streamwinning, after which he goes forth. The other 4 monks gain breakthrough later on.

<sup>142</sup> I B Horner mistranslated *brahmā* here as “brahmins” (BA:H 419).

The second breakthrough (*dutiyābhisamaya*) is at the teaching of **the Maṅgala Sutta** (Khṇ 5 = Sn 2.4)<sup>143</sup> (in Jetavana, at Sāvattṁhī), “in the midst of the devas and humans of the 10,000 world systems” (*dasasu cakka,vāḷa,sahassesu deva,manussānaṃ majjhe*).

The third breakthrough (*tatiyābhisamaya*) is during the teaching of the “Rāhul’ovāda Sutta,” probably **the Cūḷa Rāhul’ovāda Sutta** (M 147),<sup>144</sup> which records Rāhula’s attaining arhathood. At the end of the teaching, “beings beyond count” (*gaṇana,patha,vītivatte satte*) attained streamwinning. (BA 292)

7.5.3.2 **The awakening process** of these saints starts with the Buddha giving them a progressive talk, which has been explained [7.3.2]. *The progressive talk* culminates with the Buddha teaching them the 4 noble truths. Once they understand the 4 noble truths in all their aspects [7.5.3.3], **the Dharma-eye** arises in them (as in the case of Khaṇḍa and Tissa), thus (the starred \* phrases are commented on below):

THE DHARMA-EYE [3.15.3]

And just as a clean cloth [7.5.3.4], with all its stains removed, would take dye well,  
even so, in Khaṇḍa the royal prince and Tissa the purohit’s son, while sitting right there,  
there arose the dust-free stainless Dharma-eye [vision of truth], thus:

“**All that is of the nature of arising is of the nature of ending.**” [7.5.3.5]

(*Yaṃ kiñci samudaya,dhammaṃ sabbantaṃ nirodha,dhamman’ti*)

**3.16 STREAMWINNING** “*Having seen the Dharma*” *pericope* [7.5.3.6]

Then, Khaṇḍa the royal prince and Tissa the purohit’s son,

having seen the Dharma [the truth],

having mastered the Dharma,

having known the Dharma,

having found a fully firm footing in the Dharma,

having crossed over doubt,

having cleared away uncertainty,

having won moral courage,

independent of others,

in the Teacher’s teaching,<sup>145</sup> ...

(*Sādhū,kāra* [§3.16.2] & the requests for refuge-going and going-forth follow [3.16.3].)<sup>146</sup>

*te diṭṭha,dhammā  
patta,dhammā  
vidita,dhammā  
pariyogāḷha,dhammā  
tiṇṇa,vicikicchā  
vigata,kathaṃ,kathā  
vesārajja-p,pattā  
apara-p,paccayā*

7.5.3.3 THE 4 NOBLE TRUTHS. On a deeper level, then, the Dharma-eye formula also points to **the 4 noble truths**. The first truth (that of suffering) and the second truth (that of its arising) constitute dependent arising, or, philosophically, the meaning of life. The third truth (the ending of suffering) and the fourth truth (the path) constitute dependent ending, that is the purpose of life, especially the spiritual training. When we fully comprehend all this, we destroy all our mental defilements and attain arhathood, that is, nirvana here and now.

Understanding the truths fully means understanding the 4 truths essentially in terms of theory, practice and realization (*pariyatti paṭipatti paṭivedha*). This has been discussed in some detail elsewhere.<sup>147</sup>

We see just this pattern of teaching and awakening in **the Mahā’padāna Sutta**, that is, of the pair of chief disciples [§§3.15-3.17], of the 84,000 beings (2) [§§3.18-32.21], and of 84,000 renunciants [§§3.22-3.26]. Listening to the progressive talk, their minds are freed from the hindrances—which means that they can attain dhyana, or at least have calm and clear minds for effective contemplation. Then, they renounce the world, and Vipassī continues to teach them, and they practise (meditation is not directly mentioned, but implied by the ridding of the “hindrances”), and become arhats.

<sup>143</sup> Khṇ 5/2 f = Sn 2.4/46 f (SD 101.5).

<sup>144</sup> **Cūḷa Rāhul’ovāda S** (M 147/3:277-280), SD 70.7.

<sup>145</sup> “Having seen the Dharma ... in the Teacher’s Teaching,” *diṭṭha,dhammo patta,dhammo vidita,dhammo pariyogāḷha,dhammo tiṇṇa,vicikicchā vigata,kathaṃ,kathā vesārajja-p,patto apara-p,paccayo satthu,sāsane*. As in the case of **Yasa’s father** (Mv 7.10c @ V 1:16), SD 11.2(7).

<sup>146</sup> On refuge-going, see SD 35.4a (Comy on §18); SD 45.11 (3).

<sup>147</sup> On the 12 aspects of the 4 truths, see SD 1,1 (5).



7.5.3.5 *YAM KIÑCI SAMUDAYA, DHAMMAṀ PERICOPE*. The Dharma-eye passage then, broadly, refers to the arising of insight into **impermanence**, and more specifically, it is insight into the “**rise and fall**” of things, especially in terms of dependent arising and dependent ending (or **conditionality**) [7.1].

The Dharma-eye formula’s key phrase: “All that is subject to arising is subject to ending,” shows the mode in which **the path** arises. The path takes ending (nirvana) as its object, but its function is to penetrate all conditioned states as being subject to arising and ending. (MA 3:92)

In other words, the “Dharma-eye” highlights our spiritual capacity to realize the inherent truth of impermanence. Although it usually arises as a result of hearing the Buddha’s teaching, it is not a revelation as we ourselves have the potential for its realization. Thus, by our own insight, we cognize and comprehend the most basic and true reality of existence, impermanence, and so win the path to spiritual liberation.

7.5.3.6 “*HAVING SEEN THE DHARMA*” *PERICOPE*. This beautiful passage with its eight phrases does not seem to have been explained in the suttas or commentaries.<sup>148</sup> So here we will give some brief comments of each of the 8 phrases, for a clearer understanding of the passages and their contexts.

(1) “**Having seen the Dharma [the truth]**” (*diṭṭha, dhammā*) here means that we have seen, that is, understood the Dharma in the form of the 4 noble truths, in all their aspects [7.5.3.3], not merely in theory by hearsay. We have experienced these truths within our own being, that is, our own body and mind. Both our body and our mind are *impermanent*, and as such *unsatisfactory*. Since they are impermanent and unsatisfactory, they are *non-self*. This is the truth that is suffering.

Suffering arises when we do not understand this and crave for them as if they are permanent, gratifying and exist in themselves. This *craving* is the second truth. When we understand the true nature of our body and mind, we let them go even as they arise by way of form, feeling, perception, formations and consciousness (the 5 aggregates) [7.2.2]. This *letting-go* is the third truth, which leads to nirvana.

Then, we put this understanding into practice. With lovingkindness towards our physical being—our body and speech—we cultivate them harmoniously so that we can see ourself just as we see others, that we condition one another as mutual experience (in terms of the 5 aggregates). On this moral basis, we cultivate the mind to free it from craving, so that it is calm and clear, allowing us to have insight wisdom into true reality to arise.<sup>149</sup> This is *the path* to awakening and nirvana, that is, the fourth truth.

(2) “**Having mastered the Dharma**” (*patta, dhammā*). We are said to have “mastered” or “attained” (*patta*) the Dharma, that is, understood each and every one of the 4 truths in every aspect: as theory, in practice—and so realized them. We understand “theory” (*pariyatti*) as the manifestations of suffering as physical pain, mental suffering, and existential unsatisfactoriness and spiritual emptiness. “Practice” (*paṭipatti*) means we see and understand these various aspects of true reality in our body (actions and speech) and mind (thoughts). And so, we realize (*paṭivedha*) all such realities manifesting themselves as the rise and fall of events, none of which can ever be owned or grasped. We can only let them come, and let them go, just as they are.

(3) “**Having known the Dharma**” (*vidita, dhammā*). To truly know (*vedeti*) is to “feel” (*paṭisaṃvedeti*)<sup>150</sup> or less commonly *paṭisaṃvediyati*.<sup>151</sup> The verb is resolved as *paṭi* (a prefix meaning “against, towards”) + *saṃ* (a prefix meaning “completeness”) + √VID, “to know + *e* (causative infix showing passivity) + *ti* (3<sup>rd</sup> person singular verb). There is also a passive byword *paṭisaṃvediyati*, from *paṭi* + *saṃ* + *vedeti* (Vedic *vedayate* or *vedayati*), which has the same meaning.

Both have the same meaning, “to feel” (cognitively and affectively), in a generally passive sense of experiencing fruition of karma.<sup>152</sup> Or, more broadly, it means “to know completely and feel reflectively,” that is, to simply observe what is going on or to fully experience something whether good or bad, but unaffected by them. A simple example of such an action is that of a good surgeon examining a very sick

<sup>148</sup> There is, however, a traditional commentary on the passage by Dhammapāla at UA 285 f: see UA:M 2:745 f.

<sup>149</sup> This is called the **3 trainings**: see *Sīla samādhi paññā*, SD 21.6.

<sup>150</sup> *Paṭisaṃvedeti*: D 1:43, 45; M 1:8; S 2:211; A 1:157, 4:406; It 38; Pug 59.

<sup>151</sup> *Paṭisaṃvediyati*: S 2:18, 75, 5:388; It 38.

<sup>152</sup> See SD 3.9 (5) & SD 17.3 (1.2).

person or a terrible wound without feeling fearful or nauseated, but keenly observing and knowing what is really going on. This is the kind of knowing or experience that occurs during a good meditation.<sup>153</sup>

It also describes the mind of a deeply spiritual person, especially a saint, such as an arhat. Such a mind would simply “know” the true state of thing (*dhamma*); he is thus said to “have known the Dharma,” truly experiencing true reality.<sup>154</sup>

(4) “**Having found a fully firm footing in the Dharma**” (*pariyogāḷha, dhammā*). *Pariyogāḷha* has two senses, both as the past participle of *pariyogāhati* (or *pariyogāheti*), resolved as *pari* (a prefix meaning “all around, totally”) + verb *ogāhati*. However, *ogāhati* can be resolved in two ways:

(1) *pari* (y) + *ogadha* (*ava*, “down” + *gādha*<sup>1</sup>, (of a river, stream) “passable, fordable”) or + *gadha* (adj), “a firm footing in water, firm ground, a ford,” that is, “to find a firm footing, safe place (such as in deep water),” as in *ogādha-p, patta*, “found a firm footing” (in the Dharma-Vinaya, A 3:297,15)<sup>155</sup> and “a firm footing in the holy life” (S 55.2,10d).<sup>156</sup> It is also used figuratively in *amat’ogadha*, “(found) a firm footing in the death-free” (Dh 411c; Sn 635)<sup>157</sup>, and *nibbān’ogadha*, (found) firm ground in nirvana” (M 1:304,21; S 3:189,29).<sup>158</sup>

It should be noted that sometimes *ogadha* and *ogādha* are interchangeable, as the former is a by-form of the latter.<sup>159</sup>

(2) *pari* + *ogāḷha* (= *avagāḷha*; Skt *avagāḍha*; Prk *ogāḍha*; past part of *ogāhati*, “penetrate, sink, plunge into”) = *ava*, “down” + *gadha*<sup>2</sup> = “plunged into, immersed in (water, as is bathing in a river),” or *ogādha*<sup>2</sup> (adj), (figuratively) “plunging into, immersing,” as in *vanam’ogāḷham*, “plunged into a forest” (Ap 246,13).

From the context of the passage, clearly *pariyogāḷha* has the first sense of “firm footing” in a water to flood imagery, when we find the waters getting more shallow and safe, and then cross over the flood to stand on solid ground. This imagery is famously found in **the Udakūpama Sutta** (A 7.15), where a non-returner is compared to a person, who “having emerged (from the flood waters), gains firm ground” (*pati-gādha-p, patta*).<sup>160</sup> The phrase, *ogādha-p, pattā paṭigādha-p, pattā*, “who shall find a firm footing, a foot-hold (in streamwinning),” is found in **the Nakula Sutta** (A 6.16).<sup>161</sup>

However, here we should not read too much into the passage, but follow the context, which here clearly refers to streamwinning, the first of the 4 kinds of saints. This surmise becomes more obvious when we examine the next phrase.

(5) “**Having crossed over doubt**” (*tiṇṇa, vicikicchā*). This phrase traditionally describes a streamwinner, renowned for his faith in the 3 jewels.<sup>162</sup> The Udāna commentary specifies these doubts as being of two sets: the first a set of 16 doubts, mentioned in **the Sabb’āsava Sutta** (M 2), and the second, a set of 8 doubts found in the Abhidhamma (UA 295, 315). For this phrase, the 8 doubts apply.

**The 8 doubts** are in the Buddha, in the Dharma, in the sangha, in the training-rules, in ultimate beginnings, in ultimate ends, in both the ultimate beginning and end, and conditionality and dependently arisen states, and doubts related to such things.<sup>163</sup> The true disciples, beginning with the streamwinner, have overcome all such doubts.<sup>164</sup>

<sup>153</sup> On knowing during dhyana, see SD 49.5b (0.4).

<sup>154</sup> On how an arhat responds to experiences, see **Ti,kaṇḍaki S** (A 5.144) + SD 2.12 (1).

<sup>155</sup> The instrumental form *pariyogāḷhena* is more common: V 1:12, 37, 226, 2:157, 192; D 1:110, 148; S 2:58 f; M 1:380, 501, 2:145; A 4:186, 210; U 49; Vbh 329. See CPD o-gādha + o-gāḷha; DP: ogadha<sup>1</sup> & ogādha<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>156</sup> **Ogadha S** (S 55.2,10d), SD 3.3(4.1.4).

<sup>157</sup> See Dh:N 161 n411 & Sn:N 288 n635.

<sup>158</sup> See CPD: o-gadha; DP: ogadha<sup>2</sup> & ogādha<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>159</sup> See Sn:N 288 n635.

<sup>160</sup> A 7.15 (SD 28.6).

<sup>161</sup> A 6.16,2.6 (SD 5.2).

<sup>162</sup> On the faith of a streamwinner, see **Ogadha S** (S 55.2), SD 3.3(4.1.4).

<sup>163</sup> *Sattham’antāpar’ante ... , idap, paccayatā, patricca, samuppannesu dhammesu kaṅkhati vicikicchati*, Dhs 1004 = Vbh 364 f; cf DhsA 354 f.

This second set of 8 doubts, as we have noted, is found in the Dhamma,saṅgaṇī (Dhs 1006) and the Vibh-aṅga (Vbh 364 f), two of the 7 books of the Abhidhamma Piṭaka. This is actually a definition of the 2<sup>nd</sup> of the first 3 fetters of the 10 fetters—self-identity view, doubt and attachment to rituals and vows—destroying which we attain streamwinning.<sup>165</sup>

(6) “**Having cleared away uncertainty**” (*vigata,katham,kathā*). The Udāna commentary seems to explain this phrase as referring to doubts we have about ourselves (UA 285). **The 16 doubts** are about what we are, were, or will be, and in what ways, and so on, that is, speculating about the past, the present and the future.<sup>166</sup>

The key reason for the true disciple’s not having doubts or speculations about the Dharma, or any uncertainty about himself, is because he has fully understood the Dharma and the true nature of existence. He understands that whatever doubts, speculations or uncertainties he may have, especially during meditation, arises from his lack of mindfulness, forgetfulness, inattentiveness to the present and a lack of wisdom. He is doubt-free on account of having properly cultivated his body (*kāya,bhāvitā*), that is, he is restrained in his sense-faculties, and his mind (*bhāvitā,citta*), that is, he is mindful and circumspect.<sup>167</sup>

(7) “**Having won moral courage**” (*vesārajjā-p,pattā*). When we have well understood the Dharma and attained at least streamwinning, our heart is spiritually in the right place: we have true moral courage (*vesārajjā*). Since we are confident in our experience and understanding of the Dharma, we are not shy to speak about it, whether before someone else or before a huge gathering, and we are able to answer Dharma-related questions in a beneficial and healing way.

The commentary on **Tha 289** explains “intrepidity” (*vesārajjā*) as follows: “With all the influxes completely destroyed, the teacher has no fear from any quarter” (*sabb’āsava,parikkhīṇam satthāraṁ akuto,-bhayaṁ*) (ThaA 2:122).

**The Mahā Siha,nāda S** (M 12) says that the Buddha himself has 4 kinds of intrepidity (*vesārajjā*), that is, no one can justly accuse the Buddha that

- (1) his awakening is incomplete,
  - (2) that he has not destroyed all the influxes,
  - (3) that mental obstructions, as defined by the Buddha, do not obstruct spiritual progress, and
  - (4) that when he teaches the Dharma, it does not lead to the complete destruction of suffering
- (M 12,22-28/1:71 f), SD 49.1<sup>168</sup>

(8) “**Independent of others**” (*apara-p,paccayā*). This last phrase summarizes all the positive and essential qualities. In other words, it is the key quality that we should remember, if we have difficulty recalling all the 8 qualities here. The practical essence of the Buddha’s teaching is **self-reliance**, meaning that our problems, their causes, their ending, and the path to end them (that is, liberation) all lie in our own mind. Here “self” (*atta*) means mind (*citta*).<sup>169</sup>

(8.2) Secondly, being “independent of others” means that if we are not free from the “other,” then we are its captive. This means that if we keep looking for answers outside of ourself or our mind, we will only be encountering other people’s false views and our own false view of the world (as a place and as beings). The most common false views “out there” are the ideas of God and the eternal soul. Notice how such ideas are closely connected with power, violence, and mass destruction throughout human history up to this day,

<sup>164</sup> On 6 ways of overcoming doubts, see SD 40a.8 (4.2.2).

<sup>165</sup> On the 3 fetters, see **Emotional independence**, SD 40a.8.

<sup>166</sup> M 2,7/1:8 (SD 30.3).

<sup>167</sup> This an adj for “bodily cultivation” (*kāya,bhāvanā*), which in the 3 cultivations (*bhāvanā*) (of the body, *kāya*~; of the mind, *citta*~; of wisdom, *paññā*~, D 1,10(48)/3:219) refers to moral virtue (restraint and purity in body and speech). There are also the 4 cultivations \*(*kāya,bhāvanā, sīla,bhāvanā, citta,bhāvanā, paññā,bhāvanā*, S 4,111,24: *kāya,bhāvitā, sīla,bhāvitā, citta,bhāvitā, paññā,bhāvitā*), where *kāya,bhāvanā* refers to restraint of the 5 sense-doors (SA 2:395).

<sup>168</sup> See SD 28.9a (3). On the Buddha’s 4 intrepidities, see **Mahā Siha,nāda S** (M 12,22-28/1:71 f), SD 49.1.

<sup>169</sup> On self (*atta*) = mind (*citta*), see SD 26.9 (1.6.2; 2.1.2).

and also notice how people tend to define God according to their own bias and desires, and use the idea to control or exploit others. Such ideas prevent us from being really free in every good sense of the word.

(8.3) Thirdly, even though our Dharma-spirited quest of truth and liberation may start off with some “wise faith” (*avecca-pasāda*)<sup>170</sup> in the Buddha or some wise and compassionate teacher, ultimately, it is always the wisdom (*paññā*), the knowledge and vision of true reality, that liberates us. Such an understanding and liberation then deepens and strengthens our faith in the Buddha and his teaching.

(8.4) Both Sāriputta, the wisest of the monks, other than the Buddha, and the houselord Citta, the wisest of the lay disciples, are excellent examples of those who have such wise faith. In the **Pubba Kōṭṭhaka Sutta** (S 48.44), when asked by the Buddha, Sāriputta explains that it is through faith in the Buddha that the former’s liberation has arisen through the 5 faculties (*pañc’indriya*) of faith, effort, mindfulness, concentration and wisdom, but that he has done so through his own effort. However, it is through such an attainment, that he now has wise faith in the Buddha.<sup>171</sup> The **Dhammapada** preserves Sāriputta’s riddle-like statement on his faith, thus:<sup>172</sup>

Not through faith, but knowing the unmade, | the man who has broken the connection,  
eliminated the opening (for rebirth), given up desire— | he is indeed a supreme person.

(Dh 97; cf Dh 383): SD 10.6

(8.5) The houselord **Citta**, too, is an excellent example of one who has wise faith, who is spiritually independent of others on account of his realization. The **Nigaṇṭha Nātaputta Sutta** (S 41.8) relates, with some humour, a dialogue between the houselord Citta and the Nāta,putta, the leader of the Jains, who asks him if he has faith in the Buddha’s teaching that thinking does not occur in dhyana. Citta famously replies, “Here, bhante, I do not go by faith in the Blessed One ....” Nāta,putta mistakes this as meaning that Citta actually has no *faith* in the Buddha, and declares it so before his congregation. Citta, then, explains—to Nāta,putta’s embarrassment and exasperation—that he has, through his own mastery of the 4 dhyanas—understood the matter himself, and on this account, he has faith in the Buddha!<sup>173</sup>

(8.6) For those of us who are unawakened, we still need to work towards emotional independence. This is not some selfish notion that we have no need of anyone else, which may be social awkwardness at best or sociopathy at worst. The point is that, as long as we are unawakened, we will “naturally,” in some way, have some kind of dependence on others. Otherwise, that lack will likely to be compensated, as a defence mechanism, into a “collector complex,” that is, accumulating money, power, and approval, and living a life dominated by rules and rituals.

We should be diligent in identifying any source of potential dependence. This effectively covers religion in general, especially those led by guru figures. A guru demands our total loyalty; in other words, he is a pathologically dependent on others, even a sociopath (who sees himself as being above law). Those forms of Buddhism with guru-centred teachings and tendencies should simply be avoided. The God-religions, too, demand, in some way, that we surrender our independence to “God,” meaning *whoever is in charge*. Social groups that depersonalize us so that we are “really” parts of the group, like cogs in a machine, which prevents personal creativity, and make us dependent on the group and gneu.

The suttas are filled with teachings on self-reliance and emotional independence. It is vital that we spend quality time studying such suttas. Invariably, such suttas will encourage us to cultivate our minds, too. A well cultivated mind, enjoying inner calm and clarity, will prepare us for emotional independence, that is the fruit of streamwinning.<sup>174</sup>

### **7.5.4 The Dharma-eye and sainthood**

7.5.4.1 The level of sainthood we attain depends on the efforts we make to break **the mental fetters** (*samyojana*). With the breaking of the first 3 fetters—self-identity view, doubt, and attachment to rituals

<sup>170</sup> On “wise faith,” see **Pañca Vera Bhaya S 1** (S 12.41), SD 3.3(4.2); also SD 40a.8 (4.3) How faith works.

<sup>171</sup> S 48.44/5:220 @ SD 10.7.

<sup>172</sup> On Sāriputta’s spiritual independence, see SD 40a.8 (5.6.2).

<sup>173</sup> On the houselord Citta’s spiritual independence, see SD 40a.8 (5.6.3).

<sup>174</sup> On emotional independence and streamwinning, see **Emotional independence**, SD 40a.8.



and vows—we attain streamwinning. When we further weaken the 3 unwholesome roots of greed, hate and delusion, we attain once-return. When the first 5 fetters—the 3 mentioned, along with sensual lust and ill will—are eliminated, we gain non-return. And when all the 10 fetters—previous 5, along with craving for form existence, craving for formless existence, conceit, restlessness, and ignorance—are eliminated, we gain arhathood.<sup>175</sup>

7.5.4.2 In the arhat, this realization is called “**superknowledge**” (*abhiññā*), of which there are the basic 3 (*te, vijjā*), or the full set of 6 (*cha-ḷ-abhiññā*). [5.1.1.3(3) n]

## 8 The 7 buddhas

### 8.1 ORIGINS

**8.1.0** The Mahā’padāna Sutta centres upon accounts of the 7 buddhas, six of which are past buddhas, while the 7<sup>th</sup> is our own Buddha, Gotama. Here, we will examine some other texts that mention these 7 buddhas, to better understand their significance.<sup>176</sup>

#### 8.1.1 Mutual influences

8.1.1.1 The compound *isi,sattama* (Skt *ṛṣi,sattama*, “the best of rishis”) is used of the Buddha to mean “the 7<sup>th</sup> seer” (*isi,sattama*), that is, the 7<sup>th</sup> buddha. The word *sattama* means “the best” in Sanskrit, but Pali *sattama*, which is *saptama* in Sanskrit, means “the seventh.” Hence, observes K R Norman,

This may well be an idea taken over from an earlier religion, and may be connected in some way with the brahmanical idea of the seven sages (*ṛṣis*). In this context it is interesting to note that the Jain tradition has the term *jina-sattama* [Tha 1240],<sup>177</sup> which gives only the meaning “best of jinas,” since there is no stock list of seven jinas. (Norman 1989:396 = 1993:259)

8.1.1.2 It is difficult to really know who copied from whom, but one thing is certain—there is much awareness of one another’s ideas amongst these three systems. As such, their mutual influences, at least in some of the texts, is likely. Early Buddhism, as we know, too, responded by borrowing words, ideas and stories from the Jains and the brahmins, and giving them a Buddhist meaning.

Such adaptations act as bridges for those familiar with the older sources to gras and internalize Buddhism. In fact, we see today how other world religions are taking up meditation—now rebranded as “mindfulness”—and adapting according to their own faith. This is mainly to prevent a gravitation of their followers to Buddhism, which is gaining greater global acceptance, especially of its meditation.

8.1.1.3 Historically, there is an ancient core of early Buddhist teachings behind the Pali suttas and texts that we now have. These ancient teachings have been preserved in a forest of texts and buried under the debris and layers of later teachings. As such, these texts alone are insufficient for us to actually experience what early Buddhism is really about. They are, however, the closest we have to any reliable records that go so far back, close to the Buddha’s own time. They are certainly more helpful in our quest for the historical buddha than are the polemics and pious fiction of evangelical Buddhisms.

To resuscitate these dead texts, we need the living lineage of traditional forest meditation, still untouched and unspoiled by modernism and populism. More exactly, we need to get deep down into a mind of stillness and clarity so that we can see with our mind’s eye what the Buddha actually taught. This reality is beyond the wordy ken of any academic (who is not a practitioner). It is totally lost to those who belittle historical Buddhism, and distant and absent from those who do not love the Dharma. Yet, it can be as close as our breath is to us, and as vast as our attentive vision, if we know where and how to look. With such an understanding, we see the Dharma everywhere in everything and, above all, within ourself.

<sup>175</sup> On the 10 mental fetters (*dasa saṃyojana*), see **Kiṭṭa,giri S** (M 70), SD 11.1 (5.1); (**Sekha**) **Uddesa S** (A 4.85), SD 3.3 (2).

<sup>176</sup> On the tradition of past buddhas and the canonical texts that attest to it, see Bareau 1980 and Gombrich 1980.

<sup>177</sup> *Jina,sattama* occurs at Isibhāsiyāṃ 38.12. See Tha:N 294 n1240.



### 8.1.2 Possible origins

8.1.2.1 **The Upāli (Gaha,pati) Sutta** (M 56) records the conversion of the Licchavī general Sīha, a Vesālī houselord and the leading lay-disciple of the Jain Nāta,putta. Understandably, as an erstwhile Jain, newly converted to Buddhism, he sees the Buddha as replacing the object of his highest devotion. The Jains use the phrase “the supreme conqueror” (*jina,sattama*) as an epithet of their Teachers, the “Ford-makers” (Skt *tīrthaṅkara*), of whom Nāta,putta is the 24<sup>th</sup>.<sup>178</sup>

In fact, this is exactly how he praises the Buddha in his **Upāli Gāthā**, where in the 6<sup>th</sup> verse, we address the Buddha as “the best of seers” (*isi,sattama*), a term he is well familiar when he was a Jain. The Jains do not have any equivalent or counterpart of the 7 buddhas of early Buddhism. Instead, they have their 24 Tirthankaras or Ford-makers (saviours).<sup>179</sup> And here, we see an interesting development.

8.1.2.2 In due course, the early Buddhists, probably following the example of the Jains, increased the number of buddhas from 7 to 24. **The Buddha,vaṃsa**, in fact, relates the stories of these 24 buddhas. However, these are all buddhas of the past. If we include Gotama, then, we actually have a total of 25 buddhas [8.2.2].

However, in chapter 27 of the Buddhavaṃsa, we see the names of three more ancient buddhas, all appearing in the same aeon before Dīpaṅkara. He is, in fact, the very first buddha of the Buddhavaṃsa, before whom Gotama made his first aspiration to become a buddha. These 3 additional ancient buddhas are called **Taṇhaṅkara, Medhaṅkara, and Saraṇaṅkara** (B 27.1). So, now, we have a total of **28 buddhas**, the greatest number of buddhas ever mentioned in the Pali canon.

8.1.2.3 Note here a further coincidence of names ending in *-kara*, “maker,” like the *tīrthaṅkara* of the Jains. Of course, such suffixes were common enough in the religious language of the day. We should also give allowance to the fact that, on account of the significant numbers of Jains—including the leading Jain disciples, that is, the houselord Upāli (Nālandā), Vappa the Sakya (Kapilavatthu) and general Sīha (Vesālī)—who converted to Buddhism, it is not surprising to see a significant vocabulary of Jain terms adopted by Buddhism.<sup>180</sup>

8.1.2.4 Regarding the term *isi,sattama*, we have altogether these three senses:

- (1) “the supreme seer,” following the Sanskrit, probably from the Vedic;
- (2) “the supreme sage,” following the Jains, who in turn, borrowed from the Sanskrit; and
- (3) “the 7<sup>th</sup> sage or seer,” a sense that arose with the doctrine of the 7 buddhas, found in the commentaries.

### 8.1.3 *Isi,sattama*

8.1.3.1 The phrase *isi,sattama* occurs as a vocative in the **Vaṅgīsa Sutta** (Sn 356b), and the whole verse repeats as **Tha 1276** of the Vaṅgīsa Thera.gāthā, near the very end of the book itself. The quote here and those from S 8,8 = Tha 124 are all spoken by the same person, that is, the poet Vaṅgīsa.

8.1.3.2 The commentary to the Sutta Nipāta explains *isi,sattama* at **Sn 356b** very much like the preceding verses [8.1.3], as referring to the 7 buddhas: “The Blessed One is the 7<sup>th</sup> seer and has the sense of being the highest. He himself appeared along with the six seers, named Vipassī, Sikhī, Vessabhu, Kakusandha, Koṇāgamana and Kassapa, making seven; thus he is the 7<sup>th</sup> seer.” (SnA 2:351,11)<sup>181</sup>. Similarly, the commentary on **Sn 356** lists the six preceding buddhas: Vipassī, Sikhī, Vessabhū, Kakusandha, Koṇāgamana, and Kassapa (SnA 2:351).<sup>182</sup>

8.1.3.3 The pattern is clear: in the suttas, following the ancient Vedic tradition and the Jain usage, *isi,sattama* means “the best of seers,” while the Commentaries invariably gloss the term as “the 7<sup>th</sup> seer.” It is likely that the term has been introduced into the suttas by Jain converts who use it to praise the Buddha on terms familiar to them [8.1.3.1].

<sup>178</sup> M 56,29(6)/1:386,18\* (SD 27.1).

<sup>179</sup> Further see Gombrich 1980:64.

<sup>180</sup> On this Jain influence on early Buddhism, see SD 36.2 (3.2.4).

<sup>181</sup> *Bhagavā isi ca sattamo ca uttam’aṭṭhena, vipassī,sikhī,vessabhu,kakusandha,koṇāgamana,kassapa,nāmake cha isayo attanā saha satta karonto pātubhūto ti pi isi,sattamo* (SnA 2:351,11).

<sup>182</sup> Also at SA 1:278 (on S 1:192).

### 8.1.4 Commentarial explanations

8.1.4.1 By the commentarial period, this ancient sense was forgotten, or downplayed in favour of the popular doctrine of the 7 buddhas. Conveniently, *sattama* is taken as Sanskrit *saptama*, meaning “the seventh,” that is Gotama as the 7<sup>th</sup> buddha. Once this number of buddhas is established, the number grows until there are a total of 28 buddhas.<sup>183</sup>

8.1.4.2 The commentaries were probably aware of the *isi,sattama* parallel between Buddhism and Jainism. Of course, it is possible that by the time these commentaries were written, the commentators had forgotten about that parallel. Either way, the commentaries, as a rule, when commenting on the phrase *isi,sattama*, glossed it as sense (3) [8.1.2.4].

The commentary on *isi,sattama* in the **Upāli (Gaha,pati) Sutta** [8.1.2.1], for example, explains that it “refers to the 7<sup>th</sup> seer, after the 6 buddhas beginning with Vipassī” (*vipassī ādayo cha isayo upādāya sattamassa*, MA 3:97). We can deduce that the commentator here does not give meaning (1) or (2) because he is no more aware of these connections, or is trying to deflect the significance of the Buddhist/Jain parallel.

8.1.4.3 **The Paro,saḥassa Sutta** (S 740) records the monk poet, Vaṅṅīsa, as singing praises to the Buddha, calling him *isi,sattama*, thus:

“Lord, your name is naga,<sup>184</sup> | the supreme seer of seers” (*nāga,nāmo ’si bhagavā isīnaṃ isi,sattamo*).  
(S 8,8/1:192,34\*), SD 68.12 = (Tha 1240)

Commenting on *isi,sattama*, the Sutta commentary says: “the 7<sup>th</sup> seer from Vipassī” (*vipassito paṭṭhāya isīnaṃ sattamako isī*, SA 1:278,29). This same line recurs at **Tha 1240** (in the Vaṅṅīsa Thera,gātha) where its commentary glosses it as “The supreme seer amongst seers who are disciples and pratyeka-buddhas. The 7<sup>th</sup> seer of the seers from the fully self-awakened Vipassī” (*sāvaka,pacceka.buddha,isīnaṃ uttamo isī; vipassī sammā,sambuddhato paṭṭhāya isīnaṃ vā sattamako isī* (ThaA 3:195,25 f). Here again, both the commentators, Buddhaghosa and Dhamma,pāla gloss *isi,sattama* in connect with the 7 buddhas, and omitting the other two senses.

**8.1.5 Late works.** The term *isi,sattama* also appears in such late works as the Apadāna and the Abhidhamma. In the **Apadāna**, the term is used by two elders, that is, the monk Lakuṇṭaka Bhaddiya (ApTha 538.29/490,29) and the nun Mahā Pajāpatī Gotamī (ApThī 17.74/535,18).

The term appears in the Abhidhamma in the Mūla Tīkā of the **Paṭṭhāna**, which explains *isi,sattama* as follows: “*Isi,sattama* means the exceedingly saintly who are praised for their saintliness on account of having understood the 4 truths. This is said in reference to the 7<sup>th</sup> Blessed One, Vipassī, and so on.”<sup>185</sup>

The **Apadāna** and the Tīkā (subcommentary) are late works, and it’s interesting to see how they only mention the 7 buddhas in their glosses, without any mention of the ancient sense that is known in the Buddha’s own time. Once again here, we may surmise that either the compilers of these works were no more aware of the early Buddhist sense of *sattama*, or they have chosen to promote a popular pietist tradition of the 7 buddhas.

### 8.1.6 Other possible reasons

8.1.6.1 We have noted how the Jain conception of the “7<sup>th</sup> seer” was introduced into early Buddhism [8.1.3-8.1.4]. The Jain converts would understandably see the Buddha as their “supreme seer” (*isi,sattama*), transferring the Jain vision of their spiritual leader and exemplar to the Buddha himself. The ancient

<sup>183</sup> See O von Hinüber, “Upāli’s verses in the Majjhimanikāya and the Madhyamāgama” (1982:249), where Gautama Saṅghadeva, in his Chin tr of the Upāli Gāthā (MA 133 @ T1.632b24), renders the Skt *ṛṣi,sattama* as the seventh *ṛṣi*,” corresponding to *vipassī,ādayo cha isayo upādāya sattamassa* (MA 3:97,26; also in Intro to EĀ @ T2.549b13), but conflicting with the Skt *[ṛṣi]sattamasya* (61), “the best of the *ṛṣis*” (cf CPD: *isi-sattama*). See Analayo 2011:331+n104.

<sup>184</sup> *Nāga* can mean “bull elephant,” esp the herd leader (D 2:266,5\*; M 1:415,2; A 2:116,25; Dh 329; Sn 29); hence, fig, it means the Buddha is a *spiritually* “noble leader.” However, *nāga* also has the sense of “the best or the most excellent of its kind; a mighty being” (V 2:195,28\*, 5:3,29\*; M 1:386,15\*; A 3:347,15\*; Sn 522). The latter sense applies here.

<sup>185</sup> *Isisattamo ’ti catu,saccāvabodha.gatiyā isayo ’ti saṅkhyam gatānam satam pasatthānam isīnaṃ atisayena santo pasattho ’ti attho. Vipassī’ādayo ca upādāya bhagavā sattamo ’ti vutto.* (PaṭAT:Be 166)

Indians, including the Buddhists, attributed various sacred titles to those they regard as having some kind of religious attainment. The Buddha, for example, was known as the “kinsman of the sun” (*ādicca,bandhu*),<sup>186</sup> and even as the “God above the gods” (*devātideva*).<sup>187</sup>

It is possible that this was one of the earliest roots of the teaching on the 7 buddhas, which then developed into the doctrine of the 25 buddhas, and so on. Once the term *isi,sattama* is taken, whether erroneously or innovatively, to mean “the 7<sup>th</sup> sage” [8.1.3], it is easy to understand how the idea of “7 buddhas” was introduced. Of course, we can still accept, on faith, the notion that there were, in the distant pasts, buddhas by those names.

8.1.6.2 The greatest motivation for the evolution of the “7 buddhas” doctrine must surely be **the Buddha’s death**, which must surely have been traumatic for many of the unawakened followers, even in the early after-centuries. The more devotional amongst such monastics (they could have been the laity at this early stage), who could not get over the idea that their refuge had died, consoled themselves with the notion that there were, like the Jain Tirthankaras of the Jains, buddhas of the past, too.

In the absence of the Buddha, such a notion would at once, or in due course, catch on. Since the Jains already held such a notion, it was not difficult for the post-Buddha Buddhists to accept, even euphorically, welcome such an idea. Indeed, such an idea would greatly boost the prestige of a dead master in a culture teeming with gods, gurus and saints, and one that actually demands some kind of religious props of hyperbole or strangeness for authenticating saintliness and divinity. [1.0.5.2 (12)]

## 8.2 THE 7 BUDDHAS AND MORE

### 8.2.1 Sources for the “7 buddhas”

8.2.1.1 Seven all-knowing buddhas (*sabbaññū,buddha*) are mentioned in the earlier books: they are as follows:

- (7) Vipassī
- (6) Sikhī
- (5) Vessabhū
- (4) Kakusandha
- (3) Konāgamana
- (2) Kassapa
- (1) Gotama

(V 2:110; D 14.1.10/2:5 f; S 12.4-10/2:5-10; Tha 490 f; J 203/2:147).

They are also mentioned in the Vinaya (V 2:110), in an old formula against snake bites.<sup>188</sup>

8.2.1.2 The 7 buddhas are also named at **Tha 490** in the Sarabhaṅga Thera,gāthā, but their legends began to develop in **the Mahā’padāna Sutta** (D 14),<sup>189</sup> so that by the time **the Buddha,vaṁsa** was compiled, there is a total 25 buddhas, 24 past buddhas with Gotama as the 25th.

**8.2.2 Number of buddhas.** The number of buddhas increased in later books. The Buddhavaṁsa contains detailed particulars of 25 Buddhas, including the last, Gotama. The first 24 buddhas are those who prophesied Gotama’s appearance in the world. A further 3 buddhas are mentioned in the Buddhavaṁsa (B 27.1/100) as predecessors of Vipassī. These 3 buddhas [8.1.2.2] are merely mentioned as appearing in the same epoch as Dīpaṅkara, but play no role in Gotama’s aspiration to buddhahood.<sup>190</sup>

**8.2.3 Full canonical list.** The full list of the buddhas of early Buddhism is as follows:

- (25) Dīpaṅkara,
- (24) Kondañña,
- (23) Mangala,

<sup>186</sup> *Ādicca,bandhu* is prob an old term, found mostly in verses: V 2:296,17\* = A 2:54,8\*; D 2:287,21\*, 3:197,14\*, 198; S 1:192,6\* = Tha 1237; Sn 915, 921; Tha 1246.

<sup>187</sup> *Devātideva* is a late term found at Vv 64.27; Ap 253,12; Miln 257,2 and commonly in Comys (MA 3:18 = SA 3:50; UA 416; ThaA 3:171; ApA 127; CA 9; PaṭA 107).

<sup>188</sup> S Beal (*Catena*, 1871:159) says these names also appear in the Chinese Prātimokṣa. The names are also found in the Sayambhū Purāṇa (R Mitra, *Sanskrit Buddhist Literature of Nepal*, 1882:249).

<sup>189</sup> D 14/2:1-54 (SD 49.8).

<sup>190</sup> **Lalita,vistara** gives a list of 54 buddhas and **Mahā,vastu**, more than a hundred.

- (22) Sumana,
- (21) Revata,
- (20) Sobhita,
- (19) Anomadassī,
- (18) Paduma,
- (17) Nārada,
- (16) Padumuttara,
- (15) Sumedha,
- (14) Sujāta,
- (13) Piyadassī,
- (12) Atthadassī,
- (11) Dhammadassī,
- (10) Siddhattha,
- (9) Tissa and
- (8) Phussa.

The same poem, in its 27<sup>th</sup> chapter, mentions three other Buddhas, namely,

- (28) Taṇhaṅkara,
- (27) Medhaṅkara and
- (26) Saraṇaṅkara

who appeared in the world before Dīpankara.

**8.2.4 Chronology.** In a chronological summary, we have, according to the Commentaries, the following list of 28 Buddhas:

- |                       |                       |                        |                 |
|-----------------------|-----------------------|------------------------|-----------------|
| (1) <i>Taṇhaṅkara</i> | (2) <i>Medhaṅkara</i> | (3) <i>Saraṇaṅkara</i> |                 |
| (4) Dīpankara         | (5) Kondañña          | (6) Mangala            | (7) Sumana      |
| (8) Revata            | (9) Sobhita           | (10) Anomadassī        | (11) Paduma     |
| (12) Nārada           | (13) Padumuttara      | (14) Sumedha           | (15) Sujāta     |
| (16) Piyadassī        | (17) Atthadassī       | (18) Dhammadassī       | (19) Siddhattha |
| (20) Tissa            | (21) Phussa           |                        |                 |

**The 7 buddhas:**

- |                 |                 |               |             |
|-----------------|-----------------|---------------|-------------|
| (22) Vīpassī    | (23) Sikhī      | (24) Vessabhū |             |
| (25) Kakusandha | (26) Konāgamana | (27) Kassapa  | (28) Gotama |

**8.2.5 Details**

8.2.5.1 **The Mahā'padāna Sutta** (D 14), which mentions the 7 buddhas [1.0.4.18], gives details of each buddha under the following 11 headings (*paricchedā*) -

- (1) the aeon (*kappa*) in which he is born,
- (2) his social class (*jāti*),
- (3) his clan (*gotta*),
- (4) length of life in that epoch (*āyu*),
- (5) the tree under which he attains awakening (*bodhi*),
- (6) the names of his two chief disciples (*sāvaka, yuga*),
- (7) the numbers present at the assemblies of arhats held by him (*sāvaka, sannipāta*),
- (8) the name of his personal attendant (*upatthāka, bhikkhu*),
- (9) the names of his father,
- (10) the name of his mother,
- (11) the name of his birthplace.

8.2.5.2 The Dīgha Commentary (DA 2:422-424) adds the following details:

- the names of his son and his wife before his renunciation,
- the conveyance (*yāna*) in which he leaves the world,
- the park monastery in which his fragrant cell (*gandha, kuti*) is located,

- the amount of money paid for the purchase of the park monastery,
- the site of the park monastery, and the name of his chief lay patron.

### 8.2.6 The future buddha

8.2.6.1 **The Cakka,vatti Sīha,nāda Sutta** (D 26) gives details of the future buddha Metteyya, who will be born in the world during the present aeon. He arises when the human lifespan will have increased to 60,000, as in the times of buddha Vipassī [Table 1.0.4].<sup>191</sup>

8.2.6.2 **The Anāgata,vaṃsa**, a late poetical work, gives a detailed account of Metteyya. Some manuscripts of the Anāgata,vaṃsa (JPTS 1886:37) mention the names of 10 future buddhas, all of whom met Gotama who prophesied about them. These are Metteyya, Uttama, Rāma, Pasenadi Kosala, Abhibhū, Dīgha,sonī, Saṅkacca, Subha, Todeyya, and Nālāgiri,palaleyya (sic).

## III “LIVES” OF GOTAMA BUDDHA

### 9 A legendary life of the Buddha

#### 9.1 THE NATURE OF LEGEND AND THE BUDDHA STORY

##### 9.1.1 Sacred stories and hagiology

9.1.1.1 In this section, we cover what is known as Buddhist **hagiography**, defined by the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) as “the writing of the lives of saints; saints’ lives as a branch of literature or legend.” A close synonym to this is **hagiology**, “the literature that treats of the lives and legends of saints” (OED). Even more broadly, we can define *hagiology* as the study or creation of accounts or stories of the lives and legends of saints.

Hagiography specifically relates to literature—here, including oral literature—recounting the lives of the Buddha and his saints. Here, we understand the early Buddhist oral tradition as **literature**—which, strictly speaking, is defined as “anything written”—because since around 1<sup>st</sup> century BCE, the whole of the Pali canon was written down on in Sri Lanka.<sup>192</sup> It is possible, too, that the Pali texts had been written down much earlier in India, even before Asoka’s times.

Any ancient written records would have been made from perishable materials (such as cloth or bark). Even if there were teaching recorded on gold sheets, such as during Bimbisāra’s time,<sup>193</sup> such valuable metal would have been plundered by the marauding Turks during the 13th century, and who would also have destroyed any Buddhist literary records along with the monastics who produced them.<sup>194</sup>

9.1.1.2 Today we have quite a complete canon of early Buddhist teachings, recorded in Pali, a literary language (Kunstsprache, “art language”), a vernacular form of Sanskrit. Based on such texts and the local literature of Theravāda as preserved in Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia (especially Myanmar, Thailand, Laos and Cambodia), we have a rich tradition of sacred stories of the Buddha’s lives, especially his last one.

**The Buddha’s past lives** are valuable as Buddhist legends [9.1.2], myths [9.1.3], and fables (such as the Jātaka stories), all of which show how the teachings are applied in daily life, or as perceived by the common people. Such stories have found their way into the social fabric of the countries mentioned enriching their cultures. Such stories collectively form a Theravāda Buddhist literature [9.1.4] and **hagiography**.

Further, the study of such stories, their contents, form, nature and evolution, would form a Theravāda Buddhist **hagiology**. However, if we limit ourselves to the stories of the Buddha in early Buddhism, we may, of course, conveniently call this area of exploration as an early Buddhist hagiology, which is our special interest here.

<sup>191</sup> D 26 (SD 36.10).

<sup>192</sup> See SD 26.11 (3.1.3.5).

<sup>193</sup> Bimbisāra was said to have written Buddhist texts on a long gold sheet to Pukkusāti: SD 4.17 (1.2.2).

<sup>194</sup> On the Muslim Turk invasion of India and the disappearance of Buddhism from India, see SD 36.1 (1.8.3.2) esp (1)-(2).



### 9.1.2 The nature of a legend

9.1.2.1 The Oxford English Dictionary (OED) records the earliest usage of **legend** as meaning “the story of the life of a Saint” (c1375),<sup>195</sup> or “an unauthentic or non-historical story, esp handed down by tradition from early times and popularly regarded as historical” (earliest recorded usage, 1613). The Merriam-Webster online dictionary defines **legend** as “a story coming down from the past; especially one popularly regarded as historical although not verifiable” (Merriam-Webster)<sup>196</sup>

In simple terms, then, a **legend** is a traditional story,<sup>197</sup> which, may, as a whole or in parts, be non-historical. The tradition that accepts such a legend may regard the story as historical, or may not be aware of the non-historical nature of the story, but they accept its authenticity. “Non-historical” here, in reference to Buddhism, is a broad term referring to the nature of the story, which may be mythical or psychological.

9.1.2.2 A **legend** (Latin, *legenda*, “things to be read”) is a narrative of human actions that are perceived both by teller and listeners to take place within human history and to possess certain qualities that give the story *verisimilitude*,<sup>198</sup> that is, “lifelikeness” or believability, even as a work of fiction. No event in a legend falls outside of the realm of possibility, but may include miracles, that is, superhuman activities or non-human phenomena. The Brothers Grimm<sup>199</sup> defined **legend** as folktale, historically grounded.<sup>200</sup>

Legends often evolve over time through oral transmission (which may appear in print form), so that it is appealing emotionally and relevant to the people. Many legends operate within the realm of uncertainty, neither entirely believed by the masses nor resolutely doubted.<sup>201</sup>

9.1.2.3 **Timothy R Tangherlini**, a folklorist, says that “Legend, typically, is a short (mono-) episodic, traditional, highly ecotypified<sup>202</sup> historicized narrative performed in a conversational mode, reflecting on a psychological level a symbolic representation of folk belief and collective experiences and serving as a re-affirmation of commonly held values of the group to whose tradition it belongs.” (1990).<sup>203</sup>

The first part of Tangherlini’s definition of **legend** does not fit the Buddha story, as it *not* “a short (mono-) episodic ... narrative,” but a life-long multi-episodic story (with at least 12 “acts”) [1.0.5]. However, the rest of his definition describes the Buddha story as a whole very well.

9.1.2.4 The Buddha story is clearly “traditional,” since it was handed down orally for the first few centuries, and subsequently written down around the 1<sup>st</sup> century BCE. It is “highly ecotypified,”<sup>204</sup> with clearly identifiable historical places in northern India. The Buddha story is one based on the history of the relatively recent past. We know that the Buddha lived a full 80 years,<sup>205</sup> and the current scholarly consensus is that he died some time between 410 and 400 BCE.<sup>206</sup>

It is a “historicized narrative performed in a conversational mode”—as already mentioned, it was for centuries handed orally. Even today, Buddhists unfamiliar with their own scriptures, know well enough, through oral transmission, the key details of Buddha’s life. The Buddha’s life, as a whole, can be usefully seen as “the reflecting on a psychological level, a symbolic representation of folk belief and collective experiences.”

<sup>195</sup> This is the sense of “legend” as used by Geoffrey Chaucer, such as in his Nun’s Priest’s Tale (c1386).

<sup>196</sup> <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/legend>.

<sup>197</sup> For definitions of terms related to “traditional story,” see [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Traditional\\_story](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Traditional_story).

<sup>198</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Verisimilitude\\_\(literature\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Verisimilitude_(literature)).

<sup>199</sup> Jakob (1785-1863) & Wilhelm Grimm (1786-1859): [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brothers\\_Grimm](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brothers_Grimm).

<sup>200</sup> Jakob Ludwig Karl Grimm, *The German Legends of the Brothers Grimm*. [*Deutsche Sagen*, 1857] vol 1, ed & tr Donald Ward. Philadelphia: The Institute for the Study of Human Issues, 1981:1.

<sup>201</sup> Robert Georges & Michael Owens, *Folkloristics*, Bloomington, IN: Indiana Univ Press, 1995:7.

<sup>202</sup> That is, specifically located in place and time.

<sup>203</sup> Tangherlini, 1990:385. For a fuller def of **legend**, see Green 1997:485-493 sv Legend & Janet L Langlois, in Haase 2008:569-571 sv Legend.

<sup>204</sup> According to Tangherlini, the term **legend** is used in folkloristics to denote a “traditional (mono)episodic, highly ecotypified, localized, historicized narrative of past events told as believable in a conversational mode.” (2007:8).

<sup>205</sup> See **Mahā,parinibbāna S** (D 16,2.25.3 + 5.27.3) + SD 9 (9.2.0).

<sup>206</sup> *Oxford Dictionary of Buddhism*, 2003, sv date of the Buddha.

The Buddha story highlights key notions and experiences of those who perpetuate his story, reflecting their needs and fears, such as his death.<sup>207</sup> Finally, the story serves “as a reaffirmation of commonly held values of the group to whose tradition it belongs.” Believers tend to see in the Buddha story their cultural values, or project into the story what they see as being desirable for themselves personally.<sup>208</sup> In a significant way, this is the Buddha that is our psyche, a human “**common unconscious**” [9.1.4.4].

9.1.2.5 The legendary nature of the buddha stories are valuable in their own way, by showing the timelessness of the Dharma. Even if the stories are not historical, they are not “untrue” in an existential sense. They clearly reflect truths and realities that characterize any kind of sentient existence. In other words, they are teachings of the Buddha put into stories, very much like fictional movies of today (such as Star Trek or Star Wars).

While we read such stories or watch movie versions of them, we suspend our views and judgement for the moment, and let the timeless stories of the quest for good and awakening fill us with joy and awe, that is, uplift us, or, at least, entertain us. As we become more familiar with such stories, we see them in the bigger context of the life of the historical Buddha and his teachings, and begin to tease out the significance of the spirituality that underpins such legends and stories.

In other words, we are able to connect with the story, at least in part, as reflecting some Buddhist themes. We might even use some such aspects of such stories to explain or illustrate Buddhist teachings. We might, for example, see the “force” in the Star Wars series as an allusion to our latent tendencies (*anusaya*), if it is bad, or as our capacity for good in karmic terms.<sup>209</sup> Essentially, this may be said to be a didactic approach to stories.

9.1.2.6 Much of the accounts of the 7 buddhas can be regarded as “**legends**” for at least two reasons. Firstly, because of their fabulous nature (such as very long lives and huge numbers of disciples). Secondly, their stories cannot be verified as historical events, since they belong to the very distant past. However, there is a certain coherence within all these stories, and they serve mainly a didactic means for a better understanding of the Buddha’s life and, by extension, of the Buddha’s teachings.

If the didactic element is stressed, such stories—such as those of the 7 buddhas—will then be regarded as **myths** [9.1.3], as they embody a thread of instruction and spirituality, peculiar to the Buddha’s teaching. Although a legend may have psychological elements or motifs, Buddhist myths invariably have a psychological dimension, which is, in fact, its most vital quality.<sup>210</sup> [11]

### 9.1.3 The nature of myth

9.1.3.1 The term **mythology** can refer either to the *study* of myths or to a *body* of myths, especially of a culture or religion.<sup>211</sup> The term can, however, be used broadly, such as in “world mythology,” or as comparative mythology, which is the study of connections and differences amongst myths from different cultures, whereas Greek mythology is the body of myths from ancient Greece and **early Buddhist mythology** is collection and study of Indian Buddhist myths of the Buddha’s time to say five after-centuries.

In **folkloristics** (the study of folklore), a *myth* is defined as a sacred narrative explaining origins of things and how the world and mankind came to be in their present form,<sup>212</sup> and how taboos, customs, and institutions were established.<sup>213</sup> Scholars in other fields tend to use the term “myth” in different ways.<sup>214</sup> A

<sup>207</sup> On a psychological analysis of the Buddha’s death, see **Myth in Buddhism**, SD 36.1 (7.2-3). See also Reflection, “Buddhas die if we worship them,” R200, 2011.

<sup>208</sup> This last aspect includes magical and apotropaic (good fortune) roles of their notion of the Buddha.

<sup>209</sup> We could, of course, relate the good side of the “force” to the “awakening heart” (*bodhi, citta*), out potential for awakening. However, such an idea is foreign to early Buddhism, and would be difficult to reconcile it with the Buddha’s teachings.

<sup>210</sup> For a legendary life of the Buddha, further see SD 36.2 (1.2). For the same in Sanskrit tradition, see Dayal 1932:292-317 (ch VII).

<sup>211</sup> See Ency Brit 15<sup>th</sup> ed Micro: myth and mythology; Macro 12:793 (Kees W Bolle).

<sup>212</sup> Alan Dundes, editorial intro to Foley, *The Theory of Oral Composition*, 1988:1, 45, 147.

<sup>213</sup> Eliade, *Myth and Reality*, 1963:6; Bascom, “The forms of folklore,” 1984:9.

<sup>214</sup> Dundes, “Madness in method,” 1996:147; Doty, *Myth: A handbook*, 2004:11 f; Segal, *Myth: A very short introduction*, 2004:5.

broad but useful sense of mythology is that given by the OED, that is, “A body of myths, esp that relating to a particular person, or belonging to the religious literature or tradition of a country or people.” By this definition, mythology can be secular or cultural (like Greek mythology) or religious (as in Buddhist mythology).<sup>215</sup>

9.1.3.2 Mythology is a key tool of instruction that employs *implicit* teachings<sup>216</sup> to convey the timeless and liberating truth. **Myths** are stories or aspects of mythology that represent, often symbolically, key personal experiences or visions of a path out of our human predicament, or that present a vital universal truth, in ways appreciable by the masses, so that it is more widely understood, and works to benefit a greater number, even society itself and the world as a whole.

**The Mahā’padāna Sutta** (D 14), for example, presents the stories of the 7 buddhas (or, more exactly, the past 6 buddhas) in a mythical narrative to show the interconnection of all the buddhas, past and present, and, we may add, the future, too. The buddha, then, is not any kind of divine agency, but merely an exemplar and presenter of the Dharma when the time is right.<sup>217</sup> The mythic theme here is that of the eternal, timeless Dharma, and with the Buddha, that Dharma is experienced in our own time and being.<sup>218</sup>

**The Aggañña Sutta** (D 27), although ostentatiously a Buddhist creation myth, has an underpinning of the pervasive Dhamma, whose effect on the world is presented on two levels: the physical world (the evolution, or better, re-evolution, of the universe and our world) and the world of beings, or society itself—related with subtle humour and play on Vinaya themes. The Sutta is a parody of social origins and social classes—with the class-minded brahmins bearing the brunt of the irony—that humans arise as equals but are differentiated only by their work and capabilities. What ultimately distinguishes an individual, freeing him from all this, is his spiritual awakening.<sup>219</sup>

9.1.3.3 **Legends and myths** share one common characteristic: they are both stories that need not be historical. However, while a legend serves to inform us as members of a religious community [9.1.2], a myth usually teaches us some moral or value, so that we live meaningful and purposeful lives in such a community. This is the way we should view legends and myths of the Buddha, depending on their *function*. This also means that the same story, say, that of the 4 signs, may be a *legend*, if it serves to merely tell us what happened to the Bodhisattva, or it may be a *myth*, if it teaches us about the nature of the 3 universal realities of decay, disease and death, as well as the best way out.<sup>220</sup>

Form	Based on	Time	Place	Attitude	Key characters
Legend	History	Recent past	This world	Sacred	Humans
Myth	Reality	Remote past	A different world	Sacred or secular	Non-humans

**Table 9.1.3. Legend and myth in early Buddhism**<sup>221</sup>

We can summarize the key points that differentiate legend and myth, especially in the early Buddhist context. **The Buddha legend** is rooted in history—the Buddha arises among humans (in our own world — in the recent past, that is, within our memory. **The Buddha myth**—with its fabulous features (such as

<sup>215</sup> OED: mythology (3). See also Kees W Bolle, “Myth and mythology,” Ency Brit 15<sup>th</sup> ed, 12:794; G S Kirk, “On defining myths,” in Dundes, *Sacred Narratives*, 1984:57.

<sup>216</sup> On implicit and explicit teachings, see **Neyyāttha Nīt’attha S** (A 2.3.5+6), SD 2.6b.

<sup>217</sup> Even if the Buddha does not arise, the Dharma or nature of things (the 3 characteristics) remains so, but it is the Buddha who is able to fully and effectively teach it for our benefit: see **Dhamma Niyāma S** (A 3.1.34), SD 26.8; as dependent arising, **Jāti Paccaya S** (S 12.20), SD 39.5; see also SD 5.16 (4.3).

<sup>218</sup> D 14 (SD 49.8).

<sup>219</sup> D 27 (SD 2.19).

<sup>220</sup> On the mythical buddha, see **The Buddha as myth**, SD 36.2 esp (1.3).

<sup>221</sup> Cf William Bascom, “The forms of folklore: Prose narratives,” in Alan Dundes, *Sacred Narratives*, 1984:9+11, Bascom’s comparative tables of myth, legend and folklore: Tables 1+2.

astronomical numbers) and miraculous events—is a dramatization of the realities of a different world of the remote past. The myth of the Aggañña Sutta [9.1.3.2], for example, is mostly *secular*, but the myth of the 7 buddhas, such as related in **the Mahā’padāna Sutta** [9.1.3.2] is sacred. In both Suttas (as in numerous other suttas), gods and other non-humans often play instructive roles: despite their divinity or powers, they are regarded as utterly *secular*, although they may sometimes play sacred roles, such as Brahmā [14] inviting the Buddha to teach [§3.3]. Otherwise, they, too, like us, are caught in samsara.<sup>222</sup>

9.1.3.4 Although a *legend* may have **psychological** elements or motifs, Buddhist *myths* invariably have a psychological dimension, which is, in fact, its most vital quality. The Buddha legend is unified in presenting his struggle as a human, and even though he resorts of human teachers and the ritual mortification of the religious of his day, it is through his own effort that he gains full self-awakening (*sammā, sam-bodhi*). In short, his story is an epic of mental struggle and liberation.

The Buddha legend dramatically records the mental struggles and spiritual evolution of an everyman, reminding us of our struggle to be a true and free individual. The Buddha myth similarly presents that same struggle and spiritual evolution, but on a cosmic scale—such as the 7 buddhas and their growing numbers—that spans all the universe and all times. Myth then brings the Buddha story out of human *clock* time, limited to a single lifespan, into *cosmic* time—as long as there is life and intelligence, there is the potential for the arising of a buddha.

While biological evolution is the learning progress of species, spiritual evolution continues that growing process on a mental and deeper level so that we evolve into true individuals, classless and free. The Buddha, then, is the natural end-product of the whole of human evolution, from the animal into man into god and beyond.

9.1.3.5 An awakened being—whether a buddha or an arhat—essentially looks just like any other human, except the awakening being is bodily and mentally cultivated, so that his conduct is always beneficial to others, even beyond his own time. While he lives, he is an active member of the cosmic community of beings, benefitting all those who are able to come into contact with him.

The Buddha appears just like any other human being so that everyone has easy access to him. Every day of the Buddha’s life—indeed, almost every action that he does, through body, speech and mind—is of some benefit to us. When the Buddha makes an effort to have his acts and teachings recorded, especially through teaching his immediate disciples, then we have spiritual **literature** that will perpetuate his teaching, benefiting even more beings, even beyond his own time and place. It is this aspect of the Buddha that we will now turn to.

#### **9.1.4 The Buddha biography as literature**

9.1.4.1 While illiterate tribes have their folklore, handed down orally from elders to generations of tribal members, every nations has her **literature** as a distinct feature of their national culture. Religions, too, have their own literature—written accounts of their history, stories, teachings and practices—which can be shared by a number of nations or even globally in our own times.

Literature literally means “what is written down,” but a more practical and inclusive definition would be “whatever is recorded and transmitted, even orally” by a nation or an individual. In pre-literate times, or where education is limited to a special class or group of people, literature tends to be presented by authoritative persons, such as sages, priests and teachers, or more popularly, by bards and minstrels, often peripatetic performers telling and retelling stories to a mostly illiterate public.

9.1.4.2 The Buddha’s teachings as **literature** is a rich mine of teachings, stories, imageries and literary devices, which can be read or discussed for its human, historical, social, philosophical, religious, technical, or simply entertaining values. Buddhist literature as a whole is known as **the Buddha word** (*buddha, vacana*), which can also mean “authentic early teaching” or the “early Buddhist canon.”<sup>223</sup>

<sup>222</sup> For a legendary life of the Buddha, further see SD 36.2 (1.2); see also **Myth in Buddhism**, SD 36.1. For the Buddha story in the Sanskrit tradition, see Dayal 1932:292-317 (ch VII).

<sup>223</sup> On Buddhism as literature, see *Macmillan Ency of Religion*, 2005, sv Buddhist books and texts. See also *Routledge Ency of Buddhism*, 2007:195-205, Canons and literature.



The Buddha word is called **the Dharma-Vinaya** to highlight its two basic components, that is, the **Dharma** or “teachings” (mostly the suttas or “threads of teachings”) of the Buddha and the early arhats, and the **Vinaya**, that is, the monastic code (*pātimokkha*) and the monastic rules and their legal aspects. After the Buddha’s passing, beginning around 300 BCE,<sup>224</sup> Buddhist scholastics compiled the Abhidhamma, a sectarian<sup>225</sup> technical analyses of the teachings to systematize the spontaneous and person-centred early teachings.<sup>226</sup> In due course, we get what is called the **Tipiṭaka** (the “three baskets”), that is, the Vinaya Piṭaka, the Sutta Piṭaka and the Abhidhamma Piṭaka.

9.1.4.3 The broadest classification of early Buddhist literature is according to **genre** or “limbs” (*aṅga*),<sup>227</sup> of which there are nine, that is, “the nine-factored teaching of the Teacher” or “the 9 limbs of the Teacher’s teaching” (*nav’aṅga satthu,sāsana*). The earliest of these early Buddhist genres was probably the discourses (*sutta*) and the recitations (*geyya*, containing both prose and verse), both mentioned with *veyyākaraṇa* (but here probably simply meaning an act of “exposition” of the first two), in the **Mahā Suññata Sutta** (M 122).<sup>228</sup>

By the second period of the Buddha’s ministry,<sup>229</sup> when the teachings had been expounded in various ways to various kinds of audiences, we have “the 9 limbs of the Teacher’s teaching” or “the Teacher’s 9-factored teaching” (*nav’aṅga satthu.sāsana*), comprising of

- (1) *sutta* (discourses, the Sutta Nipāta prose section, the Niddesa, the Vinaya, the Vibhaṅga and texts with “Sutta” in their titles);
- (2) *geyyā* (recitations, discourses with prose and verse);
- (3) *veyya,karaṇa* (prose-exposition, sometimes, in later works, referring to the Abhidhamma);
- (4) *gāthā* (stanzas, such as the Dhammapada, the Thera,gāthā, the Therī,gāthā, the Sutta Nipāta verses);
- (5) *udāna* (inspired utterances, that is, the Udāna);
- (6) *iti,vuttaka* (Thus-said discourses, that is, the Iti,vuttaka);
- (7) *jātaka* (birth-stories, that is, the Jātaka);
- (8) *abbhūta,dhamma* (marvellous accounts);
- (9) *vedalla* (catechetical suttas, such as the Cūḷa Vedalla Sutta, the Mahā Vedalla Sutta, the Sammā Diṭṭhi Sutta, the Sakka,pañha Sutta, the Saṅkhāra,bhājanīya Sutta, the Mahā Puṇṇama Sutta).

(V 3:8; M 1:133; A 2:5, 3:86)<sup>230</sup>

Although this list of 9 limbs is found in the suttas,<sup>231</sup> it should, however, be noted that the term *nav’aṅga satthu,sāsana* itself is not found in the 4 Nikāyas, but only in the very late canonical works: the Apadāna, the Buddha,vaṁsa, the Milinda,pañhā and the Commentaries.<sup>232</sup>

9.1.4.4 Literature essentially records the common experiences and visions of the nation from the ancient past, as far back as their memories or imaginations stretch. Literature is valuable in recording les-

<sup>224</sup> Or, between 200 BCE and 200 CE, according to Frauwallner (1971b:106): see Hinüber, *A Handbook of Pāli Literature*, 1996:64-75 (II.3).

<sup>225</sup> Each of the early sectarian schools had its own Abhidhamma canon. The extant Abhidharma canons are those of the Theravāda and the Sarvāstivāda (but the school itself has died out). See *Routledge Ency of Buddhism*, 2007:3-6 *Abhidharma schools*.

<sup>226</sup> On the Abhidhamma as literature, see Norman, *Pāli Literature*, 1983b:96-107 (part 4)

<sup>227</sup> On Buddhist genres, see SD 26.11 (3.2).

<sup>228</sup> M 122,20/3:115 (SD 11.4). See SD 26.11 (3.2.1.3). See Analayo 2011:696-699 (ad M 3:115) & 2009i; also Sujato 2005:62.

<sup>229</sup> On the 2 periods of the Buddha’s ministry, see SD 40a.1 (1.3).

<sup>230</sup> See Norman, *Pāli Literature*, 1983b:15-17.

<sup>231</sup> Eg **Alagaddûpama S** (M 22.10/1:133,24-25), SD 3.13.

<sup>232</sup> The term *nav’aṅga,satthu,sāsana* is, of course, late, often mentioned (without the details) in Miln 21; mostly as a split cpd, *navāṅga satthu sāsana*: Miln 372; **Buddha,vaṁsa** (B 4.16\*/30, 12.16\*/54, 13.18\*/57, 19.12\*/74), **Apadāna** (Ap 6.97\*/1:44, 6.107\*/1:45) and Comys (Miln 21; Nm 1:10; MA 2:252; AA 1:115, 3:28, 170; KhpA 11\*, 14, 132 = SnA 1:300; ThaA 2:101\* ×2; ApA 287; BA 138, 151, 200, 205, 234; PugA 225,13+19, 245,26).



sons learned about the nature of the world we inhabit, our human experiences, social realities, political changes and cultural visions.

In an important sense, literature records or reflects the common thoughts and emotions of its society in some kind of narrative. Part of such a record will be the habitual psychological reactions of a community, forming what we might call a “**common unconscious**.”<sup>233</sup> Although the themes of such an unconscious are universal—experiences and responses rooted in love and lust, hate and violence, fear and desperation, delusion and ignorance—the local expressions are often unique to the community. Such characteristics, in fact, define a culture, or set it aside from others.

9.1.4.5 **The long-term value of a Buddhist literature** is its educating influence, freeing the community from the violence of religious anarchy and the stagnation of spiritual anomie.<sup>234</sup> Such a concern can be teased out of observation by **Ralph Flores**, of Buddhism in the west, in his book, *Buddhist Scriptures as Literature*,

What lingers on, though, in the reception of Buddhism in the West, is a tradition—from at least 1820 until recent times—of ignoring or misconstruing Buddhist scriptures, and using them as launching pad to project common fears, hopes, and fantasies. Desire, in reading, wanders, and is far from direct sight or insight. For many popular Western teachers today, a detailed study of the texts is frequently deemed unnecessary: close readings may be dispensed with, in favor of vague anecdotes about “what the Buddha says somewhere” or what he or his disciples are said to have done. Today, Buddhist teachings, despite a plethora of fine translations and exegeses, are still often read casually or ritualistically, or discussed in ways soothing to recent mindsets. (2008:2)

Flores calls such a state of affairs “the fiction of reading.” We put together bits and pieces of what we see or like of Buddhism, and fill in the gaps and missing pieces, fabricating a pastiche that can at best be described as a “vague Buddhism.”<sup>235</sup> We take this fictional reading of Buddhism as the whole truth of; we give it to others, too, wanting them to take it as a plain fact. This is the basis for more fictions to arise, and full and shaper our world.

9.1.4.6 **Buddhist anarchy** arises from the disregard, even disrespect, for the suttas and related teachings that help us have a clear vision of the purpose and practice of the Buddha’s teaching. **Buddhist anomie** arises as a result of such anarchy, so that we are only Buddhist in name, but our minds are leashed to the dominant religion and culture of the day. In an impoverished society, this anomie would be filled by a brahminized Buddhism,<sup>236</sup> or a materialistic or superstitious religion, ruttin in rituals and magic working towards immediate goals, without proper understand of conditionality of problems and their solutions

In a more affluent Buddhist community, anomic Buddhism tends to be used by a privileged class or to promote a charismatic guru figure to dominate, even control, others into submission to a single locale of control, for the promotion of a private or parochial agenda, even at the cost of basic Buddhist values. In other words, in such a scenario, Buddhism is defined and disseminated by an affluent class for its own benefits. Such a situation would invariably and insidiously stunt, even kill, Buddhism for that generation.

9.1.4.7 One of the most practical advantages of studying the suttas, or Buddhism, as literature, is that it allows us a generous latitude to see the Buddha’s teachings as a holistic whole. Literature encourages us

<sup>233</sup> Although this term may have some interesting overlaps with western psychological notions, such as that of Jung’s “collective unconscious,” the term here is used in a strictly Buddhist sense, and broadly refers to the workings of the latent tendencies (*anusaya*) on a social level. See SD 17.8b.

<sup>234</sup> “Anomic” is the adj of “anomie” (from Gk *a-nom-os*, “lawless”), an important term used by early sociologists (esp E Durkheim in *Suicide*, 1897) to describe depersonalising changes brought about by the Industrial Revolution, by a pervasive social situation where there are no norms or they are disregarded, that is, there is a breakdown of social norms, rules and restraints, conducing to meaninglessness and purposelessness in life, to the extent of causing suicides. See “anomie”: *A Critical Dictionary of Sociology* (Eng tr), 2<sup>nd</sup> ed, 1989; *Macmillan Ency of Sociology*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed, 2000; *Cambridge Dictionary of Sociology*, 2006; *Penguin Dictionary of Sociology*, 5th ed, 2006

<sup>235</sup> On “vague Buddhism,” further see SD 4.6 (1)..

<sup>236</sup> Ie a sacerdotal (priest-centred) religion ridden with blind faith and rituals.

with a great curiosity to know and to question what we know, and investigate what we do not know. This is like our discovering a great vault of ancient treasures and artifacts. We need to examine and evaluate whatever is before us. In time, we put together our findings so that we have a better understanding of the value and purpose of such a find.

Literature allows literary licence and human imagination. When the fabulous and the miraculous are examined in this light, we begin to better understand the social realities and the spirituality of their authors—so we also begin to understand their purpose in compiling and transmitting such teachings or traditions.

9.1.4.8 Another advantage of reading Buddhist suttas or scriptures as literature is that we need not be religious to do so. We can comfortably approach the suttas, even meditation, in a **non-religious way**, that is, without any vows or rituals, free from dogmas, but simply to test the truth of the teachings, and to enjoy their beauty.

Here, **beauty** refers to the ease with which we can connect to the teaching: it touches our hearts: that's the *beauty* of the suttas. The most common method the Buddha uses here is the progressive teaching [§3.15; 7.3], where the Buddha begins with teachings that the listener can easily connect with, and when his mind is calm and the heart open, the Buddha goes on to teach his specialty, that is, the 4 noble truths.

Another way the Buddha readies the listener for Dharma is to use parables, as shown in **the Danta,-bhūmi Sutta** (M 125), where the Buddha teaches the novice Aciravata. Such a parable will delight the listener so that he has faith, “and filled with faith, he would have his faith in you.”<sup>237</sup> This is the beauty that is in the Dharma, and when we see that beauty, we follow our faith to understand the truth. This is called “wise faith” (*avecca-p,pasāda*).<sup>238</sup>

9.1.4.9 Buddhist literature records not only our religious past, but also our humanity, spirituality and wisdom. A community without such a literature, is a community without a heart, blindly following one another in a crowd of meaningless activities, repeating old bad habits and harmful mistakes. Such a community pushes away intelligent seekers and creative geniuses, and attracts and holds only the worldly and myopic, where the blind lead the blind.

Buddhism is not about the right crowd, and membership in such a crowd. It is about self-effort in working for self-transformation, just as the Buddha himself has done—going on a quest for awakening by himself, and awakening by himself. Buddhism, in other words, is not about affiliation, but about attitude: only we can really change ourselves for the better (Dh 160, 380).<sup>239</sup>

Buddhist literature, properly taught and lived, roots us in our rich legacy, empowering our humanity, encouraging our individuality and spirituality, blessing us with liberating wisdom. Then, we naturally attract a community of clear heads and open hearts, where our actions, whether individual or communal, work to inspire and awake the intelligent seekers, and arouse the creative genius in us. This Buddhist renaissance would attract the spiritually inclined and awaken the masses insignificant ways.

## 9.2 THE MYTH OF THE “GREAT MAN”

### 9.2.1 The great man

9.2.1.1 An interesting aspect of the Buddha story deals with the possibility of his *not* being a buddha, a fully self-awakened being. As soon as a buddha—or technically, a bodhisattva (P *bodhi,satta*), a being bound for awakening, is born, he is predicted to have only two possible destinies: “For, the great man who is endowed in this way, there are **only two destinies**, no other” [§1.33.4], that is, if he remains a secular person, he becomes a universal monarch (like Alexander the Great), or if he leaves home to live as a spiritual renunciant, he becomes the fully self-awakened one.

9.2.1.2 The phrase “endowed in this way” above refers to the bodhisattva’s possessing of the 32 marks of the great man. In other words, the bodhisattva always arises as a “**great man**” (*mahā,purisa*) in his last

<sup>237</sup> M 125,11 (SD 46.3).

<sup>238</sup> On wise faith (*avecca-p,pasāda*), see **Pañca Vera Bhaya S 1** (S 12.41), SD 3.3(4.2). On **beauty and truth**, see SD 40a.1 (8.1.2); as aesthetics, see SD 46.5 (2.4.2); right livelihood, see SD 37.8 (2.3). See also Reflection, “No views frees,” R255.

<sup>239</sup> See Reflection R247, “Change please!” 2012.

life. The suttas have stories of such “great men” who become universal monarchs (*cakka,vatti*), who rule the entire civilized world, or most of it.

9.2.1.3 While a buddha’s teaching steadies an individual by spiritual self-conquest, a **wheel-turning king** [a universal monarch] is “a just, true king [Dharma-rajah], conqueror of the 4 quarters, whose country is blessed with stability” [§1.33.5]. He is a conqueror of the external world, the realm of space and time, and his presence stabilizes that world. In short, he is an enlightened ruler, whose realms prosper in every good way.

9.2.1.4 The great man as a world monarch is the theme of **the Cakka,vatti Siha,nāda Sutta** (D 26).<sup>240</sup> The Sutta is unique in relating how not one, but two, “great men” arising in the world. After relating the reigns of eight universal monarchs, the narrator mentions the most prominent of them, that is, the world monarch, **Saṅkha**, during whose time (when the human life-span was 80,000 years, as in the case in the Vipassī story), the future Buddha will arise. This is the only place in the Pali canon where the future Buddha is mentioned.<sup>241</sup>

It is possible that this unique Sutta was compiled before the myth of the “two destinies” arose in early Buddhist literature. After this, the universal king is never again mentioned as appearing with the Buddha, as they are both manifestation of the *one and only* “great man” (*mahā purisa*) in his own time. The idea works best when only one great man arises in the world, and that unique being goes on to become either the wheel-turner [§1.33.5] or the Buddha [§1.33.7].

### 9.2.2 Alexander as the “great man”

9.2.2.1 The conception of **the great man** (*mahā,purisa*) is not often mentioned in the suttas. It is found mostly in the Dīgha Nikāya—the **Ambaṭṭha Sutta** (D 3), **the Mahā’padāna Sutta** (D 14), **the Cakka,-vatti Siha,nāda Sutta** (D 26), **the Lakkhaṇa Sutta** (D 30)—and in the Majjhima, that is, **the Brahm’āyu Sutta** (M 91), **the Sela Sutta** (M 92 = Sn 3.7), and **the Assalāyana Sutta** (M 93).<sup>242</sup> These are the few suttas that mention the universal monarch in some detail. There are, however, a few short suttas that mention the “great man,” but in a non-technical sense, simply referring to a true practitioner.<sup>243</sup>

9.2.2.2 Although the qualification of knowing “the great man’s marks” is part of stock phrase describing the qualities of a learned brahmin, scholars have been unable to locate any such reference in the Vedas, the Upanishads or any other brahminical literature of the early Buddhist or pre-Buddhist times. In other words, this is clearly a Buddhist attribution, which may have been based on a prevalent account which fell out of vogue after the Buddha’s time.

9.2.2.3 The brahmins could have originally had some tradition of the great man, just as the early Buddhists had, but with its popularity with the Buddhists, and its close association with the Buddha, the tradition was rejected and erased by the brahmins from their scriptures. We see a similar development in the worship of **Brahmā**, who is one of the brahminical trinity (Skt *trimūrti*) of Brahmā (the creator), Viṣṇu (the preserver), and Śiva (the destroyer).<sup>244</sup> With the popularity of Brahmā with the early Buddhists, and his “conversion” to Buddhism, he fell out of favour with the followers of Brahminism, and later, Hinduism.<sup>245</sup> [14]

<sup>240</sup> D 26,23-24 (SD 36.10).

<sup>241</sup> D 26,25-26 (SD 36.10).

<sup>242</sup> **The great man**: D 3 (SD 21.3), D 14 (SD 49.8), D 26 (SD 36.10), D 30 (SD 36.9); M 91 (SD 63.8), M 92 = Sn 3.7 (SD 45.7a), M 93 (SD 40a.2): for details, see below under “The 32 marks.”

<sup>243</sup> Eg **Pinḍapāṭa Parisuddhi S** (M 151,2/3:294), SD 69.1; **Mahā,purisa S** (S 47.11/5:158), SD 19,6; (**Mahā,purisa**) **Vassākāra S** (A 4.35/2:35), SD 82.9.

<sup>244</sup> See Freda Matchett, “The Purāṇas,” in Gavin Flood (ed), *The Blackwell Companion to Hinduism*, 2003:139. For the Trimūrti system, see Heinrich Zimmer, *Myths and Symbols in Indian Art and Civilization*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ Press, 1972:124. The Purāṇas were sacred histories of the Hindus compiled between 300-1200 CE, ie, well after the Buddha’s time.

<sup>245</sup> Brahmā never attained the status of a supreme deity like Siva or Vishnu. See Nicholas Sutton *Religious Doctrines in the Mahābhārata*, 2000:182; Brian Morris, *Religion and Anthropology: A Critical Introduction*, 2005:123. Temple dedicated to Brahmā in India are rare: the best known is the Brahmā Temple (Jagatpita Brahma Mandir) in Pushkar, Rajasthan.

9.2.2.4 It is very likely that the myth arose in connection with the campaigns and conquests of **Alexander the Great** (356-323 BCE). The Greek historian, Herodotus (c484-425 BCE), in his *Histories* (7.65), records Indian soldiers serving in Alexander's army.<sup>246</sup> They must have returned to India with fabulous stories of the great conqueror. Such stories would have fascinated the learned and religious of the times, including the Buddhist literati, the monks who were teachers and transmitters of the sutta tradition.

9.2.2.5 Alexander and his armies reached the northwestern borders of India in 326 BCE. It is said that king Porus or Poros (from the Greek Πῶρος, *Pōros*) was a king of the Pauravas, whose territory covered the region between the Hydaspes (Jhelum) and Acesines (Chenab) rivers in what is now Punjab. Porus bravely fought Alexander in the battle of the Hydaspes in 326 BCE and western historians generally believe that Porus was defeated. Alexander was, however, impressed by his Porus's courage. He not only reinstated Porus as a satrap (governor) of his own kingdom, but also over the lands to the north up to the Hyphasis (Beas).<sup>247</sup>

9.2.2.6 Alexander had the great foresight and latitude of respect for local cultures wherever he went. The effect of his campaigns was to effectively unify the ancient civilized world from Greece, across southern Asia to India. For the first time, a sense of globalism of an unprecedented scale arose in our consciousness. This was just about a century after the Buddha and just before the rise of Asoka (r 274-232 BCE) who created India's largest empire.

9.2.2.7 If any ancient historical figure is worthy of the title of the "great man" as envisioned in the suttas, it would clearly have been Alexander. He perfectly fits the model of a vigorous and enlightened king who was a world-conqueror. Even while he lived, he was described as a man of remarkable physical features. However, his body also displayed a few physical oddities which included a spinal deformity. Such special feature in such a powerful, even godly, figure, only set him apart from others. It is possible that such characteristics of Alexander were the historical basis for the Buddhist myth of the 32 marks<sup>248</sup> [9.3].

### 9.3 THE 32 MARKS OF THE GREAT MAN

9.3.1 We have noted how Alexander the Great could have been the origin for the myth of the 32 marks [9.2.2.4]. Alexander was clearly also the model for the universal king (*cakka,vatti*, "wheel-turner").<sup>249</sup> This notion is further supported by the fact that the myth of the universal king is only mentioned in the latter suttas and more often in the Commentaries and later works.

Furthermore, the universal king is said to be endowed with the 32 marks of the great man (*mahā.purisa,lakkhaṇa*).<sup>250</sup> A stock passage on the 32 marks lists a knowledge of them as part of a learned brahmin's distinction, thus:

He was a master of the Three Vedas, along with their invocations and rituals, phonology and etymology, and the Iti,hāsa Purāṇas<sup>251</sup> as the fifth; learned in the vedic padas,<sup>252</sup> grammarian, and well versed in the Lokāyata [nature-lore] and the great man's marks. (M 92 = Sn 3.7), SD 45.7a<sup>253</sup>

<sup>246</sup> On Indian soldiers in Alexander's army, see SD 40a.2 (3.4.2.2).

<sup>247</sup> Arrian, *The Anabasis of Alexander*, 5.9-19; P H L Eggermont, *Alexander's Campaigns in Southern Punjab*, 1993; Ian G Spence, *Historical Dictionary of Ancient Greek Warfare*, Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2002:xl. See also Arrian, tr M Hammond, intro & nn J Atkinson, *Alexander the Great: The Anabasis and the Indica*, Oxford: Oxford Univ Press, 2013. [The battle of Hydaspes](#) (animation). [Hydaspes today](#).

<sup>248</sup> On Alexander and the origins of the 32 marks, see SD 36.9 (4). On Greek influence of Buddhism, see Halkias 2014.

<sup>249</sup> On the universal monarch's qualities, see SD 36.10 (2.1.1.2).

<sup>250</sup> The 32 marks: D 3,1.5.2/1:88 f (SD 21.3), D 14,1.33.4/2:16 (SD 49.8), D 26,2/3:59 (only the "7 jewels" mentioned) (SD 36.10), most detailed account: D 30,1.1.2-2.31/3:3:143-178 (SD 36.9); M 91,2/2:131 (SD 63.8), M 92,-5.2/2:105 = Sn 3.7 (SD 45.7a), M 93,3/2:147 (SD 40a.2). See also *Buddhānussati*, SD 15.7(4.1) n.

<sup>251</sup> Iti,hāsa Purāṇas are the oral tradition of brahminical legends of kings and sages.

<sup>252</sup> This refers to the *pada* (or literal, word for word) method of reciting (or writing) Veda sentences.

<sup>253</sup> This is the Majjhima "master of the Three Vedas pericope": for details, see *Sela S* (M 92,5.2 n), SD 45.7a. For the Dīgha "mantra-reciter pericope," see *Soṇa,daṇḍa S* (D 4,5(3) n), SD 30.5.



The prophecy of the two destinies of the Bodhisattva, always mentioned alongside the possession of the 32 marks, is found in **the Ambaṭṭha Sutta** (D 3), **the Mahā’padāna Sutta** (D 14), **the Cakka,vatti Sīha,nāda Sutta** (D 26), **the Lakkhaṇa Sutta** (D 30)—and in the Majjhima, that is, **the Brahm’āyu Sutta** (M 91).<sup>254</sup> Although the myths of the great man, his 32 marks, and the prophecy of his destiny are late features and chapters in the early Buddhist scriptures, they attest to the remarkable propensity for the ancient Buddhist monastics to ensure that the Buddha teachings were relevant to their times. The adaptation of these myths into Buddhist literature presents some of the most interesting and inspiring aspect of early Buddhist literature.

## 10 Lives of the buddhas

### 10.1 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE “7 BUDDHAS” DOCTRINE

#### 10.1.1 The buddha as the ideal of human awakening

10.1.1.1 We have already noted how the doctrine of the 7 buddhas probably originated [8.1.6]. Here, we will examine the spiritual significance of the teaching on the 7 buddhas.

The Buddha is **the ideal of human awakening**. If biological evolution is the development of the species through the survival of the fittest and natural selection, then spiritual evolution is the cultivation of the true individual, whose body and its faculties are in the full service of the mind, bringing about human awakening. Biological evolution can only bring us so far in physical and social growth; spiritual evolution starts and continue on a mental, emotional and spiritual dimensions.

While biological evolution provides us with the opportunities for survival in a worldly crowd, spiritual evolution raises us out of that crowd to become our true self. The first human to emerge as a fully free and true individual from that crowd within an epoch is a buddha. Hence, **the self-awakened buddha** is “the best of the two-legged” (S 1.14).<sup>255</sup> In this sense, the Buddha is the best of all beings, as stated in **the (Agga) Tathāgata Sutta** (S 45.139).<sup>256</sup>

10.1.1.2 **A buddha**—a fully self-awakened one—then, is the rare fruit from the tree of awakening, a tree that bears its only fruit in a season (but sometimes none). But it can bear many fruits over many seasons. The buddha is a unique being, in the sense that he is “the best,” the most evolved, of such fully self-liberated humans. So, too, is he unique as the teacher:

“For, the Blessed One is the one who gives rise to the unarisen path, who brings forth the path not yet brought forth, who points out the path that is not yet pointed out, the path-finder, the path-knower, the path-expert. But his disciples even now dwell as accomplished followers after him.”  
(M 108,5.3), SD 33.5<sup>257</sup>

A buddha, then, is one, who, having realized true reality and so liberating himself, goes on to teach and point out to others this very same path to awakening (Dh 276). He is neither a prophet of any God nor a divine being, but simply a human being who, through his own efforts, is able to transcend the limitations of his being, so that he is liberated from all states, worldly or divine. Such beings are the buddhas.

<sup>254</sup> The 2 destinies prophecy: D 3,1.5.2 (SD 21.3), D 14,1.33.4 (SD 49.8), D 26,2 (only the “7 jewels” mentioned) (SD 36.10), D 30,1.1.2-1.1.6 (SD 36.9); M 91,5/2:134 (SD 63.8)

<sup>255</sup> *Sambuddho dvi,padam seṭṭho*, S 1.14/27\*/1:6,25. This line is actually the Buddha’s reply to a devata’s declaration that “The kshatriya (warrior noble) is the best of the two-legged” (S 1.14/26\*).

<sup>256</sup> S 45.139/5:41 f (SD 49.17).

<sup>257</sup> *So hi, brāhmaṇa, bhagavā anuppannassa maggassa uppādetā, asaṅgātassa maggassa saṅjanetā, anakkhātassa maggassa akkhātā, maggaññū, magga,vidū, magga,kovido. Maggānugā ca pana etarahi sāvaka viharanti pacchā samannāgatā ti*, M 3:8,12 = S 1:191,1 ≈ 3:66,16 (SA 2:278,5) = S 3:66,15 = Miln 217,10-219,11 = Pm 2:194,19 ≠ Ap 570,5 = Thā 91,33\*. This is the sammāsambuddha pericope: **Gopaka Moggallāna S** (M 108,5.3/3:8), SD 33.5; **Pavāraṇa S** (S 8.7/1:191), SD 80.1; **Sammā,sambuddha S** (S 22.58/3:65 f), SD 63.11. Comy is silent on *pacchā samannāgata*, but Comy on S 22.58 explains it as: “they follow after him (*sam-anugatā*, from *sam-anugacchati*), the Blessed One who has gone before them” (*paṭhama,gatassa bhagavato pacchā samanugatā*, SA 1:277): see also M:H 350 n1.



10.1.1.3 Furthermore, in **the Dhamma Niyāma Sutta** (A 3.134), the Buddha declares that “whether there is the arising of tathagatas [buddhas thus come] or not,” the natural order of things is such that “all formations [conditioned things] are impermanent ... all formations are unsatisfactory ... all things [the principle behind all things] are non-self.”

“A tathagata fully awakens to this truth, realizes it. Having fully awakened to it and realized it, he tells, teaches, proclaims, establishes, reveals, analyses and clarifies that ‘all conditioned things are suffering ... all formations are unsatisfactory ... all things are non-self’.” (A 3.134), SD 26.8<sup>258</sup>

10.1.1.4 Only a buddha is able to clearly and fully declare these truths for the benefit of all beings. In such a state of things, it is natural that there would be numerous buddhas, each arising in his own epoch. For, there is only the need for a single buddha in each universe (or “buddha-field,” *buddha,khetta*), just as there is only one captain to manage and navigate a ship safely to harbour. In fact, **the Bahu Dhātuka Sutta** (M 115) declares that there can be only *one* buddha appearing at a time in the same universe.<sup>259</sup>

10.1.1.5 According to the Mahāpadāna Sutta, the 6 ancient buddhas not only lived a very long time ago, but had very long life-spans, very much longer than ours now. But these times (like all times) are relative, even in themselves—a point we will discuss later [15].

Another interesting point to note is that the Buddha and the suttas accept **the ancient Indian conception of time** as being cyclic. Such a conception does not need any explanation of a first cause or even an end of days. It is the cycle of lives and death, rebirths and redeaths, that are characterized by impermanence and unsatisfactoriness.

We can, however, if we are observant enough, notice the patterns of existence in this cycle or samsara. Those beings who are the best at seeing the true reality underlying samsara, thus freeing themselves from it. They are the buddhas, who then teach us the liberating truth they have discovered. The buddhas, then, provide us with the best way of understanding ourself and the world, living wisely in it, and, when the time is right, simply letting it go for something much higher—spiritual awakening and nirvana.

### **10.1.2 The buddhas as unique beings**

10.1.2.1 The Buddha’s exhortation to us to do the “supreme worship” [17.2.2.4] applies to all the buddhas (past, present and future, here and in other universes). We need not and should not pray to the Buddha: this is clearly the original intention of the Buddha. Praying to the Buddha is treating as an external agency—a god or God—which would be a serious misconception of his full awakening, and bring him down to the level of religious imagination.

10.1.2.2 If we understand and accept the Dharma, then we should understand the true nature of prayer. We envision the Buddha as the ideal of human awakening [17.1.1], and diligently live to emulate his qualities by cultivating our whole being, body, speech and mind. We do not really need to worship the past buddhas or the future buddha (he is not buddha yet, anyway). It’s just like we have only one father in our family, and our love and respect are due to that person. Indeed, when we “go for refuge” to the Buddha, we see him as the ideal of awakening, which includes all other buddhas. In this sense, all buddhas are the same.

When we bow before a buddha symbol, such as an image, a shrine, a stupa or a tree, it is in reflection of the Buddha as the fully self-awakened, the Dharma as the true teaching that liberates us, and the sangha as those true individuals who attained awakening or are on its path, just as we aspire to walk that path. Or, we remind ourself to put the Dharma into practice through body, speech and mind, respectively with each bow.<sup>260</sup>

10.1.2.3 The Buddha is no ordinary being, but the only one in a class all his own, a unique being, the fully self-awakened one, *sub specie aeternitatis*, as evident from **the (Pāda) Doṇa Sutta** (A 4.36).<sup>261</sup> Each

<sup>258</sup> A 3.134/1:286 (SD 26.8). See also **Jāti Paccaya S** (S 12.20) where the same is said of dependent arising (S 12.-10,3.2), SD 39.5.

<sup>259</sup> M 118,14 (SD 29.1a).

<sup>260</sup> On Dharma-centred training, see *Sīla samādhī paññā*, SD 21.6.

<sup>261</sup> A 4.36/2:38 (SD 36.13). On “*sub specie aeternitatis*,” see SD 36.2 (2.1.2). See also SD 48.2 (6.2.2.4).

of the 7 buddhas, by his own full self-awakening, is a unique being, too, in his own epoch. He is like the king or ruler of a country, or the head of state—there is only one of them. When one dies, a new one replaces him or her, who continues with ruling the country.

However, the lives, characteristics and conduct of each of the buddhas may differ from one another [Table 1.0.4]. These differences arise from the human origins of each of these buddhas. They will choose a suitable family and parents; their life-spans vary according to their epoch; they choose their own chief disciples and attendants; and so on. These differences, as such, are merely incidental. Their awakening is the same, so to speak, and it is this awakening that makes each them a unique being wherever he arises.

Buddhas do not always arise in the world; there are epochs without any buddha (Dh 182). However, when a buddha does arise in the world, says **the Suriy’upamā Sutta 2** (S 56.38), “then, there is a manifestation of great light, of great radiance. There is then no blinding darkness, no total darkness. There is a the proclaiming, teaching, defining, establishing, revealing, expounding, analysing and clarifying of the 4 noble truths.”<sup>262</sup> We then only need to diligently make the effort to realize these liberating truths to awaken to true reality and nirvana.<sup>263</sup>

10.1.2.4 **The Pali canon** is the closest record that we have of the historical Buddha and his teaching, which when studied in the light a calm and clear meditative mind, is the best of paths to awakening.<sup>264</sup> Hence, the Buddha is *our ideal of human awakening*, and, the Dharma-Vinaya, as a canon, is *the heart of our spiritual life*—just as the heart is at the centre of our physical and conscious life. We may not be able to see the heart, but we can feel it: so, too, we need to feel the Dharma, to directly experience what the Buddha himself has experienced. The Pali canon, even as it is, is a true and complete record of that experience.

10.1.2.5 It is true that the ordinary Buddhist, especially the laity, in general, may not read the suttas, not even occasionally, or have access to it. Such Buddhist may even practise or be influenced by “popular” Buddhism, or the talks and teachings of socially dominant persons—such as a successful, titled or wealthy lay Buddhist speaker—or imported teachers or the occasional visiting foreign monastic. However, when in the face of major issues (such as some kind of loss) or crises (such as clerical scandals), those seriously concerned with help and healing would need to turn to “what the Buddha teaches” in connection of the matter at hand.

10.1.2.6 No matter what kind of Buddhism or religion is dominating the scene, sooner or later, the observant, the intelligent, the curious, or those who, for any reason, are disillusioned with the dominant religion, would want to turn to the ancient canon of early Buddhism for inspiration and guidance. The early canon is not some auxiliary teaching or afterthought, but the very reason for the existence of Buddhism as *buddha, sāsana*, the Buddha’s dispensation, and, above all, for its quality and authenticity.

Indeed, without the early Buddhist canon, we would basically be sheep to be herded or fish to be netted by those who claim to speak for the Buddha or who have the loudest voice in the madding crowd of the religious market. Indeed, without early Buddhism, there would be no Buddhism worth its name.

## 10.2 CANONICAL ACCOUNTS OF THE BUDDHA STORY

### 10.2.1 The Buddha’s social background

10.2.1.1 **Jonathan S Walters**, in his journal article, “Suttas as History: Four approaches to the *Sermon on the Noble Quest* (Ariyapariyesanasutta)” notes that the sutta “is full of startling silences: here we have no Suddhodana, no Mahāmāyā, no Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī, no Yasodharā and Rāhula, no pleasure palace, no women of the harem, no 4 signs...” (1993:276).

<sup>262</sup> *Atha mahato ālokassa pātubhāvo hoti mahato obhāsassa. N’eva andha, tamam tadā hoti na andha, kāra, timisā. Atha kho catunnam ariya, saccānam ācikkhanā hoti desanā paññāpanā paṭṭhapanā vivaraṇā vibhajānā uttānī, kammaṃ.*

<sup>263</sup> S 56.38/5:442 f (SD 49.16).

<sup>264</sup> Although a few scholars (who are not Buddhist practitioners) may reject this notion—see eg Collins 1990—(their reasons for doing so should be examined), most scholars accept the authenticity and vitality of the early Buddhist canon.

10.2.1.2 The story of Suddhodana as a powerful and wealthy king is very likely a later legend: it is clear from the suttas that the Sakyas were vassals (*anuyuttā*) of king Pasenadi of Kosala (D 27,8/3:83). In **the Pabbajjā Sutta** (Sn 3.1), the young ascetic Siddhattha tells Bimbisāra that the former is a “Kosala-dweller” (*Kosala nīketino*), implying that the Sakyas are a part of Kosala (Sn 422).

This is further confirmed by **the Dhamma,dāyāda Sutta** (M 89), where Pasenadi tells the Buddha, “The Blessed One is a kshatriya and I am a kshatriya; the Blessed One is a Kosalan (*kosalaka*) and I am a Kosalan.”<sup>265</sup> **The Ambaṭṭha Sutta** (D 3), in fact, gives a clear hint of the republican system of the Sakyas followed by a delightful analogy of the quail.<sup>266</sup>

### **10.2.2 Siddhattha’s renunciation**

10.2.2.1 The oldest biography of some length that we have is found in **the Ariya Pariyesanā** (M 26).<sup>267</sup> The Sutta presents the Buddha as giving a social and historical context his awakening. He mentions his pre-renunciation life merely as someone reflective of the facts of worldliness, and one seeking the spiritual life and liberation, that is, the “noble quest” (*ariya pariyesanā*).<sup>268</sup>

10.2.2.2 The Ariya Pariyesanā Sutta account then follows with the Buddha’s well-known brief statement on **the great renunciation**:

while still young, a black-haired young man endowed with the blessing of youth, in the prime of life, though my mother and father wished otherwise and wept with tearful faces, I shaved off my hair and beard, put on the saffron robe, and went forth from the household life into the homeless life.

(D 4,6/1:115 = 5,6/1:131 = M 26,14/1:163 = 36,13/1:240 = 85,11/1:93 = S 1.20,4/1:9), SD 1.11 (2.1)

Here, we have the bare historical account of the Bodhisattva’s renunciation, when he openly leaves home for the recluse’s life, grievously witnessed by his own family. This is the momentous start of the Bodhisattva’s spiritual quest for the meaning and purpose of life that fruits in his full awakening or nirvana.

10.2.2.3 The commentarial life of the Buddha presents a more dramatic and interesting Buddha biography. There is an important reason that it should be “interesting”: it serves as a didactic tool (*pariyāya*), a skillful means (*upāya*), an implicit teaching (*neyy’attha*) for a world that is still thick with defilements. The colourful accounts of the Bodhisattva Siddhattha before his renunciation—the events around the nativity, the childhood stories, the youthful pleasures, the 4 sights—are great world literature, rich in narrative details and drama: it is a religious epic for the masses and mass media.<sup>269</sup> [9.1.4]

Such stories embellish the faith of the believers. In due course, when they are ready, a skillful teacher will then explain the deeper significance and tease out the spirit of these stories, myths [9], and legends [9.1.3], gently raising the ready to the level of more explicit and direct Dharma teachings.

## **10.3 THE BUDDHA IN THE MAHĀ’PADĀNA SUTTA**

### **The 1<sup>st</sup> teaching [§§1.1-1.15]**

#### **10.3.1 Nine sets of teachings**

10.3.1.1 **The Mahā’padāna Sutta** opens with the “**1<sup>st</sup> teaching**,” which mentions the following 9 sets of facts about the 7 buddhas—the 6 past buddhas and the 7<sup>th</sup>, our Buddha Gotama—how long ago they arose [§1.4], their social classes [§1.5], their clans [§1.6], their life-spans [§1.7], their bodhi-trees [§1.8],

<sup>265</sup> M 89,19/2:124 (SD 2.18).

<sup>266</sup> See A K Warder, *Indian Buddhism*, 1970:45.

<sup>267</sup> D 3,1.13 f/1:91 (SD 21.3). See K R Norman 1990:126 f, qu L Schmithausen 1981:207, qu A Bareau. Also Nakamura 2000: 247 f. See SD 1.11 (1).

<sup>268</sup> M 26,5-13 (SD 1.11).

<sup>269</sup> Such epics (where the Buddha is a superhuman hero) are indeed found in the post-Buddha Skt works, especially **Lalita, vistara** (“the Elaborate Sport,” 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> cent CE) and **Buddha, carita** (“The Acts of the Buddha”), of which there are 2 versions: the first by the monk Saṅgharakṣa (1st cent CE) and the second, better known, work by the philosopher-poet Aśvghoṣa (2<sup>nd</sup> cent).

their pairs of chief disciples [§1.9], their sangha assemblies [§1.10], their foremost monk-attendants [§1.11], and their parents and cities [§1.12].

10.3.1.2 This listing of personal details for each of the 7 buddhas plays **two important roles**:

- (1) that the buddhas are identical in awakening and wisdom: a standardization of spirituality, and
- (2) that they differ only in personal or incidental details: a differentiation of historicity.

These are the earliest and most basic details we have of the buddhas in the suttas. This list would be expanded in later works beginning with the *Buddhavaṃsa* [5.1.2], including the commentaries.

Although some aspects of the Vipassī narrative seem unique to him, most of the other episodes recur in the life-story of Gotama, as will be evident by the relevant sutta references given below. Furthermore, many of the Vipassī episodes closely, even fully, clearly with those of Gotama Buddha. We can then conclude that such accounts of Gotama, especially those not found anywhere else, probably comes from the Vipassī narrative in the Mahā’padāna Sutta.

## The 2<sup>nd</sup> teaching [§§1.16-3.33]

### 10.3.2 The bodhisattva chapter [§§1.16-1.42]

10.3.2.1 In the “2<sup>nd</sup> teaching,” we have the earliest linear biography of a buddha—but this is a life narrative of the first of the 7 buddhas, Vipassī. In fact, only the detailed narrative of his life is found in the Mahā’padāna Sutta. Apparently, we are expected to take this as a sort of biographical template, upon which we fill in the set of 9 details, *mutatis mutandis*, for the other 6 buddhas. This is, in fact, how we have the biography of Gotama Buddha.

10.3.2.2 The oldest canonical source we have for the Buddha’s life is found in **the Ariya Pariyesanā Sutta** (M 26) [10.1.2.1]. This, along with the biographical template given here in **the Mahā’padāna Sutta**, is a detailed, almost complete, linear life of the Buddha. It can be said that this is the earliest canonical biography of the Buddha that we have.

10.3.2.3 While **the Ariya Pariyesanā Sutta** (M 26) gives only historical and psychological details of Gotama Buddha’s life, **the Mahā’padāna Sutta** provides us with both historical and mythical (which can also be said to be psychological) details of Vipassī. These details are, of course, applicable to the life of Gotama Buddha, too.

10.3.2.4 The 2<sup>nd</sup> teaching [§1.16] of the Mahā’padāna Sutta opens a repeat of the set of 9 details for **Vipassī Buddha**. Then, it deals with the “nature of the Bodhisattva” (*bodhisatta, dhammatā*), giving details relating to his descent from Tusita [§1.17], his conception [§1.18], his birth [§1.19], the state of his birth mother [§§1.20-24], his gestation period [§1.25], his birth and attending wonders [§§1.26-32].

10.3.2.5 The next important section deals with Vipassī’s **twin destiny** [§1.33], and an account of his 32 marks of the great man [§§1.34-36].<sup>270</sup> Then, follows a set of details found *only* in **the Mahā’padāna Sutta**, that is, his charisma, exceptional personal qualities, and wisdom [§§1.37-41], the origin of his name [§1.41], and the 3 pleasure palaces or mansions built Vipassī’s father [§1.42].

### 10.3.3 The quest chapter [§§2.1-2.17]

10.3.3.1 Then, the narrator (our Buddha Gotama) relates Vipassī’s **4 signs** or sights [§§2.1-15; 11.2]. After seeing all the 4 signs, Vipassī renounces the world [§2.15], which is unique, in that he renounces immediately after seeing the 4<sup>th</sup> sign, that of the renunciant, with only the charioteer (unnamed) as witness.

10.3.3.2 **A multitude of 84,000 “living beings”** (*pāṇa*) of Bandhumatī, renounce after Vipassī [§2.16], but then they go their separate ways, so that Vipassī can properly go on his solitary quest [§2.17]. All this is unique to Vipassī’s narrative. We can only speculate from silence that these innumerable “living beings” may include non-humans.<sup>271</sup> Astronomical numbers, as we have seen, are common in the Sutta [16].

<sup>270</sup> These 32 marks are elaborated in **Lakkhaṇa S** (D 30), SD 36.9. From this, we can surmise that Lakkhaṇa S is probably later than Mahā’padāna Sutta.

<sup>271</sup> This may be so in Vipassī’s case, where all those ordained have attained arhathood, or attain arhathood soon after ordination. Gotama Buddha, however, forbids non-humans from being ordained (Mv 1.76.1 @ V 1:93; for the nuns’ version, see V 2:271). “Non-humans” (*amanussa*) here can refer to devas (J 6:219), yakshas and demons (DA

### 10.3.4 The awakening chapter [§§2.18-2.22]

10.3.4.1 The Mahā'padāna Sutta then gives an account of Vipassī's **awakening**, describing it in terms of conditionality and causality (*paccaya,hetu*). Vipassī first contemplates on both *arising* conditionality [§2.18] and dependent arising [§2.19], and then *ending* conditionality and dependent ending [§§2.20-21]. The awakening account closes with the contemplation on the impermanence of the 5 aggregates [§2.22]. The same terms of specific conditionality and dependent arising are mentioned in connection with the Buddha's awakening, too, in **the Āyācana Sutta** (S 6.12).<sup>272</sup>

10.3.4.2 This 10-limb "looped" dependent arising formula that describes Vipassī's awakening process is an ancient one. In **the Nagara Sutta** (S 12.65), the Buddha says that before his awakening, he reflects on the 10-limbed cycle that starts with (12) decay-and-death (*jarā,maraṇa*) and ends with (4) name-and-form, as described in the Mahā'padāna Sutta.<sup>273</sup>

10.3.4.3 One of the important senses of the broad term *dhamma,dhātu* [4] is that of conditionality underpinning the cycle of dependent arising and dependent ending. **The (Jāti) Paccaya Sutta** (S 12.20) declares that

Whether there is the arising of Tathagatas [Buddhas thus come] or no arising of Tathagatas, this element [principle] stands as the fixity of things, the order of things, a specific conditionality.<sup>274</sup>

The Tathagata awakens to this and realizes it.

Having awakened to it, having realized it, he tells, teaches, proclaims, establishes, reveals, analyses and clarifies<sup>275</sup> it ... (the full specific conditionality formula follows). S 12.20,3 (SD 39.5).

The phrase, "This element (that) stands as the fixity of thing ..." (*sā dhātu dhamma-ṭṭhitatā*) has the same sense as the "dharma-element" (*dhamma,dhātu*) [§§1.13.4, 1.14.5, 3.46]. The Buddha, in fact, describes his awakening is just these terms, and he also declares that his knowledge and awakening come from this dharma-element, "the nature of things."<sup>276</sup> [4].

### 10.3.5 The "hesitation" chapter [§§3.1-3.11]

10.3.5.1 **The Mahā'padāna Sutta** (D 14) account of Vipassī's "hesitation" to teach recurs in connection with Gotama Buddha—especially the two "hesitation" verses [§3.5]—in **the Vinaya** (Mv 1.5.3), **the Ariya Pariyesanā Sutta** (M 26), and **the Āyācana Sutta** (S 6.1).<sup>277</sup> The brief "hesitation" account of the Mahā'padāna Sutta fully agrees with the parallel passages in these references, where the "hesitation" accounts are very much longer. This also suggests that the Mahā'padāna Sutta version is probably the oldest account we have, from which the other accounts are based and elaborated upon.

10.3.5.2 Another noteworthy point is that **Mahā Brahmā** is the protagonist here. but he is not named: he is only referred to as "Mahā Brahmā." In the other parallel accounts [10.3.5.1], he is called Brahmā Saham,pati. It is less likely that Brahmā is named only after Buddhism was more familiar with the dominant brahminical religion of the time. This is one of the clues suggesting that the Mahā'padāna Sutta this Brahmā episode is one of the oldest, if not the oldest, of them.<sup>278</sup>

### 10.3.6 The teaching chapter [§§3.12-3.26]

10.3.6.1 The whole of the "teaching chapter" of the Mahā'padāna Sutta is unique, and not found anywhere else. Vipassī decides to take the royal prince Khaṇḍa and the purohita's son Tissa as his first disci-

3:887; AA 2:152, 3:271; J 6.549; PmA 3:692), hell wardens (J 5:274), or simply something that is "not a human being" (MA 2:34; CA 145).

<sup>272</sup> S 6.12,3/1:136 (SD 12.2).

<sup>273</sup> S 12.65,3-7 + SD 14.2 (3). On the looped sequence of dependent arising, see SD 17.8a (6.2).

<sup>274</sup> *Uppādā vā tathāgatānaṃ anuppādā vā tathāgatānaṃ, ṭhitāva sā dhātu dhamma-ṭṭhitatā dhamma,niyāmatā idap,paccayatā*. See SD 39.5 (1.1.2.4).

<sup>275</sup> "He tells ... clarifies," *ācikkhati deseti paññāpeti paṭṭhapeti vivarati vibhajati uttānīkaroti*: See n at S 12.65 ad loc. On the need to "instruct, inspire, rouse and gladden" one's audience, see SD 6.1 + SD 11.4 (4).

<sup>276</sup> See Jayatilleke 1963:448 f (§770).

<sup>277</sup> This verse recurs at **Mv 1.5.3** (V 1:5\*), SD 12.1 (2.1) = **Mahā'padāna S** (D 14,3.2.3/2:36, Vipassī Buddha), SD 49.8 = **Ariya Pariyesanā S** (M 26,19.7/1:168), SD 1.11 = **Āyācana S** (S 6.1/1:136), SD 12.2; Mvst 3:315.

<sup>278</sup> See **Why the Buddha "hesitated" to teach**, SD 12.1.



ples [§§3.12-3.17]. In Gotama's case, his first disciples—those who are the first to be taught the Buddha Dharma—are the group of 5 monks, as attested in **the Dhamma,cakka Pavattana Sutta** (S 56.11).<sup>279</sup>

10.3.6.2 The Sutta goes on to say that 84,000 “living beings” from Bandhumatī, hearing that royal prince Khaṇḍa and purohit's son Tissa have renounced world, decide to follow suit. When they approach the Buddha, he first gives them a progressive talk or gradual teaching, on account of which they attain the Dharma (streamwinning, etc, but not arhathood). Then, they take the 2 refuges (there is no sangha yet), and ask for admission. With their ordination, the sangha is born, numbering 84,000 monks and the 2 chief disciples. [§§3.18-3.23].

10.3.6.3 Gotama Buddha, on the other hand, starts off with a sangha of only 5 monks, as recorded in **the Dhamma,cakka Pavattana Sutta** (S 56.11) and **the Anatta Lakkhaṇa Sutta** (S 22.59).<sup>280</sup> However, like Vipassī, Gotama, too, starts off with a noble sangha, comprising the group of 5 monks and himself. The noble sangha only arises with the attaining of arhathood of all these 5 monks.

**Koṇḍañña** first attains streamwinning at the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> sermon, asks for admission, and is admitted by the Buddha by the “Come, bhikshu!” going-forth (*ehi, bhikkhu pabbajjā*).<sup>281</sup> Then, with further instructions by the Buddha, **Vappa** and **Bhaddiya**, too, attain streamwinning, and are admitted in the same way.<sup>282</sup> After that, with more instructions, **Mahānāma** and **Assaji** attain streamwinning, and are admitted.<sup>283</sup>

10.3.6.4 All these 5 monks become **arhats** at the end of the teaching of **the Anatta Lakkhaṇa Sutta** (S 22.59).<sup>284</sup> Technically, we can say that Gotama's noble sangha is born with the attaining of streamwinning of Mahānāma and Assaji (that is, of the group of 5 monks). Within days of one another (we have no exact dates of these teachings bringing about the 5 monks' streamwinning), they attain the Dharma-eye, and then arhathood, with the teaching of the Anatta Lakkhaṇa Sutta.

We must conclude, then, that strictly speaking, this is *not* the “2<sup>nd</sup> sermon,” as there are intervening instructions, but which lack details. Suffice it to say that the Anatta Lakkhaṇa Sutta nevertheless deserves to be called so on account of the arhathood of the group of 5 monks, becoming the first arhats in the world, other than the Buddha himself.

### 10.3.7 The sangha chapter [§§3.27-3.33]

10.3.7.1 The “Sangha chapter” of the Mahāpadāna Sutta opens with Vipassī's reflection that since the sangha of arhat monks at Bandhumatī has grown to **6,800,000**, it is time to send them out on the great commission. **Mahā Brahmā**, on his cosmic watch, notices this pivotal spiritual act, and at once appears before Vipassī to endorse it [§3.28]. In fact, he supplicates again (the first time was to invite Vipassī to teach, §3.3).

This episode of **Brahmā's 2<sup>nd</sup> supplication** is unique to the Vipassī narrative. In the Gotama biography, Brahmā does not play any role in his great commission [10.3.6.2]. However, as recorded in **the Cātumā Sutta** (M 67), Brahmā (along with Sakya of Cātumā) does intercede on behalf of a group of noisy young monks who are being reprimanded and dismissed by the Buddha.<sup>285</sup>

10.3.7.2 At this point in the Vipassī story, he decides to send the 6,800,000 arhats out into the world to spread the Dharma. This is Vipassī Buddha's **great commission**. We are told that “the monks, for the most part, that very day itself, went forth and about in the country.” [§3.31.3]

When the noble sangha reaches a total of 60 arhat monks, Gotama Buddha similarly sends out his great commission.<sup>286</sup> By this act, he makes Buddhism the first missionary religion in human history. Here again we see that both Vipassī and Gotama starting their public ministry with a noble sangha of only arhats, who self-awakening fully qualifies to be the best exemplars of the faith.

<sup>279</sup> S 56.11 = Mv 1.6.16-31 (SD 1.1).

<sup>280</sup> S 56.11,2/5:421 (SD 1.1); S 22.56,24/3:68 (SD 1.2).

<sup>281</sup> Mv 1.6.32 @ V 1:12.

<sup>282</sup> Mv 1.6.33-34 @ V 1:12. This is before the teaching of **Anatta Lakkhaṇa S** (S 22.56), SD 1.2.

<sup>283</sup> Mv 1.6.36-37 @ V 1:13. This, too, is before the teaching of **Anatta Lakkhaṇa S** (S 22.56), SD 1.2.

<sup>284</sup> Mv 1.6.38-47 (V 1:13 f); S 22.56,24/3:68 (SD 1.2).

<sup>285</sup> M 67,6-9/1:458-450 (SD 34.7).

<sup>286</sup> Mv 1.7-11 (V 1:15-21): see **The great commission**, SD 11.2.

10.3.7.3 By “**mission**” is meant peacefully walking (*cārika*) without saying a word, unless asked a question or requested of a teaching. Even these public walks are, as a rule, limited to the daily almsround, conducted in total silence and with calm demeanour. This is, in fact, the habitual acting out of the 4<sup>th</sup> sign, that of **the renunciant** [§2.14], for the world to witness in a regular basis. Inspired by it—just as Sāriputta does<sup>287</sup>—they will turn to the Dharma.

10.3.7.4 In Vipassī’s case, however, we are not told of any conversions by the 6,800,000 arhats. From the pattern of events in the Sutta, we may surmise that these must be arhats, although not mentioned so. Moreover, only *arhats* are sent put by the buddhas on the great commission. After the Buddha’s time, since arhats are difficult to meet or to recognize, we need to take upon ourselves this great commission, even on a smaller scale, to go forth into the world with the Dharma for its welfare and happiness.

## The 3<sup>rd</sup> teaching [§§3.34-3.47]

### 10.3.8 The Suddh’āvāsa chapter [§§3.34-3.45]

10.3.8.1 We have already briefly noted the Buddha’s visit to Suddh’āvāsa [10.4.1.7]. The Mahā’padāna Sutta closes with a long section on Gotama Buddha’s account of his visit to the Suddh’āvāsa, the exclusive world of the non-returners. This is the only place that he has not reborn into, even in his last life.<sup>288</sup> As such, he has not visited it, even after a long time, that is, until now. Indeed, we have no other record of his having visited Suddh’āvāsa, except here. The unprecedented details of this closing section only attest to the fact that this is clearly the first time that Gotama Buddha visits Suddh’āvāsa.

10.3.8.2 The Mahā’padāna Sutta, however, records the Buddha as reflecting, “There is no other abode of beings, so easily accessible, that I have not abided in before, for a very long time, other than the devas of the Pure Abodes.” (*Na kho so satt’āvāso sulabha,rūpo, yo mayā anāvuttha,pubbo* [Ke Se anajjh-āvuttha,pubbo] *iminā dīghena addhunā aññatra suddh’āvāsehi devehi*) [§3.34.1]. If the Buddha has visited the pure abodes “for a very long time,” it must mean that he may have visited Suddh’āvāsa probably late in the second period of the ministry.<sup>289</sup> [13]

## 11 A psychology of the Buddha’s life

### 11.1 THE MYTH OF THE 3 PLEASURES

#### 11.1.1 The mythical element

11.1.1.1 To have a fully understanding of the life of the historical Buddha, Siddhattha Gotama, in our own times, it helps greatly, even necessary in many cases, to understand the psychological and spiritual nature of myths.<sup>290</sup> A **myth** is a story that is bigger than we are, lasts longer than we do, and reflects what lies deep in our minds and hearts, our desires, dislikes and delusions.<sup>291</sup>

An understanding of the nature of myths opens our minds and hearts to the latitude provided by literature and the depth of psychology. In very simple terms, these two approaches help us see the insights and dimensions of what Buddhism as a whole, as the Buddha life specifically, in a better understanding of how we feel and think.

<sup>287</sup> Mv 1.13.5+10 @ V 1:40,28\*+41,35\* (VA 5:975) = Ap 1.146/1:25 (ApA 231) = Petk 10 = ThaA 3:95. On Sāriputta’s conversion on meeting Assaji, see SD 42.8 (1.2).

<sup>288</sup> Another place which is not visited in the Bodhisattva is prob the realm of the unconscious or non-percipient beings (*asañña,satta*), which is cosmologically located just “below” Suddh’āvāsa. Understandably, the realm of non-percipient or unconscious beings (*asañña,satta*) is not very attractive since beings here exist only physically without any consciousness. Once when a thought arises in them, they fall from that state. See (1.4); also Nyanatiloka, *Guide Through the Abhidhamma-Piṭaka*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed 1971:68, 79, 96, 99, 105, 107, 109. See **Saṅkhār’upapatti S** (M 120,(22)/-3:103), SD 3.4 & SD 1.7 (Table 1.7).

<sup>289</sup> On the 2 periods of the Buddha’s ministry, see SD 40a.1 (1.3).

<sup>290</sup> If you have not done so, it is helpful to temporarily suspend the reading here, and go on to familiarize yourself with **Myth in Buddhism** (SD 36.1) and **The Buddha as myth** (SD 36.2), as they are background readings for a fuller understanding of the Mahā’padāna Sutta and our study of it here.

<sup>291</sup> This a working def we will be using for our study here. For a more comprehensive lexical def, see (2.1) below.

11.1.1.2 In important ways, mythology and psychology overlap harmoniously when we understand the human predilection for stories. The kind of stories that we like read about or listen to, or love to watch in the media, gives us a good clue to the kind of person we emotionally are, even if we are not aware of it. The greatest value of the Buddha story and the stories of his great arhats is their power to help us look deep into the roots of our personality and problems. In this way, we learn to heal ourselves where such self-healing is needed, but more vitally so, to grow as a wholesome emotionally independent individual—represented by the lone image of the radiant Buddha in blissful meditation under the bodhi tree.<sup>292</sup>

11.1.1.3 Even the miraculous stories of the Buddha and his early saints have some kind of psychological value or narrative lesson to them. Many may find such stories edifying, while others find them entertaining, but both their interests simply reflect their own spiritual maturity, such stories reach out to their respective levels with intended benefits. However, for those who are able to see more deeply into the stories and study behind the scenes, will be rewarded with deeper insights into human nature and self-understanding.

11.1.1.4 The stories of the Buddha's life, whether miraculous or not, as such, are not merely edifying or entertaining. They may, in fact, be seen as **case-histories** or case studies of the most evolved human who has ever lived in history within human memory. With some wisdom and some narrative skill, such stories provide us with the stage for re-enacting the drama of our lives, so that they are seen from a different, more revealing, educating and healing angle.

The stories of the Buddha's life, then, can serve us as tools, whether in understanding ourselves or in helping others. With a useful understanding of personality psychology, or even an educated interest in it, we would be even better prepared to be able to apply such stories in inspiring others with visions of better lives, rich in meaning and clear in purpose, bringing happiness here and now, and ultimately bringing about spiritual liberation..

### **11.1.2 The Bodhisattva's early loss of his mother**

11.1.2.1 Enthusiasts of psychology who do not have a proper understanding, much less an in-depth appreciation, of the Buddha's life might think attribute his youthful towards the world leading to renunciation as being a direct result of the early loss of his birth mother [§1.24]. Some might even invoke Bowlby's attachment theory or some other child psychology theory to highlight the trauma that the child Siddhattha must have undergone on account of such an infant maternal deprivation.

11.1.2.2 The immediate answer to such a misconception is simply that the child Siddhattha has never had such a trauma because his mother dies within a week of his birth, and thereafter he is looked after by his aunt, Māyā's sister, Mahā Pajāpatī, the new queen, who suckles him herself as his own son.<sup>293</sup> Siddhattha's childhood and youth are spent in the security of a royal household or the leading kshatriya (noble) family of Kapila, vathu. As such, he enjoys the security and benefits of a full family throughout his pre-renunciation life.

### **11.1.3 Raised in pleasure**

11.1.3.1 There is, however, a more plausible psychological issue we can raise in connection with the youth of prince Siddhattha. This is the over-protectiveness of his father, to ensure that he would not see the 4 signs and renounce the world:

Now, bhikshus, king Bandhuma had 3 palaces [mansions] built for prince Vipassī, one for the rains, one for the cold season, one for the hot season, and filled them with the 5 cords of pleasures.

In the rains mansion, bhikshus, throughout the four months of the rains, prince Vipassī was entertained by female musicians, and did not come down to the ground floor of the mansion during those months.

(D 14,1.43), SD 49.8

This short passage is probably an ancient pericope that may even be the urtext that is the source for the stories of the young householder **Yasa** in the Vinaya (V 1:15) and the Buddha in **the Mahāpadāna Sutta** (D 14),

<sup>292</sup> See "the mythical method in early Buddhism," SD 36.1 (2).

<sup>293</sup> **Dakkhiṇa Vibhaṅga S** (M 142,3/3:253), SD 1.9.

the (Paribbajaka) Māgandiya S (M 75) and the Sukhumāla Sutta (A 3.38).<sup>294</sup> On the other hand, there are scholars who think that the Yasa story is the urtext.<sup>295</sup>

11.1.3.2 The Sukhumāla Sutta (A 3.38) describes the Bodhisattva's sheltered life of sensual pleasure in greater details, as follows:

Tender<sup>296</sup> was I, bhikshus, extremely tender, absolutely tender.

In my father's house, bhikshus, lotus lakes were made just for my pleasure; in one blue lotuses bloomed, in another red lotuses, and in another white lotuses.<sup>297</sup>

Moreover, bhikshus, I used no sandalwood, except those from Kāsī.

My turban, too, bhikshus, is of Kāsī cloth, as were my jacket, my undergarment, my outer garment.<sup>298</sup>

Night and day, bhikshus, a white parasol was held over me, (with the parasol-holder thinking:) 'Let him be untouched by cold, heat, grass, dust, or dew.'<sup>299</sup> (A 3.38), SD 63.7

Then, follows the passage describing the 3 palaces. Clearly the shorter passage of the Mahā'padāna Sutta, being shorter, is older. However, over time, the story of the Bodhisattva's life of pleasure became even more elaborate.

11.1.3.3 The description of the Bodhisattva's *dolce vita* ("sweet life") is even more elaborately described in the Commentaries (and later works). The Jātaka Nidāna, kathā relates the following:

The king said, "From now on, let no one such as these [any of the 4 signs] come within the sight of my son. There'll be no act of buddhahood for my son. I wish to see him ruling with the might of sovereignty over the 4 continents surrounded by its 4,000 islands, and surrounded by a retinue extending 36 yojanas<sup>300</sup> all around under the vault of the sky."

Having said this, he posted guards at every gavuta in the four quarters for the sake of preventing any of the 4 kinds of persons from coming into the prince's sight.

Now, each of the 80,000 relatives gathered at the festive spot on that day promised a son each, saying,

"Whether he become a buddha or a king, we will each give a son!

If he were to become buddha, he will wander about surrounded by a train of kshatriya sons.

If he were to become king, he will move about surrounded by a retinue of kshatriya princes."

The king, then, appointed for the Bodhisattva nurses of great beauty, free of all faults.

The Bodhisattva grew surrounded by great beauty and splendour, attended by a retinue that is legion. (J 1:57)

Then, follows a fabulous description of his pleasurable life, where even the gods have a hand in his life of pleasure (J 1:58). By now, the point should be clearly taken by us that the Bodhisattva's life of pleasure reaches the greatest extremes in human and divine terms. Such a life of abandon ironically prepares us for

<sup>294</sup> See the Yasa story (Mv 1.7.1 = V 1:15), SD 11.2, Mahāpadāna S (D 14,38/2:21), SD 49.8, and the Buddha story at Māgandiya S (M 75,10/1:504), SD 51.5; Sukhumāla S (A 3.38,1/1:145), SD 63.7.

<sup>295</sup> For the Yasa story, see SD 11.2 esp (4).

<sup>296</sup> Sukhumalo: A 3.38.1/1:145,8 (glossed as "without suuffering," *niddukho*, AA 2:235); Tha 475 (ThaA 1:200); Ap 1:122\*, 313\*; C 19/2.9/2\*; J 544/152,7\*; V 1:15,2, 86,11+12, 179,5, 185,14, 2:180,6+19. *Sukhumala* has an unetymological aspirate in its second syllable. Its Sanskrit cognate is *sukumāra* (mf), "very tender," or (n) "tender youth". Prob an influence of *sukhuma* < *sūkṣmā* ("minute, fine, trifling"). See H Berger, *Zwei Probleme de mittel-indischen Lautlehre*, Munich, 1955:14 n4. See Geiger, *A Pāli Grammar*, 1994 §40(1b).

<sup>297</sup> They are respectively *uppala* (Skt *utpala*), *paduma* (Skt *padma*, *kokanada*), and *puṇḍarīka*. They are all varieties of the species *Nelumbo nucifera* (old name, now obsolete, *Nelumbium speciosum*).

<sup>298</sup> *Kāsikaṃ bhikkhave su me taṃ veṭhanam hoti kāsikā kañcukā kāsikaṃ nivāsanaṃ kāsiko uttarā,saṅgo.*

<sup>299</sup> *Ratt'indivam kho pana me su taṃ bhikkhave seta-c, chattaṃ dhārīyati, "mā naṃ phusi sītaṃ vā uṇhaṃ vā tiṇaṃ vā rajo vā ussāvo vā 'ti.*

<sup>300</sup> A *yojana* is about 7 mi = 11.25 km. 1 *yojana* = 4 *gavutas*. A *gavuta* then is about 1.75 mi = 2.8 km.

a greater drama, or, psychologically, may extract a heavy cost from the Bodhisattva, as we shall see [11.2.1.3].

## 11.2 THE WORLD AS FATHER

### 11.2.1 A father's conditional love

11.2.1.1 We are told that the Bodhisattva is king Suddhodana's only son and heir. We are also given the clear impression that the father loves the son dearly. But this is *not* an unconditional love (*metta*). It is the love of a king, a supreme father-figure, for his offspring, a son who is not only from his seed and line, but also who would one day continue that line. This father's love is clearly conditional: the son must become the father in due course.

King Suddhodana, in a frantic effort to prevent the Bodhisattva from seeing the 4 signs and so renounce the world, and desiring him to remain in the world to become a world monarch, or at least, to rule after him, creates a vast web of sensual life to hold him back in the world. He is, in effect, trying to exert his control over the Bodhisattva—like a Godly father-figure or like Māra himself—to keep him in the world.

11.2.1.2 In doing so, the father is only honing the Bodhisattva—or Vipassī in the Mahā'padāna Sutta—for a deeply traumatic experience when he actually sees the first 3 sights: an old man [§§2.1-2.4], a sick man [§§2.5-2.8], and a dead man [§§2.9-2.12]. Unlike most of us, who see such universal visions of decay, disease and death, all our lives and so often, so that we are not traumatized by them, the Bodhisattva, ironically, is actually being prepared for, or even assured of, a dramatic confrontation with these everyday events.

When the Bodhisattva sees the first 3 signs (the old man, the sick man and the dead man), he is, in effect, seeing the “3 universal bads” (decay, disease and death) for the first time: it is an **epiphany**. In fact, in **the (Pañca) Deva,dūta Sutta** (M 130), it is the devas who appear as these visions (including that of the renunciant)—called “divine messengers” (*deva,dūta*)—for all the world to see and be reminded of true reality.<sup>301</sup>

11.2.1.3 After seeing each of the first 3 signs, the Bodhisattva experiences what we would say in modern terms, **post-traumatic stress disorder** (PTSD). He is traumatized by suddenly realizing a simple, yet universal truth, that *all* whom he loves would decay, fall sick, and die, and that *he*, too, would decay, fall sick and die. And so, the Buddha declares in **the Mada Sutta** (A 3.39), how all his intoxications with youth, with health and with life vanish right there.<sup>302</sup> All that he has believed in, and lived to enjoy, suddenly rear show their ugly faces of true reality of impermanence and suffering. As an unawakened and compassionate person, he is understandably traumatized.

### 11.2.2 The way out

11.2.2.1 The story of the 4 signs does not ends as a tragedy: there is a *deus ex machina*.<sup>303</sup> When everything seems to fall apart, there appears an antithesis and solution to the three universal bads, and that is in the 4<sup>th</sup> sign or vision (*pubba,nimitta*)—that of the renunciant: “a shaven-headed man, **a renunciant wearing the saffron robe** ... good in living in truth [Dharma-faring], good in living in harmony, good in doing the wholesome, good in being non-violent, good in being compassionate to all beings” [§§2.13-1.13].

11.2.2.2 Vipassī, when he asks about this 4<sup>th</sup> sign is explained by his charioteer, who is not named, In the Gotama story, his charioteer is called Channa. He is one used to these visions, and yet is neither traumatized nor awakened. The delicately innocent Gotama is deeply traumatized, but has a clear vision of his

<sup>301</sup> The Sutta mentions 5 “divine messengers” as (1) an infant, (2) an old man, (3) a sick man, (4) a criminal being punished, and (5) a dead man (M 130/3:178-187 @ SD 2.23).

<sup>302</sup> A 3.39/1:146 f (SD 42.13). See also **Ariya Pariyesanā S** (M 26), SD 1.11(3.2).

<sup>303</sup> A *deus ex machina* (Latin, “a god out of the machine”). In Greek drama, a god was lowered onto the stage by a *mēchenē* (a crane) so that he could get the hero out of difficulty or untangle the plot. Today, the phrase is applied to any unanticipated intervention that resolves a situation in any literary genre. See *Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed, 1998: *deus ex machina*.



way out of all the roots of his trauma. He now realizes that his pleasure palaces are ablaze with the fires of decay, disease and death, and he has to flee from it: he has to renounce the world. (J 1:61)

11.2.2.3 In the **Vipassī** story, he sees the 4 signs, but each is separated by “many years, many hundred years, many thousand years” [§§2.2, 2.5, 2.9, 2.13]. According to the Buddhavaṃsa Commentary (quoting the Dīgha reciters), our Bodhisattva Gotama (then aged 29), too, sees the 4 signs on 4 different days, once every 4 months. (BA 280)

At first blush, it may seem difficult to understand how Vipassī can be effected, much less traumatized, by events that occur separated by such a great length of time. Here, we need to understand the nature numbers in the Sutta, and how the relativity of time actually works to bring about the same emotional effect on Vipassī, as the seeing the 4 signs would in the case of Gotama, living in another time-zone. [15]

## **12 A historical life of the Buddha**

### **12.1 THE BUDDHA WAS A HUMAN BEING**

#### **12.1.2 The Buddha in history**

12.1.2.1 In our study of Buddhism, we must begin by accepting the fact that the Buddha is a part of human history. During the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the western academic pioneers of Buddhist studies were largely divided between a group of myth-oriented scholars, such as Heinrich Kern (1833-1917, Dutch), Emile Senart (1847-1928, French), and Ananda Coomaraswamy (1877-1947, Sinhala Tamil), and a group of more historically oriented philologists, such as Hermann Oldenberg (1854-1920, German) and T W Rhys Davids (1843-1922) and C A F Rhys Davids (1857-1942, both British).

The myth-oriented interpreters emphasized the study of Sanskrit sources and focused on the importance of those elements in the sacred biography that pointed in the direction of solar mythology. For these scholars, the historical Buddha was, at most, a reformer who provided an occasion for historicizing a classic solar myth.

In contrast, the historically oriented philologists emphasized the Pali texts, as well as those elements in these texts that they could use to create or reconstruct an acceptable “historical” life of the Buddha. From the perspective of these scholars, the mythic elements—and other supposedly irrational elements as well—were later additions to a true historical memory, additions that brought about the demise of the original teachings of the Buddha. Such pious frauds were identified and discounted by critical scholarship.<sup>304</sup>

12.1.2.2 The consensus amongst scholars today was well expressed by the great Belgian Buddhistologist **Etienne Lamotte** (1903-1983), who noted that “Buddhism would remain inexplicable if one did not place at its beginning a strong personality who was its founder” (1985:707, 1988:639). At the same time, however, scholars are aware that the available Buddhist texts provide little historical information about the details of Gotama Buddha’s life. This is understandable when such texts, especially those of early Buddhism, are more concerned with the right practice (orthopraxy) of the Dharma than with the right dogmas (orthodoxy) of a religion.

#### **12.1.3 Dates of the Buddha**

12.1.3.1 The Buddhist texts provide us with important clues for two chronologies, from which we can calculate the date of the historical Buddha. A “**long chronology**,” given in the Sinhala chronicles, the Dīpa,vaṃsa and the Mahā,vaṃsa, places the historical Buddha’s birth 298 years before the coronation of king Aśoka (326 BCE), and his death 218 years before that event. Then, the Buddha’s birth year is in 624 BCE—and since, according to the Pali canon, the Buddha died at the age of 80<sup>305</sup>—his death was in 544 BCE.

<sup>304</sup> See F E Reynolds & C Hallisey, “Buddha,” in Macmillan Encyclopedia of Buddhism, 2005:1061 incl the dates of the Buddha.

<sup>305</sup> **Mahā,parinibbāna S** (D 16,5.27), SD 9.

These are in fact the traditional dates generally accepted by Sinhalese Buddhists, and also the ethnic Buddhists of SE Asia, who, however, pushed the dates a year later, to 623 and 543 BCE respectively.<sup>306</sup> Western scholars, basing their views on secondary literature, generally propose the dates 566-466 or 563-463 BCE. Recent scholarship, however, suggests that the Buddha lived some 50 years or more closer to our time. The current western scholarly consensus is that he died between 410 and 400 BCE.<sup>307</sup>

12.1.3.2 A “**short chronology**” is found in Indian sources and their Chinese and Tibetan translations. They place the Buddha’s birth 180 years before Aśoka’s coronation and his death 100 years before it. If we accept the ancient Greek record of Aśoka’s coronation, then the Buddha’s birth date is 448 and his death is 368. This short chronology is accepted by many Japanese Buddhologists and was defended by the German scholar Heinz Bechert in 1982.<sup>308</sup>

## 12.2 THE BUDDHA AND HUMANITY

### 12.2.1 The Buddha as a human

12.2.1.1 As practitioners of the Buddha’s teaching, it is vital for us to know that the Buddha is *human*, that he is neither a prophet of some higher being, nor some eternal cosmic being born of the imagination of some unawakened guru, nor the emotional projections of some zealous preacher. The Buddha was born a human, lived a most pleasurable life as a youth, had the best education, but was spiritually precocious and compassionate, even as a young person.

The Buddha, when he was Bodhisattva, was, above all, one who was very sensitive to the world around him. Perhaps, his overprotective father ironically prepared him to be traumatized by the 4 signs. Then again, he could have simply forgotten about those sights, and drowned himself in the pleasures waiting for him in his palaces. The point is that the Bodhisattva chose to heed the world. In fact, we can say that, even as a young man, he evolved to such a level that he just could not ignore the world’s realities, especially its sufferings.

12.2.1.2 While the history of religion attempts to explain to us how the various religions, especially the world religions, arise dependent on human, social and political circumstances, and such circumstances, as a rule, shape the nature of the religion, we see **the Buddha** arising in ancient India when it was most culturally and economically developed, the brightest star in the galaxy of religious experimentation and human genius.<sup>309</sup>

12.2.1.3 If the Buddha were a God or some supreme miracle-worker, we would be helplessly dependent on him for succour and salvation. The Buddha was a human living amongst humans, experiencing the world, both in its profound pleasures and extreme pains. He emerged all the wiser through awakening by himself and for us. As a human, he liberated himself beyond earth and heaven, transcending both the human and the divine.

The Buddha is like the captain of a ship named Dharma coursing through the troubled waters of samsara. We are the crew, and along our voyage, we save others thrown into the surging waves from shipwrecks and other disasters. As we learn the skills of keeping our vessel ship-shape, on an even keel and on course, we learn to run and steer the ship better and move closer to port. In due course, we can become captains, if we choose to. Or, we can simply celebrate landing on firm ground and the security of home.

### 12.2.2 Asking the right questions

12.2.2.1 In other words, we can be buddhas, but we can never become God. Emulating the Buddha, we first learn to live with the world, taking the world as an on-going lesson. We learn to ask the right questions, in which lie the right answers. The worldly ask, “What do I get from Buddhism?” We ask, “What do I let go of, to gain the Dharma?” Religion asks, “What can Buddhism do for me?” We ask, “What can I do

<sup>306</sup> SE Asian ethnic Buddhists calculate the Buddhist era (BE) by adding 543 to the current commercial year. So, the year 2000 CE = 2543 BE. East Asian Buddhists accept the later dates of 448-368 BCE. See Oxford Dictionary of Buddhism, 2003:71 date of the Buddha.

<sup>307</sup> See L S Cousins, “The dating of the historical Buddha: A review article,” 1996.

<sup>308</sup> See Reynolds & Hallisey, “Buddha,” in Macmillan Encyclopedia of Buddhism, 2005:1061 f.

<sup>309</sup> On the Buddha’s Indian background, see Nakamura, *Indian Buddhism: A survey with bibliographical notes*, Osaka, 1980:12 f.

for myself?” “How can I help myself grow and awaken to true reality?” “How can I help others help themselves?” When we ask the right question, we have found the key to the right answer.

12.2.2.2 We can *become* buddhas because the Buddha is the Dharma, in the sense that he awakens through the Dharma, he lives the Dharma, and even with his death, he shows the Dharma to be true and timeless. If we understand and live this Dharma, we, too, can awaken. If we are the first to arise in a new epoch, we are called the Buddha. Those who awaken following the Buddha’s teaching are called arhats (*arahata*), those worthy of the Buddha’s teaching and worthy in every good way.<sup>310</sup>

### 12.2.3 Acting on the answers

12.2.3.1 The liberating truth that the Buddha’s discovery can be conveniently formulated for us as **the 4 noble truths** (*catu ariya, sacca*) or the truths of the noble ones. The truths encompass the meaning and purpose of life—the essence of dependent arising<sup>311</sup>—for the sake of our spiritual cultivation and awakening. They are so called because they raise us up from our subhuman states by humanizing us, and then through our self-understanding, uplift us to divine levels and beyond, to nirvana.

12.2.2.2 **The 1<sup>st</sup> noble truth** is a statement of the reality of our existence—unsatisfactoriness pervades all things. As unawakened beings, our current state is unsatisfactory, we are victims of impermanence, and burdened by destructive selfishness. But this unsatisfactoriness has nothing to do with any kind of original sin or fundamental evil state. We are more like uncut diamonds or ugly ducklings who are unable to see our own goodness. Instead of looking at our natural goodness, we keep looking outside, running after what we see as “better” than we are, rejecting what we see as being “inferior,” or collecting what we feel as being our “equal.”

12.2.2.3 These are all delusory projections. The world out there—despite all its truth and beauty—is neither good nor bad. Our thinking and projections make it so. This measuring and collecting habit is never complete, never fulfilling—like hunger or thirst. We are caught in the uphill stone-rolling of Sisyphus, and we even think we are doing great while we are at it. But when we stop—because we have reached the peak of the hill, and the stone rolls down—we feel a sudden loss.

We need to run after the rolling stone again. We are compelled to run after the heartless rolling stone; it gives us a purpose in life! But we do not know what it’s all about: we have no idea of the meaning of life. We’re caught in an unhappy routine, running after our stone, not knowing what else to do, fearing some terrible disaster if we stop. This is called craving (*taṇhā*), or literally, a thirst for things. This is **the second noble truth**—the arising of unsatisfactoriness.

12.2.2.4 **The meaning of life** is right there in the world we create before us and live in—this is the 1<sup>st</sup> noble truth. We incessantly chase after things, without a moment of respite, much less joy, in our lives. Any sense of satisfaction is only a momentary thought that we “got it” like a predator that has caught its prey. Then, we need to stalk and kill some more other prey, ad infinitum. That’s all the meaning there is to this life of craving—this is **the 2<sup>nd</sup> noble truth**.

12.2.2.5 **The 3<sup>rd</sup> noble truth** is about the solution to our self-created and self-creating problems: we need to stop—like Aṅguli, māla stopping right in his tracks, and is liberated.<sup>312</sup> In very simple worldly terms, this is like nirvana, where all suffering ceases, and joy persists. This is **the 3<sup>rd</sup> noble truth**—the ending of unsatisfactoriness. Even as we read these passages—if we, even for a moment, forget our self—there is just this reading, this knowing and unknowing, this rise and fall of consciousness—we momentarily have a glimpse of nirvana. All we need to do now is put in a bit more effort, to stop looking down at ourself as a vile, sinful creature, but to look up and see the clouds parting, and before us, within us, a noble mountain unshakable by any wind from any direction.<sup>313</sup>

12.2.2.6 **The 4<sup>th</sup> noble truth** is an exhortation and invitation for us to walk the path of the noble ones, the eightfold path, to the ending of unsatisfactoriness or suffering. Since our problems originate and arise within ourself, it is there that we have to look and work. No amount of seeking the external will bring any

<sup>310</sup> On the Buddha as the first amongst equals, see **Sambuddha S** (S 22.58), SD 49.10.

<sup>311</sup> See SD 1.1 (4.0).

<sup>312</sup> See **Aṅgulimāla S** (M 86.5) + SD 5.11 (2.2).

<sup>313</sup> **Soṇa (Koliṇṇa) S** (A 6.55/3:378), SD 20.17. See also U 3.4/27 = Tha 651; cf Dh 81.

satisfactory answer; no supplication to any external agency, not even an almighty God can succour us; much less, running after the rolling stones of worldliness.

12.2.2.7 In order to fully understand what’s going on in the world “out there,” we need first to **look within** ourself. This means that we must diligently exert ourself in, firstly, fully directing our sense-faculties and speech to remove all distractions, so that, secondly, we are able to calm and clear our mind to tap its goodness and genius.

Religion tells us we are not good enough, we are evil sinners, we are incapable of helping ourself, and so on. Spirituality tells us we are good enough to work at it ourself; we can do it. For, who else can be our refuge and master, if not ourself? (Dh 160, 380).<sup>314</sup>

12.2.2.8 The Buddha does not spoil us with empty promises of after-life heavenly delights, nor delude us with bribes of fabulous wealth and power in this life, nor threaten us with hell-fire, if we do not follow him. If we are to follow him, we must follow the Dharma—this is the supreme worship.<sup>315</sup> We honour the Buddha best by practising the Dharma. It is in this spirit that the Buddha compassionately exhorts us:

You must make the effort (yourself). | The tathagatas only show the way.

Liberated are those who have gained the path, | who meditate, freed from Mara’s bonds.

(Dh 276), SD 45.8(4.3.1)

## 12.3 THE BUDDHA AND DIVINITY

### 12.3.1 The timeless Dharma

12.3.1.1 One useful way of understanding the Buddhist “divide,” the difference between early Buddhism and later sectarian Buddhisms, is how the Buddha’s death is viewed. The early Buddhists and those who are guided by early Buddhism, understand and accept the Buddha’s death and learn from it. After all, the Buddha himself clearly reminds us in **the Mahā,parinibbāna Sutta** (D 16) and elsewhere, that he (that is, his body or physical being) is *human*, comprising the 4 elements (earth, water, fire and wind), just like anyone else. And whatever arises must pass away.<sup>316</sup> In passing away, the Buddha proves his own teaching to be true. [17.2.2.4]

12.3.1.2 The Buddha’s famous last words are: “Conditioned things are subject to decay—strive on diligently [with diligence]!”<sup>317</sup> (D 16). The Buddha’s passing away is the “final act of truth” that proves the Dharma true. The Dharma, in this sense, “pre-exists” the Buddha or any being, and is, as such, timeless (*akālika*). It is the Dharma that makes the Buddha: whether buddhas arises or not, the Dharma (true reality) is there [10.3.4.3]. But the Buddha is the teacher who re-discovers this true reality, and declares it to us with wisdom [12.3], so that we, too, can see it for ourself, and so awaken to true reality and be liberated [12.4.2.5].

12.3.1.3 To say that the Buddha is (or was) a god or God—or even to see him as being “eternal” or legion—is to reduce him into a worldly or religious category or pious fiction. In **the (Pāda) Doṇa Sutta** (A 4.36), the Buddha declares that he is *not* a deva, a gandharva, a yaksha nor even a human.<sup>318</sup> He is either uncategorized, or for our convenience, we may view him as being a category of his own [12.4.2.5]. In linguistic terms, we can say that the Buddha is an unconditioned being in a *conditioned* world.

The “world” here refers to our 6 sense-faculties (the 5 physical senses and the mind).<sup>319</sup> We are the world in which the Buddha, the unconditioned being, inhabits, that is, in our mind, our consciousness. We can only sense, define and understand the Buddha in this limited sense-based way. In other words, this Buddha that we sense is only a mental construct, like everything else.

<sup>314</sup> On Dh 160, see SD 27.2(3).

<sup>315</sup> See **Mahā,parinibbāna S** (D 16,5.1-3) + SD 9 (7.2).

<sup>316</sup> See **Anatta Lakkhaṇa S** (S 22.59 = V 1:13 f), SD 5.2.

<sup>317</sup> D 16,6.7: *Vaya,dhammā saṅkhārā, appamādena sampādeṭhā ti* (SD 9). In **Parinibbāna S** (S 6.2), this is reversed: *appamādena sampādeṭha, vaya,dhammā saṅkhārā ti* (S 6.2/1:158). However, Bodhi appears not to have noticed this, rendering it as in Mahā,parinibbāna S (S:B 251). The Sarvāstivāda ed omits *appamādena sampādeṭha*. The Chin versions vary, T1, eg, gives a more elaborate exhortation here.

<sup>318</sup> A 4.36/2:38 (SD 36.13). On “sub specie aeternitatis,” see SD 36.2 (2.1.2). See also SD 48.2 (6.2.2.4).

<sup>319</sup> See **Sabba S** (S 35.23), SD 7.1.

The only way, we can close the chasm between our conditioned self and the unconditioned Buddha is through understanding the Dharma. To understand that unconditioned Dharma, we need to first understand the conditioned and mundane Dharma preserved in the suttas moderated and illuminated by our own mindfulness and mental clarity. In other words, we need to awaken to the unconditional reality, too, before we can see the Dharma that we may see the Buddha. To see the Buddha is to see the Dharma, that is, to attain nirvana.<sup>320</sup>

### **12.3.2 The supreme worship**

12.3.2.1 The early Buddhist suttas record the Buddha as consistently preoccupied with **living the spiritual life**, with the 3 trainings of moral virtue, mental cultivation and wisdom.<sup>321</sup> Even when the Buddha speaks about death, it is about understanding it so that we live our lives more wisely, and, by our own diligence, work for ourselves a liberating death.<sup>322</sup>

12.3.2.2 As the Buddha lies on his deathbed, Ānanda asks him about how his remains and last rites should be properly dealt with. The Buddha replies,

Do not worry yourselves about **the funeral rites** [relic worship],<sup>323</sup> Ānanda. Come now, Ānanda, you should strive for your own good, devote yourselves to your own good, and dwell with your minds tirelessly, zealously devoted to your own good.<sup>324</sup> There are wise kshatriyas, wise brahmins and wise householders who are devoted to the Tathāgata: they will take care of the funeral rites. D 16,5.10-11 (SD 6)

The key theme running throughout the Buddha's instructions during his last days, as recorded in **the Mahā,parinibbāna Sutta** (D 16), is that of not mourning his death, but of practising the Dharma as the supreme worship. This is to practise the Dharma in accordance with the Dharma, so that we gain awakening in his life itself. [10.1.6.4]

### **12.3.3 The invisible Buddha**

12.3.3.1 How did the deification of the Buddha arise in later Buddhism? Firstly, it may be said that there were the unawakened followers who were unable to accept the death of such a great teacher as the Buddha. They speculated on the nature of buddhahood, and in due course viewed the Buddha as being "living on" or eternal in some way. Perhaps, when they worshipped at a stupa, especially one with a Buddha relic, they imagined that they were addressing the Buddha who was actually present therein. In other words, these were (are) symptoms of a protracted mourning. [10.1.6.4]

12.3.3.2 By the time of Aśoka, as noted by André Bareau, there were new generations of Buddhists who had never known or seen the Buddha. The invisibility of the Buddha who has passed away was like the invisibility of the devas. Unable to physically *see* the Buddha, these pious and imaginative Buddhists began to view him as a god—since he was invisible just like a god. (1980:2)

Compounding this view was the fact that they saw the Buddha as a sort of saviour. This was a time when the Bodhisattva idea of the Mahāyāna had not yet arisen. As such, the Buddha—in the minds of the religious—reverted, as it were, to the role of the Bodhisattva before Gotama was Buddha. In his penultimate life, he was Santusita, the Bodhisattva as a deva, a lordly god (*issara*), in Tusita heaven, looking down (*avaloketi*) in compassion upon the world.<sup>325</sup> It is possible that such a view contributed to the rise of the

<sup>320</sup> See **Vakkali S** (S 22.87), SD 8.8.

<sup>321</sup> See **Sīla samādhi paññā**, SD 21.6.

<sup>322</sup> See eg **(Mahānāma) Gilāyana S** (S 55.54), SD 4.10.

<sup>323</sup> "Funeral rites," *sarīra, pūja*, lit "worship of the bodily remains." The Buddha here is indirectly reminding Ānanda of the need of his own spiritual cultivation (ie, to gain arhathood since he is still a streamwinner). However, the general tone of the Buddha's reply, as is clear from the next sentence, is that all monastics should not be concerned with such rituals. See SD 6 (7.1).

<sup>324</sup> "Your own good," *sad-atthe*. Be *sār'atthe*, "the essence of good; the essential goal" Ānanda is still only a streamwinner, and the Buddha is here urging him to work towards the "highest good," viz arhathood (*uttam'atthe arahatte ghaṭetha*) (DA 2:583).

<sup>325</sup> See SD 49.3 (1.1.7.3).



Bodhisattva **Avalokiteśvara**, “the lord who looks down (in compassion upon the world),” who was depicted as a prince in ancient India, in the wake of the rise of Mahāyāna in the early centuries.

## 12.4 THE INEFFABILITY OF THE BUDDHA

### 12.4.1 The Buddha’s uniqueness

We have already noted that the Buddha is a unique being, *sub specie aeternitatis* [10.1.11.3]. He is simply “buddha,” a species in his own right, as it were. He is free from all the mental qualities of any being, worldly, human or divine. For, all these beings, by the very nature of existence, are subject to renewed existence, to rebirth and redeath. Whatever exists can only do so in impermanence and change. Nothing exists in eternity, except perhaps ignorance and impermanence—but this is only a way of speaking, testifying to the enigma of language.

### 12.4.2 The nature of buddhahood

12.4.2.1 We may try to speak of the Buddha with the acumen of professional scholars, or the zeal of a pious believer, or the hubris of a religious evangelist—we are only constructing an image of the Buddha, an ideology, based on our own biases and agendas. If we understand that all views are provisional, we would not cling on to such images and views. And we would let go of them for the right reason—that is, when we have a better understanding of ourself and the Dharma.

Even as serious practitioners, in all honesty, we must admit that we do not really *know* the Buddha, a fully self-awakened being. For, we are not yet awakened ourselves. We must be ourselves awakened to really know another, whether that person is awakened or not.<sup>326</sup> Otherwise, we could at best make an informed surmise, have a view of what the Buddha is, with some wise faith.<sup>327</sup>

12.4.2.2 We do have a discourse showing how an arhat praises another arhat—that is, Sāriputta’s high praises of the Buddha, as recorded in **the Sampasādanīya Sutta** (D 28). Sāriputta tells the Buddha that he (the Buddha) is the wisest of all in the three periods of time: “There never *has been*, there *will* never be, and there *is* now no other recluse or brahmin who is better or wiser than the Blessed One, that is to say, as regards self-awakening!”

The Buddha then challenges how he can know this—he must have known all the past buddhas and all the future buddhas, even also well know the present one. Sāriputta replies with a parable of the frontier, well fortified with only one gate, and the guard there knows all those who enter or leave the city. In other words, Sāriputta is saying that he knows the Buddha on account of “the drift of the Dharma [the Dharma lineage] (*dhamm’ anvaya*).”<sup>328</sup> Sāriputta then gives a detailed analysis of the Dharma in what we would today call philosophical and buddhological analyses.<sup>329</sup>

12.4.2.3 The term *dhamm’ anvaya* is interesting [12.4.2.2]. It can mean “the drift of the Dharma” if we are referring to Sāriputta’s wisdom, which is second only to that of the Buddha’s. Or, it can mean “the Dharma lineage,” if we are referring to Sāriputta’s liberated state as an arhat, which is no different from that of the Buddha. Here, of course, Sāriputta’s wisdom is meant.

In this sense, we can take *dhamm’ anvaya* as a synonym for the “Dharma-element” (*dhamma, dhātu*) [4]. However, *dhamma, dhātu* probably has a broader, more theoretical, sense relating to the nature of things as well as the of awakening itself, while *dhamm’ anvaya* refers to its more practical aspects, that is, the application of such wisdom, as Sāriputta has done.

12.4.2.4 The Dharma-element, in an important way, is not really limited only to buddhas and arhats. If we are taught directly by the Buddha or an arhat, we will easily, even if temporarily, have a clear vision of “the drift of the Dharma.” This is hinted in the Buddha’s famous statement in **the Vakkali Sutta** (S 22.87):

“He who sees the Dharma, sees me. He who sees me sees the Dharma.” (S 22.87)<sup>330</sup>

<sup>326</sup> On the impartiality or full knowledge of the saints towards one another, see **Saṅgaha Bala S** (A 9.5,6(4)), SD 2.21.

<sup>327</sup> See Pilotikā’s response on being asked about the Buddha’s wisdom: **Kāraṇapāli S** (A 5.194,1.4), SD 45.11.

<sup>328</sup> On “the drift of the Dharma,” see SD 14.14 (2.3) n.

<sup>329</sup> D 28,1-2 (SD 14.14). Cf Pāsenadi’s remarks about arhats, S 3.11/177-79 [5]; also Piya Tan, *The Buddha and His Disciples*, ch 8 “The Thundering Silence” §14.

<sup>330</sup> **Vakkali S** (S 22.87), SD 8.8; cf D 3:84.

The meaning here is that, there is nothing worthwhile with the Buddha's physical body. These are merely the 4 element of earth, water, fire and wind, of which we are all composed. The body is impermanent and unsatisfactory. What we should "see," that is, personally experience, is the Buddha's mind, that is, his awakening and liberation. This is the same for all the other arhats or self-awakened ones. Although there may be significant differences in the depth of the wisdom of such awakened beings, their awakening are all the same—just like in the parable of the fire that is extinguished and has gone nowhere, given in **the Aggi Vaccha,gotta Sutta** (M 72).<sup>331</sup>

12.4.2.5 The Buddha is only unique as a type or category (*sub specie aeternitatis*) [10.1.11.3], but buddhas keep appearing time after time, as evident from the Mahā'padāna Sutta. They are like expert doctors or physicians who appear from time to time in our midst. They give us a diagnosis of the epidemic that is ravaging around us; they tell us of the causes of the epidemic; they teach us how to deal with it, stay healthy, and get rid of it; and exhort us to set to work at once to heal ourselves and help others heal.

Even when such a **physician or doctor** passes away, he has passed on to us sufficient healing knowledge, tools and skill, which we must apply to ourselves. It is unhelpful, even unhealthy, to go on mourning his loss, or imagine some other fabulous doctors from another world, and to worship such doctors. The point is that no amount of worshipping of doctors or calling out their names would help or heal us. We need to take the medicine and live spiritually healthy lives. And, in due course, we may learn and excel as qualified and skilled doctors, or at least as nurses ourselves. Essentially, this is what the parable of the doctor and the man wounded with a poisoned dart is about.<sup>332</sup>

## IV DIVINE BEINGS IN THE SUTTA

### 13 The Buddha in Suddh'āvāsa

#### 13.1 SIGNIFICANCE OF SUDDH'ĀVĀSA

##### 13.1.1 Abodes of the non-returners

13.1.1.1 *Suddh'āvāsa* or the pure abodes is a collective name for the five highest of the eight heavens that constitute the 4<sup>th</sup> dhyana form realms (*rūpa,loka*). The divinities inhabiting these abodes are called the *Suddh'āvāsa,kāyika*<sup>333</sup> gods. These realms are inhabited only by non-returners, the 3<sup>rd</sup> of the 4 kinds of saints of the path who have broken **the 5 lower fetters**, those that hold us back to the sense worlds.<sup>334</sup>

13.1.1.2 When a bodhisattva arises in his last life, it is said that the gods of the pure abodes would send down the 4 signs or portents (that is, an old man, a sick man, a dead man, and a renunciant). This vision causes the bodhisattvas to renounce the world and go on to seek buddhahood.

13.1.1.3 **The pure abodes** (*suddh'āvāsa*) comprise the following 5 heavens, and their life-spans, are as follows:<sup>335</sup>

Avihā	"non-declining"	16,000 aeons
Atappā	"unworried"	8,000 aeons
Sudassā	"clearly beautiful"	4,000 aeons
Sudassī	"clear-visioned"	2,000 aeons
Akaniṭṭhā	"the peerless"	1,000 aeons

<sup>331</sup> M 72,18-19 (SD 6.15).

<sup>332</sup> This famous parable is given in **Cūḷa Māluṅkyā,putta S** (M 63,5.2), SD 5.8; **Sunakkhatta S** (M 105,24-28), SD 94.3.

<sup>333</sup> V 2:302; D 2:253; S 1:26.

<sup>334</sup> The "5 lower mental fetters" (*orambhāgiya saṃyojana*) are: (1) self-identity view (*sakkāya,diṭṭhi*), (2) spiritual doubt (*vicikicchā*), (3) attachment to rituals and vows (*sīla-b,bata,parāmāsa*), (4) sensual lust (*kāma,rāga*), (5) aversion (*paṭigha*). On their significance, see **Kīṭa,giri S** (M 70), SD 11.1 (5.1); (**Sekha**) **Uddesa S** (A 4.85), SD 3.3 (2).

<sup>335</sup> D 3:237, M 3:103, Vbh 425, Pug 42-46. For the location of the pure abodes in the 31-plane cosmology, see SD 1.7 (Appendix).

13.1.1.4 It is interesting that the pure abodes, **the 5 highest heavens of the form world**, are not listed as “stations for consciousness.” No one, except non-returners, are reborn there, where they will spend their remainder of their last life to become arhats and attain final nirvana. It is also interesting to note that bodhi-sattvas are never reborn there, as they are not non-returners (which they cannot be if they are to be born into the world as buddhas).

13.1.1.5 The pure abodes are said to be empty, or rather do not arise, for several aeons, when there are no buddhas. They arise only when there is a buddha. These planes are like the “camping-ground” (*khan-dha, vara-ṭ, thāna*) for the Blessed One after he has set in motion the Dharma Wheel. As such, they are not assigned as a station of consciousness, nor as a sphere for beings, that is, as a karmic state for rebirth.<sup>336</sup>

### 13.1.2 Non-return and nirvana

13.1.2.1 The pure abode inhabitants are called “**non-returners**” (*anāgāmī*) because they would no more be reborn in these worlds. In fact, they spend their remaining karmic lives in the pure abodes, until they attain arhathood. They may attain arhathood just before reaching the abodes, or upon reaching it, or pass through the abodes, or skip over one or more of them.

It should be noted that as “form” beings, that is, having a subtle “physical” form like light, the pure abodes non-returners do not assume any kind of biological birth. They are all of immediate “spontaneous birth” (*opapātika*, M 1:465), rather than being born from a womb or an egg (M 1:173).<sup>337</sup>

13.1.2.2 How the non-returners awaken to arhathood is mentioned in the **Purisa, gati Sutta** (A 7.52), “can be seen to be a rather weak and strained one” (Harvey 1995:100). The sutta compares **the 5 kinds of non-returners** [4] respectively to:

When a hot iron slab is beaten,

- |   |   |   |
|---|---|---|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1 a bit of which comes off from the hot iron, and then cools down;</li> <li>2 a bit of which comes off, flies up and then cools down;</li> <li>3 a bit of which comes off, flies up, and then, <u>before cutting into the ground, cools down</u> (<i>anupahacca, tala</i>);<sup>339</sup></li> <li>4 a bit of which cools after cutting into the ground (or upon landing) (<i>upahacca, tala</i>);<sup>340</sup></li> <li>5 a bit of which flies up and falls on a bit of grass or sticks, igniting them, then cools down after they are consumed;</li> <li>6 a bit of which falls on a large heap of grass or sticks, but cools down after they are consumed;</li> <li>7 a bit of which flies up and falls down on a heap of grass or sticks such that a fire spreads, but then goes out when it reaches water or rock, etc.</li> </ol> | } | <i>antarā, parinibbāyī</i> <sup>338</sup> |
|---|---|---|
- (A 7.52/4:70-74), SD 82.10<sup>341</sup>

The first triad refers to the non-returners who after here, their consciousness abide in an intermediate state (that is, after death but before rebirth).<sup>342</sup> (1) are non-returners who attain arhathood and nirvana upon dying or as soon as they attain the intermediate state. (2) attain nirvana while in transit (that is, in midst of the intermediate state), and (3) upon “cutting into the ground,” that is, at the moment of emerging from the intermediate state like a chick breaking through the egg-shell.

(4) refers to non-returners who attain nirvana “upon landing” in a pure abode, that is, immediately *on being* reborn therein. (5) attain nirvana almost immediately after arising in a pure abode; and (6) lives on for a while in that pure abode. And (6) is the slowest of the non-returners in terms of attaining nirvana: they progress through each one of the pure abodes, until they attain nirvana.<sup>343</sup>

<sup>336</sup> DA 2:511; AA 4:28, 190.

<sup>337</sup> On the pure abodes, see SD 47.15 (2.3).

<sup>338</sup> *Antarā, parinibbāyī*, one who attains final nirvana in the intermediate state.

<sup>339</sup> *Anupahacca, tala*, one who attains nirvana “without cutting into the ground.”

<sup>340</sup> *Upahacca, tala*, one who attains nirvana “upon cutting into the ground” or “upon landing.”

<sup>341</sup> DA 1030 = AA 2:350; cf SA 3:114; AA 4:7; Masfield 1986:115.

<sup>342</sup> See **Is rebirth immediate?** SD 2.17.

<sup>343</sup> Further see SD 2.17 (4.4)+(5).

In the 6<sup>th</sup> kind of non-returner, we can imagine goign through a series of “Chinese” caverns, where after entering the first portal into a huge beautiful cavern (Avihā), then we then find a second portal into another cavern (Atappā), then another portal (into Sudassā), and another (into Sudassī), and then a final portal (into Akaniṭṭhā). Here, the whole blissful journey would take 16,000 aeons!<sup>344</sup>

### 13.2 THE SUDDH’ĀVĀSA DEVAS’ WITNESSING

#### 13.2.1 Unique account

13.2.1.1 We have already noted the unique nature of the Buddha’s visit to Suddh’āvāsa, as recorded in the 3<sup>rd</sup> teaching [§§3.34-45], and briefly noted its significance [10.4.7.1]. Here, we will analyze the events in Suddh’āvāsa related to the Buddha’s visit there.

13.2.1.2 The Siamese and PTS manuscripts give abridged texts with *peyyālā*. Fortunately, we have fuller texts in the Burmese and the Sinhala manuscripts, which I have followed here.<sup>345</sup> The Dīgha Commentary tells us the Pali here gives only an abridged account (*pāli pana saṅkhittā*). If the Sutta recounts all the interviews of all the Suddh’āvāsa devas according to their abodes and the past buddhas they had attained non-return under, it would take a total of “21 recitals” (*eka, vīsati bhāṇavārā*)<sup>346</sup> (DA 2:480).

#### 13.2.2 Visit sequences

13.2.2.1 Multitudes of non-returners devas appear in turn before the Buddha, beginning with the Avihā devas, where the Buddha is. The deva multitudes present themselves before the Buddha according to the past buddha under whom they attained non-return, which they announce to him.

13.2.2.2 Here is a summary of the interviews of the various Suddh’āvāsa devas according to abodes and attainment of non-return under the past buddhas, given as “the 3<sup>rd</sup> teaching” in the Sutta, thus:

	<u>Pure abode devas</u>	<u>Attained non-return in the time of</u>
§3.34	The Buddha visits Avihā. <sup>347</sup>	
§3.34.3	Avihā	Vipassī
§3.35	Avihā	Gotama
§3.36	Atappā	Vipassī
§3.37	Sudassā	Vipassī
§3.38	Sudassī	Vipassī
§3.39	Akaniṭṭhā	Vipassī
§3.40	Suddh’āvāsa	Sikhī
§3.41	Suddh’āvāsa	Vessabhū
§3.42	Suddh’āvāsa	Kakusandha
§3.43	Suddh’āvāsa	Konāgamana
§3.44	Suddh’āvāsa	Kassapa
§3.45	Suddh’āvāsa	Gotama

Each of the multitude that appear before the Buddha would announce the name of the past buddha (including Gotama) under whom they have attained non-return, and then they list these 12 details about each of the buddhas, that is, his name, class, clan, life-span, bodhi tree, pair of chief disciples, arhat assembly, monk attendant, father or king, mother, and city (birthplace) [Table 1.0.4]. The time of the buddha (in aeons) is omitted.

<sup>344</sup> See **Purisa, gati S** (A 7.52), SD 82.10.

<sup>345</sup> The Be Ce Ee Se refs are all given at appropriate intervals.

<sup>346</sup> A “**recital**” (*bhāṇavāra*) is traditionally said to comprise 8,000 syllables (*akkhara*), usually measured as 250 stanzas of 32 syllables each, even for the prose sections. The most practical application of the term is that the reciters would break for a rest after each *bhāṇavāra*. [2.1.3]

<sup>347</sup> In the Skt version of **Mahā’padāna S** (SF36), the Buddha progressively visits each of the 5 pure abodes, beginning with the Avihā, and then returns to Jambu, dvīpa (India): <https://suttacentral.net/skt/sf36>. For Chin refs, see (1.0.1.2) sv Dīrghāgama.

## 14 Mahā Brahmā and his roles

### 14.1 BRAHMĀ AND EARLY BUDDHISM

#### 14.1.1 Trinity

14.1.1.1 Brahmā or Mahā Brahmā (“great Brahma”) is an Indian divinity, originally one in his own right. After the Buddha’s time, he became the first of the *trimurti* (“three forms”) or trinity, comprising Brahmā the creator, Viṣṇu the preserver, and Śiva.<sup>348</sup> Brahmā was adopted into the Buddhist pantheon as a Dharma protector (*dharmapāla*) and lord of the Brahma world (*brahmāloka*), here referring to the 1<sup>st</sup>-dhyana form world of the gods.<sup>349</sup>

14.1.1.2 Brahmā’s role as the first of the Trimurti, that of the “world-creator,” has little significance in a cyclic cosmology, where the universe is with neither beginning nor end. Perhaps because of his favourable roles in early Buddhism, he was (and is) the least worshipped by followers of Brahmanism and Hinduism. Indeed, of the Hindu gods, he has hardly a handful of temples in the whole of India. [9.2.2.3]

14.1.1.3 In the **Kevaḍḍha Sutta** (D 11), Brahmā is humorously depicted as playing the Creator’s role, even fancying himself with very grand epithets, as “Brahmā, the Great Brahmā, the Vanquisher, the Unvanquished, the Supreme Seer of All, the All-powerful, the Lord God, the Maker, the Creator, the Chief, the Ordainer, the Almighty, the Father of all that are and that will be.”<sup>350</sup>

However, when he is asked a question that troubles a meditating monk—where in this universe do the 4 element disappear without leaving a trace?—he privately admits to the monk that his knowledge, is after all, limited, and he directs the monk back to the Buddha, who knows the right answer.<sup>351</sup>

#### 14.1.2 Sahampati

14.1.2.1 In the later sutta narratives, Brahmā or one of the Brahmās, is called Sahampati, “lord of the *saha* [endurance] world. He is a key figure in the Buddha story who sees himself as being instrumental in inviting the “hesitant” newly awakened Buddha to proclaim the Dharma to the world [2.3]. Brahmā appears before the Buddha, beseeching him that there are those “with little dust in their eyes” who would be able to understand his teachings, and who would falter otherwise. Surveying the world, the Buddha agrees with Brahmā and declares that he would, after all, teach the Dharma.

14.1.2.2 The commentator Buddhaghosa, however, reminds us that the compassionate Buddha never has any hesitation about teaching the Dharma, but feels that if he is implored by Brahmā, who is revered in the world, it would greatly endorse his mission. This is an example of the assimilative genius of Buddhism, where dominant deities and traits of other religions are adapted into the service of the teaching.<sup>352</sup>

#### 14.1.3 Depiction

14.1.3.1 Brahmā is depicted with four faces and four arms, and his primary attributes are the lotus and the wheel (*cakka*), both incidentally common Buddhist symbols. The four faces represent the 4 divine abodes (*brahma, vihāra*),<sup>353</sup> which are said to be the inherent qualities of Brahmā himself. Each of the face faces a cardinal quarter, all of which signify the boundlessness of the abodes. **The Tevijja Sutta** (D 13), for example, presents Brahmā as inherently having all these boundless qualities.<sup>354</sup>

14.1.3.2 The lotus represents those who can be taught the Dharma,<sup>355</sup> represented by the wheel. In the post-Buddha iconography, the figure of Brahmā was merged with the early Indian Bodhisattvas, such as Padma, pāṇī, the “lotus-bearer,” who later evolved into Avalokiteśvara, the Bodhisattva embodiment of compassion (*karuṇa*). In Tantric iconography, Avalokiteśvara belongs to the Amitābha Buddha family, whose emblem is the lotus.<sup>356</sup>

<sup>348</sup> See Anant Ramchandra Kulkarni, *Buddha, the Trimurti, and Modern Hinduism*. Nagpur: Kulkarni, 1980.

<sup>349</sup> For their location in the 31-plane cosmology, see SD 1.7 (Appendix).

<sup>350</sup> D 11,80.4 (SD 1.7). For a humorous riposte to this, see **Brahmajāla S** (D 1,42/1:18), SD 25.2.

<sup>351</sup> D 11/1:211-223 (SD 1.7).

<sup>352</sup> See **Why the Buddha “hesitated” to teach**, SD 12.1. On **Brahmā Sahampati**, see SD 12.2 (2).

<sup>353</sup> See **Brahma, vihāra**, SD 38.5 esp (1.2.2).

<sup>354</sup> D 11 esp §81.2 (SD 1.8).

<sup>355</sup> See SD 12.2 (1.2).

<sup>356</sup> See Vessantara, *Meeting the Buddhas*, Birmingham, 1993:97-99 (see errata page).



## 14.2 BRAHMĀ IN THE SUTTA

### 14.2.1 Mahā, brahmā

14.2.1.1 Throughout Mahā'padāna Sutta, Brahmā is referred to only as “Great Brahmā” (*mahā, brahmā*) [§3.3 n] or “Almighty God” [14.1.1.3], whereas in parallel passages in **the Ariya Pariyesanā Sutta** (M 26), SD 1.11, **the Bodhi Rāja, kumāra Sutta** (M 85), SD 55.2, **the Brahmāyācana Sutta** (S 6.1), SD 12.2, and **the Vinaya** (V 1:4-7), he is called Brahmā Sahampati throughout [14.1.2]. In the Mahāvastu version, too, the deity who approaches the Buddha is simply referred to only as Mahā Brahmā, but, in this Sanskrit work, he is depicted as being accompanied by many other gods, including Sakra.

14.2.1.2 The fact that Brahma is unnamed in the Mahā'padāna Sutta may attest to the fact that the Sutta is older than these other Suttas that actually name him. A plausible explanation is that the narrative refers to the Buddha Vipassī, the first of the 7 buddhas, who lives 91 aeons before Gotama Buddha. Brahma Sahampati, the Mahā Brahmā of our epoch, the lord of the 1<sup>st</sup>-dhyana brahmas, has a lifespan of only 1 aeon.

14.2.3 It is clear, then, that the Mahā Brahmā of the Sutta and Brahmā Sahampati are different brahmas. The Mahā Brahmā of the Kevaḍḍha Sutta is probably a generic Mahā Brahmā who regards himself as “Almighty God.” He is clearly the brahminical Deity that the Sutta is lampooning<sup>357</sup> [14.1.1.3]. Sahampati, on the other hand, always plays a positive role in the suttas.<sup>358</sup>

### 14.2.2 Brahmā's 3 supplications

14.2.2.1 The Mahā'padāna Sutta, in its narrative, records Mahā Brahmā as supplicating to the Buddha on three occasions [2.3.4]:

- (1) When he thinks that Vipassī is hesitating to teach the Dharma [§3.3.3]
- (2) When Vipassī wonders if he should send the monks forth into the world [§3.28]
- (3) When, at the end of 6 years, it is time for the recitation of the Pātimokkha [§3.28.4]

On each of these three occasions, reading the Vipassī Buddha's mind, Mahā Brahmā at once appears before him and beseeches him to carry out the act that he is thinking about. Here, we see Mahā Brahmā as a “world-protector” (*loka, pāla*),<sup>359</sup> who sees himself as being compelled to ensure that there is goodness in the world. Hence, we see him rejoicing in the world's goodness and in the Buddha's presence [§3.1.1]

**14.3** In the Buddhist figure of Brahmā, we see **an existential role reversal of the God-figure**. We not only see a truly compassionate supreme being, but also one who actively participates in human affairs. In **the Brahma, deva Sutta** (S 6.3), for example, we see Brahmā himself appearing to his devotee, the mother of the monk Brahma, deva, telling her the futility of making earthly offerings to him (Brahmā), when she would greatly benefit from giving alms to his own son, who is an arhat.<sup>360</sup>

Instead of man supplicating God for guidance and succour, here it is the High God Himself who comes down from his heaven to supplicate the human Buddha to declare the Dharma for the world's good. Or, we can see the Buddha as a superhuman superdivine transcendental being—a *sub specie aeternitatis* [10.1.-11.3]—who appears in history for our benefit.

## V TIME AND NUMBER IN THE SUTTAS

## 15 The nature of time in the suttas

### 15.1 RELIGION AND TIME

#### 15.1.1 Linear concept of time

15.1.1.1 Non-Indian God-centred religions (such as tje Abrahamic systems) tend to have a linear conception of time: the world was created at the start, time began, and then that same world would end, permanently, as it were. One major problem with such a conception is that it is difficult to account for

<sup>357</sup> On Brahmā, see Greg Bailey, *The Mythology of Brahmā*, Oxford, 1983.

<sup>358</sup> On Brahmā Sahampati, see SD 12.2 (2)..

<sup>359</sup> In the suttas, the “world-protectors” (*loka, pāla*) are our qualities of moral shame (*hiri*) and moral fear (*ottappa*): see **Hiri Ottappa S or Cariya S** (A 2.1.9), SD 2.5(2c) & SD 1.5 (4).

<sup>360</sup> S 6.3/1:140-142 (SD 12.4).

what happened before creation, and what would happen after the world ended. The God-centred religions can only work their imagination in a post-creation and pre-destruction world religious realities.

15.1.1.2 The inherent intolerance of God-religions arises from the fact that it is impossible to speak of what happens before creation. Yet, it is simply human nature to question what can be questioned. What happened *before* creation? Who created God? Since no religious scripture are really clear, or can be clear, about such matters, the religious exponents of such systems would naturally find it difficult, even impossible, to give any satisfactory answers. Hence, it is necessary to take things on faith, and believe in what is officially taught by those with the authority to define the religion.

These are, as such, belief-systems. We need to believe in something we cannot know or can never know. Since we can never know, reason the theologians or priestly leaders, we have to believe. If such a belief system exists in itself—that is, its members have the freedom to think for themselves (which is rare)—then, it is likely there would be a great diversity of responses. Hence, we see the rise of sectarianism and dissent in the God-religions.

15.1.1.3 When God-religions are factored in with power—as they are wont to—then those in power would invariably try to dominate others, and have some form of control over those who dissent or do not believe. Here, belief is power; knowledge is freedom. In such a closed system, believers are conditioned to “believe that I may understand.”

Here, we are given a set of facts (religious truths), and we must work to *understand* them. This is a fixed understanding, one that is expected of some higher authorities. We may “understand,” but we must never *know*. In such a closed system, knowledge is fixed and measured, because knowledge sets us free—free from the theologians and priests, that is. In short, in a belief system, we must, to fit in, leave our minds in the hands of our religious minders.

15.1.1.4 In early Buddhism, although knowledge is seen as being useful in freeing us from ignorance and being controlled by our senses and by others, it is, in itself, incapable of freeing us from existential suffering. This is because this is only an understanding of the world out there. It is a *worldly* knowledge.

There is only one kind of knowledge that really frees us, that is, **self-understanding**. This is when we understand how our mind works. This understanding is intimately related to our understanding of impermanence, which is what *time* is really about.

### 15.1.2 Cyclic concept of time

15.1.2.1 The suttas employ the ancient Indian conception of time, that is, it is cyclic. It is with neither beginning nor end, only a “middle,” so to speak. But this middle is always moving, never still for even a moment. The linear concept of time is at best only takes a bite, or a phase (from point A to point B), from this endless cycle. Hence, it has only a quick peek at the awesome tapestry of past, present and future. Whatever such a linear mind can experience, is only a very brief moment, too brief to allow any meaningful attention for any useful understanding, but for preconceptions or speculations.

15.1.2.2 **Cyclic time** is as natural as the cycle of the sun and the moon, of the tides and the climate, of the growth, flowering, fruiting and seeding of plants, and of course of the cycle lives. There is a season to everything, even the sun itself. The physical universe, too, goes through a cycle of expansion, then stability, of contraction, and then stability. We exist while the physical universe takes momentary respite (in cosmic terms), when after expanding it rests.<sup>361</sup> This complete cycle of the universe is called a “world-cycle” (*kappa*), an aeon.<sup>362</sup>

15.1.2.3 Where there’s time, there’s space. If time is cyclic, **space** is boundless. However, our universe is bounded, so to speak: we cannot reach the universe’s end by going.<sup>363</sup> Yet, there are parallel universes just like ours, with all its realms, heavenly bodies, and galaxies,<sup>364</sup> this “ten-thousandfold world system”

<sup>361</sup> The 4-cycle aeon is given in **Kappa S** (A 4:156), SD 2.19 (Appendix 2). See also Vism 13.28-30/414-422; cf D 1:14, 3:109; It 15, 99; Pug 60; Kvu 11.5/455 f; Miln 232.

<sup>362</sup> On the aeon (*kappa*), see SD 2.19 Appendix esp (3).

<sup>363</sup> See the beautiful teaching on this the Buddha gives to a space-traveller: **Rohitassa S** (S 2.26 = A 4.45), SD 7.2.

<sup>364</sup> On parallel universes, see **Kosala S 1** (A 10.29,2), SD 16.15 & (**Ānanda**) **Abhibhū S** (A 3.80), SD 54.1; also SD 10.9 (8.2.3).

(*dasa,sahassa loka,dhātu*), each with a number of world systems (*cakka,vāḷa*)<sup>365</sup> like our own solar system. [15.1.3.4]

However, unlike his brahminical and Jain counterparts, the Buddha refuses to speculate over the problem of time and space, because they are philosophical speculations at best, and of no use at all to spiritual liberation. “Let the past be, let the future be!”<sup>366</sup> the Buddha declares, just watch “the present state, as it arises, | one sees each of them with insight.”<sup>367</sup> That’s where the answer lies: in the here and now, within oneself.<sup>368</sup>

### 15.1.3 Early Buddhist conception of the universe

15.1.3.1 The suttas rarely present any teaching which we might today term “cosmology.” The main purpose of the Buddha’s teaching is working in the here and now for awakening. However, to expedite his teachings, the Buddha accepts the cosmological ideas of his times, often modifying them to suit the drift of his teachings.<sup>369</sup>

15.1.3.2 These suttas, as a rule, do not speak of any of the realms of beings *cosmographically* as a structured spatial universe. From the contexts of accounts involving the heavenly beings or the subhuman beings, they appear to be hierarchical (by way of implicit teaching) in terms of the beings karma. Such a temporal cosmology (with their relative time scales) is closely related with our meditation attainments.<sup>370</sup>

15.1.3.3 In other words, such realms are **interdimensional**, that is, they exist as mental states, so that this universe’s end cannot be reached by going [15.1.2.3]. They are attained or reached via our mind, either through our karma (as a rule, after death) or through our meditation. After all, we are led by our minds (Dh 1+2).

We create our own worlds: just as we have a variety of mindsets behind our karmic acts, so, too, we have innumerable states of being, mind-based realms, painful or pleasurable.<sup>371</sup> Hence, the Buddha famously declares in **the Rohitassa Sutta** (S 2.26 = A 4.45): “So, avuso, in this very fathom-long body, endowed with perception and mind, I declare the world, the arising of the world, the ending of the world, and the way leading to the ending of the world.”<sup>372</sup>

15.1.3.4 Early Buddhism has some notion **a solar system**.<sup>373</sup> In **the (Ānanda) Abhibhū Sutta** (A 3.80) and **the Kosala Sutta 1** (A 5.29), the Buddha describes the universe as follows:

Bhikshus, as far as the sun and the moon revolve, illuminating the quarters with their light, there extends **the thousandfold world-system**.<sup>374</sup> In that thousandfold world-system there are<sup>375</sup>  
     a thousand moons,  
     a thousand suns,

<sup>365</sup> Lit “a ring of mountains.” The term *cakkavāḷa*, found mostly in comys, suggests that the comys see our world as being flat (a common notion in the ancient civilized world). On *cakravāḷa* (Skt), see 2005:2026 f.

<sup>366</sup> **Cūḷa Sakul’udāyi S** (M 79,7×2/2:32), SD 91.4.

<sup>367</sup> **Bhadd’eka,ratta S** (M 131,3.2), SD 8.9.

<sup>368</sup> See the famous stanza of the world out there being what it is, but “here (within oneself), the wise remove desire,” **Na Santi S** (S 1.34,7), SD 42.6 = **Nibbedhika S** (A 6.63,34), SD 6.11.

<sup>369</sup> See Kloetzli 2005:2028.

<sup>370</sup> See Marasinghe 1974:56 f, 94-97; Gethin 1997; Ency Bsm: Cosmology; Loka.

<sup>371</sup> On how feelings arise and affect us, see **Vedanā**, SD 17.3 (3).

<sup>372</sup> S 2.25/1:62 = A 4.45/2:48 (SD 7.2); see also Karunadasa 1967:171.

<sup>373</sup> It’s important to note that the Buddha does teach any kind of “scientific” conception of a Buddhist cosmogony or cosmology. On the contrary, as evident, for example, from **Cūḷa Māluṅkyā,putta S** (M 63), SD 5.8, the Buddha advises us to avoid speculative thoughts. In **Acinteyya S** (A 4.77), the Buddha specifically says that thinking about “the world” (*loka,cintā*), ie, its nature and origin, is “not to be thought of” (*acintetabba*) or “unthinkable” (*acinteyya*), as it is a mentally risky matter (esp for one without any scientific training), and may even result in madness, and so should be avoided (A 4.77), SD 27.5a. Instead, as Buddhist practitioners, we should give priority to mental cultivation and spiritual awakening.

<sup>374</sup> *Sahassa,loka,dhātu*. “Thousand” (*sahassa*) here is not an exact number but simply refers to the immensity of such a universe. A good intro to ancient Buddhist cosmology is Gethin 1998:112-132 (ch 5).

<sup>375</sup> On parallel universes, see also Kvu 13.1/476.

a thousand Sinerus, the kings of mountains,  
 a thousand Jambu,dvipas [Rose-apple Continents],<sup>376</sup>  
 a thousand Western Goyana continents [Apara,go,yāna],  
 a thousand Northern Kuru continents [Uttara,kuru],  
 a thousand Eastern Videha continents [Pubba,videha],  
 four thousand oceans,  
 four thousand maharajahs [emperors],  
 a thousand heavens of the Cātum,mahārājika [the 4 great guardian kings],  
 a thousand heavens of Yāma [the Yāma devas],  
 a thousand heavens of Tusita [contented devas],  
 a thousand heavens of Nimmana,rati [the devas who delight in creating],  
 a thousand heavens of Para,nimmita,vasavatti [the devas who lord over the creation of  
 others], and a thousand Brahma worlds. A 3.80 (SD 54.1) & A 15.29 (SD 16.15)

Note here that a plurality of “suns” and “moons” are mentioned here. We can see this as referring to other solar systems, or to parallel universes [15.1.2.3]. Mount Sineru (or Sumeru) here is not the Himalayas, but the axis mundi, the centre of the galaxy around which it revolves. We see here an awareness of spinning world systems.<sup>377</sup>

In other word, our solar system—including our earth—is not unique in such a system. Note, too, what is *not* mentioned here—that the earth is the centre of the universe. To that extent at least, early Buddhist cosmology, of all religious cosmologies, the closest to the basic ideas of modern scientific cosmology.<sup>378</sup>

15.1.3.5 After describing our solar system and its immediate universe, **the (Ānanda) Abhibhū Sutta** (A 3.80) goes on to describe the larger universe as comprising the following:

- (1) a system of 1,000 universes (*sahassī cūḷanikā loka,dhātu*), or a “small chiliocosm”;
- (2) a system of 1,000,000 universes (*dvi,sahassī majjhimikā loka,dhātu*), a “middle chiliocosm,” embracing 1,000 “small chiliocosms”; and
- (3) a system of 1,000,000,000 (one billion) universes (*tisahassī mahā,sahassī loka,dhātu*), a “great chiliocosm,” embracing 1,000 “middle chiliocosms.”<sup>379</sup>

15.1.3.6 **The Saṅkhār’upapatti Sutta** (M 120), in its teaching on “rebirth through aspiration,” describes the Brahma realm as comprising multiples of thousands of Brahmā-worlds, as follows:

a Brahmā of a “1,000-world system,”	<i>sahasso brahmā</i>	
a Brahmā of a “2,000-world system,”	<i>dvi,sahasso brahmā</i>	
a Brahmā of a “3,000-world system,”	<i>tri,sahasso brahmā</i>	
a Brahmā of a “4,000-world system,”	<i>catu-s,sahasso brahma</i>	
a Brahmā of a “5,000-world system,”	<i>pañca-s,sahasso brahmā</i>	
a Brahmā of a “100,000-world system.”	<i>sata,sahasso brahmā</i>	(M 120,12-18), SD 3,4

All these world systems constitute *only* the 1<sup>st</sup>-dhyana Brahmā realm with a 31-plane cosmology. Each of these descriptions is meant to be taken as a sort of meditation in connection with aspiring towards being reborn there, thus:

“Just as a man with good sight might take a myrobalan in his hand and review it, so a Brahma of a ... world system dwells resolved on pervading a world-system of ... worlds, and he dwells resolved on pervading the beings that have arisen there.” (M 120,12-18, abridged)<sup>380</sup> [1.6.1.1]

<sup>376</sup> *Jambu,dīpa* (Skt *Jambu,dvipa*) (the Rose-apple Continent) is the ancient name for the Indian sub-continent. See SD 16.15 (3).

<sup>377</sup> On the conception of a mythical Sineru, see *Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism*: Sumeru.

<sup>378</sup> On the Buddhist awareness of black holes and galaxies, see SD 2.19 (Appendix).

<sup>379</sup> A 3.80/1:227 (SD 54.1). **Abhidharma,kośa** 3:138-141 describes the *tri,sāhasra,mahā,sāhasra,loka,dhātu* in virtually identical terms.

15.1.3.7 Although this description is close to that of spatial conception of the universe, we must remind ourselves that the suttas, as a rule, refers to a temporal universe of worlds and realms—this can be called **the *asaṅkheyya* (uncountable) cosmology**. Only in the commentaries and in the Mahāyāna, the universe—the “thousandfold” (Skt *sāhasra*) cosmology—is described, as a rule, in spatial terms, and such vast spaces are conceived as containing countless Buddhas and their paradises.<sup>381</sup>

## 15.2 THE WORLD CYCLE

### 15.2.1 *Kappa*

15.2.1.1 The length of an aeon (*kappa*), is defined, or rather described, in **the Pabbata Sutta** (S 15.5), in a powerfully figurative way. Imagine a solid rocky mountain (we can also imagine it as a solid rock cube) 7 miles or 11.3 km on all sides, and every 100 years, someone were to come along and give it a gentle swipe with a piece of fine cloth—the whole mountain would have been flattened before an aeon has passed!<sup>382</sup>

This fabulously abstract notion of time probably reflected the ancient Indian awareness of the relative nature of time, and also the difficulty they face in conceiving time and space. However, such an imagination was clearly very advanced for their time.<sup>383</sup>

Even today, the scientists cannot really be sure how long our universe will last. Although scientists have some vague idea about old our universe is today, no one can be sure when it will end. And it does not really matter. What really matters is how we feel right now, and to treasure this moment; then, it's gone forever.<sup>384</sup>

### 15.2.2 The world-cycles and buddhas

15.2.2.1 Only one buddha arises in each epoch. There is never a need for more than only one buddha to turn the Dharma wheel.<sup>385</sup> Just as fire needs to be discovered only once, the wheel invented only once, and a ship having only one captain, it is obvious and natural that each world-system (*loka, dhātu*)<sup>386</sup> needs only one buddha for that epoch.<sup>387</sup>

15.2.2.2 However, not all epochs have a buddha in it. The Buddha, vamsa Commentary speaks of two kinds of epoch: the “void aeon” (*suñña, kappa*) when there is no buddha, pratyeka buddha or wheel-turning king, and the “non-void aeon” (*asuñña, kappa*), when there is a buddha.<sup>388</sup> The “non-void aeon” is a generic term for those aeons that have at least one buddha. [15.2.2.3]

15.2.2.3 **The “non-void” aeon** is of five kinds, each of the having at least one buddha, but not more than five—one buddha arising in each epoch—as follows:

<sup>380</sup> This excerpt is one of many visions of the happy realms which we can aspire to be born in. However, the Sutta concludes that the best is to aspire to have no rebirths at all! (M 120,37), SD 3.4.

<sup>381</sup> See Kloetzli 2005:2030.

<sup>382</sup> S 15.5/2:181 f. Cf Grimm's fairy-tale of the little shepherd-boy: “In Farther Pommerania there is a diamond mountain, one hour high, one hour wide, one hour deep. There, every hundred years a little bird comes out and whets its little beak on it. And when the whole mountain is ground off, then the first second of eternity has passed.” This story could have well come from our parable. (Quoted by BDict: Kappa)

<sup>383</sup> On the relativity of time, see **Pāyāsi S** (D 23,11.1-4), SD 39.4; see also **Patipūjika Vatthu** (DhA 4.4/1:362-366).

<sup>384</sup> Modern astronomy estimates the age of our universe as being between 13 and 15 billion years: *Facts on File Encyclopedia of Space and Astronomy*, New York, 2006:17 f. For an idea of the future of the universe in cosmic time, see [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Timeline\\_of\\_the\\_far\\_future](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Timeline_of_the_far_future). On *kappa* and *asaṅkheyya*, see SD 2.19 (App).

<sup>385</sup> **Bahu Dhātuka S** (M 115,14/3:65), SD 29.1a; A 1.277/1:27; Vbh 336. See BHSD: buddhakṣetra.

<sup>386</sup> From the powers and activities of the Buddha, we can deduce that *loka, dhātu* here refers to at least a galaxy or a whole universe (*cakka, vāḷa*), technically called a “buddha-field” (*buddha, khetta*, Tha 1087; Ap 1:4, 26, 29, 44, 2:444; Vism 414).

<sup>387</sup> Miln essentially the same thing but with circular rhetoric (Miln 236-239); the Dilemma is qu at MA 4:118-121; AA 2:11-14; VbhA 434-436.

<sup>388</sup> BA:Ce 191; cf Jtkm 20 f.



**The essential aeon**

(*śāra,kappa*) 1 buddha Koṇḍañña; Padum’uttara; Siddhattha; Vipassī, each on his own aeon

**The cream aeon**

(*maṇḍa,kappa*) 2 buddhas Sumedha, Sujāta; Tissa, Phussa; Sikhī, Vessabhū

**The noble aeon**

(*vara,kappa*) 3 buddhas<sup>389</sup> Anoma,dassī, Paduma, Nārada; Piya,dassī, Attha,dassī, Dhamma,dassī

**The essential cream aeon**

(*śāra.maṇḍa,kappa*) 4 buddhas Taṇhaṅkara, Medhaṅkara, Saraṇaṅkara, Dīpaṅkara; Maṅgala, Sumana, Revata, Sobhita

**The fortunate aeon**

(*bhadda,kappa*) 5 buddhas Kakusandha, Konāgamana, Kassapa, Gotama, Metteyya (yet to come)

**Table 15.2.2** The “non-void” aeons and buddhas**15.2.3 A buddha’s progress**

15.2.3.1 In practical terms, a **buddha** can be said to be a wise being who is the most experienced in terms of learning from his own suffering. From the Buddha,vaṃsa, we know that our Buddha took hundreds of thousands of world-cycles, meeting various other buddhas before he himself awakens as a buddha. From the hundreds of Jātaka stories, we are given the impression that he is by nature a wise and compassionate being for many lives even before he aspires to be buddha before Dīpaṅkara Buddha he meets.

15.2.3.2 **The Dīgha Commentary** (DA 410 f) gives a succession of buddhas in their respective aeons, longer than the one given in the Mahā’padāna Sutta. Our Buddha makes his aspiration to become buddha before Dīpaṅkara. In that same aeon, there are altogether 4 buddhas: Taṇhaṅkara, Medhaṅkara, Saraṇaṅkara and Dīpaṅkara. Then, followed one incalculable aeon devoid of buddhas.

In the final aeon of the incalculable, only one buddha, Koṇḍañña, arose. Then followed an aeon empty of buddhas.

At the end of the aeon of the incalculable, 4 buddhas—Maṅgala, Sumana, Revata, and Sobhita—arose in the one aeon. Then again there followed an incalculable aeon void of buddhas.

In the final aeon of this, and a 100,000 aeons and an incalculable aeon ago 3 buddhas arose in one aeon: Anomadassī, Paduma, and Nārada. Then there was another empty aeon.

100,000 aeons ago, only Padumuttara arose. 32,000 aeons ago 2 buddhas—Sumedha and Sujāta—arose in the same aeon. 18,000 aeons ago, 3 buddhas—Piyadassī, Atthadassī and Dhammadassī—arose in one aeon. 94,000 aeons ago, only one buddha, Siddhattha, arose.

(Now we come to the time-frame of the Mahā’padāna Sutta.) 91,000 aeons ago, Vipassī arose. 31,000 aeons, two buddhas—Sikhī and Vessabhū—arose. In the fortunate aeon, four buddhas—Kakusandha, Konāgamana, Kassapa and our Buddha Gotama—arose. Then, Metteyya will arise.

15.2.3.3 A life of Metteyya is given in **the Anāgata,vaṃsa**, a mediaeval poetic work by Kassapa, an elder of Coḷa country in south India. According to this work, the Bodhisattva currently in Tusita is named Ajita.<sup>390</sup>

Besides Metteyya, the names of nine other succeeding Bodhisattvas are given in **the Dasa,bodhisatt’-uppati,kathā**, “an account of the arising of ten Bodhisattvas.”<sup>391</sup> However, only Metteyya will arise in our present aeon.

<sup>389</sup> Comy: The first buddha announces the coming of the second, who announces the coming of the third (BA:Ce 191).

<sup>390</sup> JPTS 1886:33 f, 46 f.

<sup>391</sup> Bodhisatt’uppatikathā has almost the same contents as **Dasa,bodhisatta,uddesa**, of a very late date, prob written in Cambodia (from its peculiar SE Asian Pali: Supaphan na Bangchang, *The Development of Pāli Literature Based on the Suttanta Piṭaka Composed in Thailand* [Thai, BE 2533], 1990:190-196). See Hinüber, *A Handbook of Pāli Literature*, 1996:98 f

## 16 The nature of numbers in the suttas

### 16.1 A LANGUAGE OF LARGE NUMBERS

#### 16.1.1 Numbers that figure

16.1.1.1 We have already noted how the Buddha and the sutta compilers are aware of large numbers in connection with world systems or space [15.1.3.4-6] and of time [15.2.3.2]. It is difficult to see such numbers literally. In the spirit of **Neyy’attha Nīt’attha Sutta** (A 2.3.5+6), we need to ask ourselves: “What do such numbers mean?”

16.1.1.2 If we are learned in modern mathematics or astronomy, we may actually see that even such big numbers are not really big when we speak about stars, star systems or world systems in outer space. The question then arises: Do these sutta passages actually refer to the physical universe, or mentally constructed realities, or to parallel universes?<sup>392</sup> We cannot give any exact answer here.

16.1.1.3 Perhaps, we can at best settle for a surmise that such big numbers simply signify the vastness and comparative sizes of the universes or realms in question. Note also that there is an imagery of Brahmā looking at his thousandfold realm, which looks the size of a myrobalan (or a walnut) [15.1.3.6]. This parable is to help us visualize such a great vastness of world. Perhaps, we may feel the same awe-inspiring zest when we peacefully gaze at the moonless starry night sky.

#### 16.1.2 Vipassī’s 3 communities of monks

16.1.2.1 **The Mahā’padāna Sutta** mentions “6,800,000” (*aṭṭha,saṭṭhiṃ bhikkhu,sata,sahassam*) [§1.6(7)] as the number of those who have been admitted into the order by Vipassī himself, before the great commission [§3.31]. **The Buddha,vaṃsa** (Ee), however, gives the number as being only “68,000” (*aṭṭha,saṭṭhi,sahassam*, B 20.8/77). This figure seems acceptable, when contrasted with the other two numbers, but this reading is found only in the European (Pali Text Society) manuscript. All the other manuscripts we know have the same reading as that of the Mahā’padāna Sutta.

16.1.2.2 Both the Mahā’padāna Sutta and the Buddha,vaṃsa agree in mentioning the three assemblies of Vipassī Buddha. The first assembly (*sannipāta*) is that of 6,800,000 monks [§3.27]; the second, 100,000; and the third 80,000 [§3.23] (B 20.8-9). The last figure of 80,000 is given as 84,000 in the Mahā’padāna Sutta—this is the number of the very first group of renunciants who join Vipassī when he himself renounced the world. Then, Vipassī goes on a solitary quest. The 84,000 return to Vipassī after he has awakened.

### 16.2 RELATIVITY OF LARGE NUMBERS

#### 16.2.1 Scale of things

16.2.1.1 The numbers of 6,800,000 monks [§§1.10, 3.27], 100,000 monks [§1.10] and 84,000 [§§2.16, 3.18] are clearly astronomical. However, we need not conclude that they are “absurd” in any way (pace D:W 563 n305)—unless we lack faith in literary licence or religious imagination, even scientific possibility, viz, the relativity of time. It should be remembered that this story about the world some 91 aeons ago [§1.4], when the average human lifespan in Vipassī’s age is 80,000 years [§1.7]. We are dealing with a very different scale of things here in the very long distant past.

16.2.1.2 It is interesting to note some unique characteristics of our Buddha Gotama compared to the other 24 buddhas (going back to Dīpaṅkara) [8.2.3]. The duration of **austerities** for Sobhita, Nārada, Padumuttara, Dhammadassī and Kassapa is only 7 days (the shortest), while Dīpaṅkara, Koṇḍañña, Sumana, Anomadassī, and Siddhattha each spend 10 months of austerities. Only our Buddha Gotama’s duration of austerities is the longest: 6 years!<sup>393</sup>

Another interesting difference amongst the buddhas is their height. As a rule, the older buddhas of the past are very much taller than the later ones. **Gotama Buddha** is traditionally said to be 18 hands tall (8.1 m = 26.6 ft). These ancient measurements are problematic. If we assume that our Buddha were about 6 ft tall, by way of ratio, we might estimate that **Kassapa** would be about 6.6 feet tall. However, the numbers grow exponentially for the other buddhas, so that **Dīpaṅkara** is 80 hands (36 m = 118.1 ft)!

<sup>392</sup> But see also Reflection, “Parallel universes,” R450, 2016.

<sup>393</sup> For a full list of the 24 buddhas, the vehicle they left home with, and the duration of their austerities, see B:H xxxvi.

We must assume that humans of those distant past were giants, or we must allow latitude for such accounts as being more instructive than they are historical.<sup>394</sup> Then, again, before the age of discovery, many South and South-east Asians, for example, could not imagine there were tall white Europeans. And much earlier before that, even the best educated amongst us thought that the world was a flaty disc!

### **16.2.2 The right time**

16.2.2.1 The duration of “80,000” years is very significant: it is Vipassī’s lifespan [§1.7]. We know from the Buddhavaṃsa commentary that if the human lifespan is more than 100,000, it is not the time for a buddha to arise. Long-lived humans would not understand what impermanence, suffering and non-self are.

If the human lifespan is only 10 years, they would be filled with so much defilements that they would not be able to attend to the Dharma. Moreover, their lifespan will be too short to effectively understand any Dharma. (BA 273)

16.2.2.2 **The Cakka,vatti Sīha,nāda S** (D 26) says that when the human lifespan is 80,000 years, only when a girl reaches 500 years is she matured and ready for marriage!<sup>395</sup> A further hint of the relativity of time is alluded to by the fact that the monks meet in conclave for Pātimokkha recital, neither weekly nor fortnightly, but only once every 6 years.

## **APPENDIX**

## **17 Canonicity, authority and Buddhism**

### **17.1 WHAT IS BUDDHISM?**

#### **17.1.1 Academic Buddhisms**

17.1.1.1 Modern academic Buddhist studies began in **the 19<sup>th</sup> century in Europe**, mainly as the side-effects of western colonialism. Around the same time, **Japan**, too, saw her own rise in Buddhist studies but which was mostly limited to the Japanese-speaking circle.<sup>396</sup> Much of the texts and exegeses we have today of “modern Buddhism,” the kind of Buddhism we see spreading and evolving globally today, have been available due significantly to this modern Buddhist studies.

17.1.1.2 **Western colonialism**, especially the rise of the British empire in Asia, opened to the intellectually aware colonial administrators and observers an eye-opening, firstly, of the remarkable similarities of English and western languages with Sanskrit and related Indian languages. Through these windows, the colonials applied their advanced academic discipline to open new doors of learning of oriental cultures, bringing about the discovery—and, to some extent, the invention—of Buddhism.<sup>397</sup>

17.1.1.3 On account of this development, some scholars have wondered if **modern Buddhism**—especially in the media of western languages (such as the one we are engaged in)—is a scholarly “construction.”<sup>398</sup> Such a conjecture may well be true of how westerners and westernized Buddhists see Buddhism, and how scholars study it.

17.1.1.4 But serious practitioners of Buddhism—those who study the suttas, keep to some level of moral commitment, and practise some form of Buddhist meditation—can only wistfully smile at this sometimes magisterial uncertainty that seems to be aimed at ensuring Buddhist studies to be an academically relevant discipline and economically profitable profession, especially for “external observers.” There is a mutual benefit is that both the academics and the Buddhist practitioner found their **profession** in Buddhism, although each side for very different reasons [17.1.3].

<sup>394</sup> See B:H xxxii. Also SD 49.3 (2.1.2.1), on Kassapa’s height. On how the historical Buddha probably looks like, see Reflection R135b, “What the Buddha really looks like,” 2010.

<sup>395</sup> D 26,22.4+26.19 (SD 36.10).

<sup>396</sup> See in Lewis R Lancaster, “Buddhist Studies,” in Eliade, *Ency of Religion*, 1987:554-560. For refs to Buddhist studies in Japanese, see Nakamura 1980.

<sup>397</sup> For helpful surveys, see, eg, Philip C Almond, *The British Discovery of Buddhism*, Cambridge U Press, 1988; C S Prebish & M Baumann, *Westward Dharma: Buddhism beyond Asia*, U of California Press, 2002.

<sup>398</sup> See eg (eds) Karen Derris & Natalie Gummer, *Defining Buddhism(s): A reader*. London: Equinox, 2007.

17.1.1.5 No doubt, such studies are often valuable in helping us better understand the roots, nature, transformation and transmission of Buddhism as we have it today. Buddhists generally value the inquiring and critical spirit, and of personal direct experience of true reality. Understandably, there are some scholars (and a growing number of them) who, realizing that—just as we cannot usefully teach or write music unless we know and play, or at least, listen to, music, and love it—we cannot know Buddhism (especially as a religion, a spiritual system, and meditation) unless we practise it ourselves.<sup>399</sup>

### **17.1.2 What is a Buddhist canon?**

17.1.2.1 **Steven Collins**, in his essay, “**On the very idea of the Pali canon,**” tries to argue that we have to reject any notion that “the Pali Canon = Early Buddhism.” He is convinced that text alone is insufficient to determine what we see as “early Buddhism.” He argues that for so many things either not found or not emphasized in the Canon, and usually seen as “later” developments, there is, in fact, extensive evidence in the earliest archaeological and epigraphical remains.<sup>400</sup>

17.1.2.2 Collins’ key contention is that the Pali canon is merely “a closed list of scripture ... [that] should be seen as a *product* of [the Theravāda], as part of a strategy of legitimation by the monks of the **Mahāvihāra lineage** in Ceylon [modern Sri Lanka] in the early centuries of the first millennium AD.” (1990:89). This legitimation effort, argues Steven, was to denounce the rival monastery, the Abhayagiri, which favoured *vetulla, vāda*, a term for Mahāyāna teachings.

17.1.2.3 Since the Abhayagiri was patronized by the king, the Mahāvihāra monks, worried that the “original” teachings (the Pali canon) would be lost, had them **written down** at Alu-vihāra (or Āloka-vihāra) near modern Matale in Central Sri Lanka, under the patronage of the local chieftain.<sup>401</sup> Apparently, the idea of having such a Canon according to Steven, was an act of “Sinhalese nationalism” by the Mahāvihāra to establish Sri Lanka as the “Dharma-land” (*dharmā, dīpa*, literally “dharma island”), in other words, to “catholicize” Theravada as the country’s dominant religion and remove all traces of Mahāyāna from Sri Lanka. (1990:100)

17.1.2.4 In significant ways, the Mahāvihāra, in due course, succeeded in establishing **Theravāda** as the dominant faith of Sri Lanka, that is what we see to this day. However, Collins continues (paraphrasing his arguments), there is really no such thing as a “Pali Canon” or even “Early Buddhism.” It depends on who is defining Buddhism and for what purpose. [17.1.3]

The reality is that Buddhism as *practised* by the masses is very different from “Canonical” Buddhism. The Pali Canon, then, is a “closed *tipitaka*” (one that is a “fixed” collection, and does not accept any other texts except those of its own ideology as being “canonical”)—this is a kind of “**scripturalism**,” that is, a “conservative and/or reformist, text-oriented self-definition.”<sup>402</sup> Furthermore, the very idea of a Pali Canon itself is just that: an *idea*, or that it is merely “a ‘canon’ in Pali, one amongst others.” (1990:104)

### **17.1.3 A professing professional**

17.1.3.1 Collins’ thesis is that there is not such thing as a Pali “Canon,”<sup>403</sup> and its corollary is that there is no “Early Buddhism,” that is, we cannot know what exactly the Buddha taught because he had left not reliable records of his teachings. This is a good example of what we may call a “scholar’s Buddhism,” or an academic construction of Buddhism.

<sup>399</sup> See esp (eds) Roger R Jackson & John J Makransky, *Buddhist Theology: Critical reflections by contemporary Buddhist scholars*. Richmond, UK: Curzon, 2000.

<sup>400</sup> Admitting the influence of Gregory Schopen, Collins (1990:89+n3) quotes the former’s essays: “Filial piety and the monk in the practice of Indian Buddhism,” in *T’oung Pao* 70, 1984; “Two problems in the history of Indian Buddhism,” in *Studien zur Indologie und Iranistik*, Heft 10, 1985; and “The stupa cult and the extent and extant Pali Vinaya,” in *Journal of the Pali Text Soc* 13, 1989.

<sup>401</sup> Collins 1990:98+n38, quoting E W Adikaram, *Early History of Buddhism in Ceylon*, Colombo, 1946:79.

<sup>402</sup> Collins 1990:102. “Scripturalism” was first used in this way by cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz, *Islam Observed*, Univ of Chicago Press, 1968, and has been applied to Theravāda by S J Tambiah, *World Conqueror, World Renouncer*, Cambridge Univ Press, 1976 & George D Bond, *The Buddhist Revival in Sri Lanka*, Univ of South Carolina Press, 1988. Quoted by Collins 1990:115 n51.

<sup>403</sup> A canon may be defined collection of texts, usually religious, regarded as authentic and authoritative, to the exclusion of other texts. For a discussion, see G T Sheppard 1987, in Eliade, *Ency of Religion* 3:62-69, sv Canon.



17.1.3.2 If a scholar sees his profession as a job, then he sees Buddhism as an object of scrutiny and discourse; if he sees his profession as faith, then, he sees Buddhism as a mirror for self-scrutiny and self-discourse. The “professing professional” (a juxtaposition of the old and the modern meanings)<sup>404</sup> is twice blest: he studies Buddhism firsthand, not as an outsider, of his personal and direct experience of Buddhism, and he experiences the benefits of Buddhist living, too.

Studying Buddhism is like studying one of the fine arts. Indeed, we cannot merely “study” such an art: we have to *do* it to. As we have noted: it’s like learning music [19.1.1.4]. It’s like learning a language: we cannot do this as an “outsider,” even if we diligently compile the language’s vocabulary and measure all its sounds: we need to learn and speak the language, and this is only the beginning of it.

So, too, Buddhism is a living experience. We don’t learn much by merely *watching* even the best experts meditating! Quantum physics has debunked the outsider, the “scientific” 3<sup>rd</sup> person. For, even as we study, we are also constructing our object of study. It is this construction that we need to understand and work with. Otherwise, we are merely sticklers of an outmoded learning style, studying the whole forest but missing the greatest tree of them all.

17.1.3.3 While an academic scholar may rightly see Buddhism in a “professional” (a scientific 3<sup>rd</sup> person way), he should be sensitive to the profession of a Buddhist practitioner who sees Buddhism as a way of life leading to self-awakening, and wishes to follow a clearly defined path of authentic teachings so that he would attain the professed goals, especially some level of awakening in this life. A scholar may construct “Buddhisms” from his learned discipline and for his academic livelihood, but a **professing Buddhist**—especially one with a vision of early Buddhism—is working to deconstruct his own views and biases, so that he would not find any benefit in taking more views, and diverting his spiritual efforts in ways which would distract from his avowed spiritual goals and relating to others in a joyful Dharma-spirited way.

On the other hand, a scholar who professes and practises Buddhism has a greater advantage than even most ethnic or traditional followers. The professed scholar, being intelligent and focused, will know the Buddha’s teachings in great depth, and, as such, is in a better position to practise more effectively, and enjoying the full benefits of the teaching. Such a scholar, as a wise and compassionate teacher, would be an invaluable Dharma guide and worker, especially if he dedicates himself to the propagation of the true teachings.

17.1.3.4 If such a scholar were to later renounce the world to be a monastic, he would further deepen his practice with greater confidence, and be an even better teacher. This is certainly a very much better approach than that of first becoming a monastic, and then, despite the avowed renunciation, taking up a lay academic commitment, and ending up as a career monastic. Although a career monastic may seem acceptable to the world, he is, in fact, an antithesis to his avowed spiritual life of renunciation as taught by the Buddha.<sup>405</sup>

17.1.3.5 Buddhism, as an object of study, by the very nature of academic study, can only be a part of the whole. Scholars, depending on their field of interest, would study Buddhism as literature, as history, as archaeology, as art, as architecture, as a religion; or Buddhism may be views through the lenses of history, geography, sociology, economics, psychology, or comparative religion. None of these are complete in themselves.

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<sup>404</sup> OED gives this range of meanings of “**profession**”: (1) “the declaration, promise, or vow made by one entering a religious order, the action of entering such an order; that fact of being professed in a religious order” (1225); (2) “The profession of religion; the declaration of belief in and obedience to religion, or of acceptance and conformity to the faith and principles of any religious community; hence, the faith or religion, which one professes” (1526). (3) “In wider sense: Any calling or occupation by which a person habitually earns a living. Now usually applied to an occupation considered superior to a trade or handicraft; but formerly, and still in vulgar (or humorous) use, including these” (1576).

<sup>405</sup> A career monastic would habitually break the rules, especially those forbidding money and property, and socializing with the laity: see **Money and monastics** (SD 4.19). The Buddha himself rejects even alms given as “fees” for Dharma instructions given: see **Kasi Bhāra, dvāja S** (S 7.11 = Sn 1.4), SD 69.6.



That completeness—of taking Buddhism wholly as it is, can only be experienced by a true practitioner. The interesting irony of it all is that Buddhism is still complete and efficacious without being analyzed and dissected as any of these fields. Once in the “third-person” hands of the academic specialists, Buddhism at once loses its efficacy, simply because they do not see Buddhism as it really and fully is.

17.1.3.6 Scholars often pride themselves in declaring that they are examining Buddhist *as is*, meaning as it is practised or viewed by a certain community at a certain time, or examining some ancient artifacts, such as stupas and epigraphs. Based on such studies, and perhaps other related studies, they conclude, “This is *it!*”

Sometimes, the conclusion can be bizarre. A certain scholar studied the conduct of certain monastics in a post-Buddha India—basing his study on some texts, inscriptions and other ancient records—concluded that these monks engaged in financial transactions, money-lending, and so on. Even if this were true, it only showed that those monks under study engaged in such misdemeanours. This was simply not true of all other monks!

To conclude that on account of such a find, that *all* other monastics, even from the Buddha’s times, engaged in financial and commercial enterprises—and to conclude that the Buddha was therefore himself a businessman!<sup>406</sup>—would simply be bad scholarship, to say the least. Clearly, such a scholar is unaware of the spirit of early Buddhism, or unsympathetic to it.<sup>407</sup> Some critics might even wonder if he was trying to make waves for a fruitful fish harvest when he is not even good at fishing.<sup>408</sup> The point is that we should at least be respectful of our field of study that is our livelihood, and not bite the Buddha’s hand, even if in a studious manner. It is simply tragic to merely see and follow the letter of Buddhism, but be dead to the spirit of the Dharma.

## 17.2 WHAT DEFINES BUDDHISM?

### 17.2.1 Scripture and practice

17.2.1.1 If we have a canon of scriptures, and a mastery of the language, hermeneutics, and related skills, then we are in an excellent position to better distinguish between what is authentic and what is spurious, what is helpful and what is unhelpful in our practice, whether individually or as a community. In an important sense here, it is the canon that defines Buddhism; it is the Dharma that defines itself.

17.2.1.2 This last phrase—“it is the Dharma that defines itself”—needs explanation, lest we fall for the false notion that the Dharma is a living essence or cosmic presence that communicates with us, and so on. Essentially, the phrase means that, with right practice, we will see the Dharma for what it really is, and not what we make it to be. This clarifying vision arises from proper mental cultivation and joyful meditation. Only the calm and clear mind can directly see the Dharma as true reality.

Here, it makes good sense to differentiate “canon” with a small “c,” and “Canon” with a big “C”—at least for the purpose of illustrating a vital point here. The canon of scriptures—the Dharma-Vinaya of early Buddhism—even as the most authoritative, authentic or sacred texts, are just that, texts. They are like a user’s guide or an operations manual, not useful in themselves,<sup>409</sup> but they are very helpful, even necessary, for the proper assembly and operation of a tool or machine, especially when we are doing this for the first time, or not sure of what to do.

If we merely collect or preserve scriptures, no matter how sacred—this is like collecting user’s manuals without any wish to use what they are for—then, these scriptures become a Canon, with the big “C.” This practical vision is clear from the parable of the raft in **the Alagaddûpama Sutta** (M 22), which says

<sup>406</sup> We may, of course, use “businessman” in a figurative sense, as a discussion on the virtues of right livelihood, but it is simply problematic if we take it literally here. It would clearly reflect a scholar’s insensitivity to his own profession and livelihood, even a desperation to prove his relevance.

<sup>407</sup> See eg **Right livelihood**, SD 37.8.

<sup>408</sup> See eg Gregory Schopen, “[The Buddha as a businessman](#),” 2009.

<sup>409</sup> The figure is, of course, limited here, because Buddhist scriptures in themselves, unlike a user’s manual, serve as an interesting field of study as literature.

that the Dharma is merely a tool for awakening, and need to be applied (not merely studied or worshipped), and our views of it, no matter how noble, would then fall away like dead leaves.<sup>410</sup>

17.2.1.3 Although practitioners of early Buddhism look up to **the Pali canon** as an authoritative and authentic source of teachings, they are also open to the canons and teachings of other Buddhist schools, even of other religions, which may help them in their quest for a morally virtuous life, mental cultivation, and the wisdom of true reality—or simply for a better understanding of the Buddha and his teachings. Nevertheless, the best source of Dharma teachings for self-understanding and spiritual liberation is undeniably the early Buddhist texts themselves.

17.2.1.4 Although we have the Pali canon, the Chinese canon and the Tibetan canon, amongst our **major canons of Buddhist scriptures**, the reality on the ground is very different. The ordinary Buddhists generally do not read, much less study, the Buddhist scriptures, despite their accessibility today (or in the past). However, we are seeing a slow, but significant, change in recent times, with online (that is, global) availability of annotated translations with modern commentaries, and also the various canons in roman script.

For those who are not inclined to take advantage of such helpful resources, they have to rely on the vagaries of pluralistic and vague Buddhisms, which are characteristic of ethnic Buddhisms. The plural, “**Buddhisms**,” is descriptive of the individualistic approaches of the various temples, groups, even individuals. Moreover, in Singapore and Malaysia), many, if not most, such Buddhist centres are owned or run by clerics or by lay organizations or even by lay individuals, often as business enterprises.

In such a milieu, the ordinary Buddhist is more likely to end up as *members* or *subscriber* to a Buddhist business than attending Dharma classes or benefitting from Dharma-based ministries. Devotees and seekers have a wide choice of engagements as with a free market of retail outlets, but is really caught in a rut of shopping around a range of very private and limited religious enterprises of Chinese Mahayana Buddhism, Tibetan Gelugpa Buddhism, Thai Theravada Buddhism, Burmese Vipassana Buddhism, Japanese Soka Gakkai Nichiren Buddhism, and so on.<sup>411</sup>

17.2.1.5 Curiously, we do not see any centres promoting, say, “Malaysian Buddhism” or “Singapore Buddhism.” This is clearly because local Buddhists are generally quite new to Buddhism in terms of cultural history, and so are dependent on “imported” or other ethnic Buddhisms, or even the dominant religion of the day. This does not mean that a “local” Buddhism is desirable without question. Some useful answers may probably be found in the careful study of how Buddhism is growing in the west and westernized societies, and how Buddhist groups there—especially those of the “convert Buddhists”<sup>412</sup>—organize themselves and practise Buddhism. After all, the Dharma is not about *affiliation*, but our attitude towards self-understanding and a wholesome social life.<sup>413</sup>

17.2.1.6 Such temples, monasteries or organizations are usually owned or run by middle-aged or young clerics (some as “CEOs”), often with academic qualifications, and lineage titles—clearly, signs of ambition, charisma, and worldliness. Such institutions often have a regular calendar of well organized religious and social events and periodic activities, including meditation classes and retreats, sutra studies, Buddhist talks, musical events, craft classes, and so on, very much like a community centre.

Invariably, almost all such activities are planned and executed for only one purpose: to attract and maintain a pool of donors, supporters and volunteers necessary to run an organized religion and serve the clerics themselves. In recent years, the growing number of clerical scandals is only befuddling and challenging to the faithful. However, such increasingly brazen worldly conduct of the clerics of organized

<sup>410</sup> The last analogy is not mentioned in the Sutta, but implicit there: **M 22**, 12-14/1:134 f (SD 3.13).

<sup>411</sup> Pluralistic Buddhisms have their benefits, such as providing Buddhist teachings and social cohesion, for their members, and in the Buddhist spirit networking with other Buddhist groups. In other words, such groups can be beneficial if they are not racist, worldly or narrow in spirit.

<sup>412</sup> On “convert Buddhism” and “ethnic Buddhism,” see W D Hickey, “[Two Buddhisms, three Buddhisms, and racism](#),” *Journal of Global Buddhism* 11, 2010:1-25. Also Voice of America, “[Ethnic Buddhism vs convert Buddhism – 2002-12-15](#),” 27 Oct 2009.

<sup>413</sup> See Reflection, “Change please,” R247, 2012.

Buddhism is easier to understand when we see their religious activities as **commercial enterprises**, often under a cloud of a feudalistic hangover.<sup>414</sup> In short, there may be Buddhism here, but certainly little or no Dharma.

### 17.2.2 Historical and non-historical approaches

17.2.2.1 As followers of early Buddhism, we accept the fact that the texts of the Dharma-Vinaya are a “closed” canon, for at least one good reason. It records the lives and teachings of the Buddha and his early saints. The Buddha and the saints may be dead, but the truth they embody is still with us in the canon. This canon of tales and teachings are as close as we can get to the historical realities of early Buddhism.

This approach to Buddhism, stressing on the historical Buddha and his teachings, is what some scholars called “historical” or “**historicist**.”<sup>415</sup> Early Buddhism centres on history, human events that actually happened (that the Buddha was born, lived, taught and died). Such an approach vitally highlights the truth of impermanence underlying all of life and the Dharma, how we understand our lives and beyond. If there is any notion that the Buddha does not die, or is eternal, then the Dharma he teaches cannot be true.

17.2.2.2 The Mahāyāna movement that started around the beginning of the Common Era, as a revolution, that at first reinterpreted those teachings they were trying to reject—this is best exemplified in the Perfection of Wisdom Sutras. In due course, the Mahāyāna revolutionaries, as if more confident of themselves, took a “**non-historicist**” approach.

According to a central Mahāyāna doctrine of **the Trikāya** (the “Three Bodies”) of the Buddha: the emanated body, that is, Sakyamuni Buddha—who is impermanent and suffers from decay and death—is only an “emanated body” or projection (*nirmāṇa, kāya*) of something higher. Such a doctrine is known as docetism, which is a theological term, referring to the view or doctrine according to which the Buddha, in his human form, that is, his historical and bodily existence, is altogether mere semblance without any true reality.<sup>416</sup>

17.2.2.3 Most of the numerous Buddhas of the Mahāyāna pantheon exist, according to the Mahāyāna, each in their own timeless form or “bliss body” (literally, “enjoyment body,” *sambhoga, kāya*), exist in the paradises they have created for themselves throughout the cosmos. In simple terms, we can see them as “cosmic Buddhas,” and with them, the cosmic Bodhisattvas, often regarded as the hypostates of various qualities, such as compassion (Avalokiteśvara) and wisdom (Mañjuśrī).

The notion of the “truth body” (*dharmakāya*) evolved into a kind of transcendental principle—like the Vedic Brahman, or universal Soul—from which all the Buddhas arise or are projected. Hence, the Mahāyāna Buddhas have, in effect, become eternal beings, like the theistic God, but thankfully without his wrath and caprices, but constant compassion and wonders.

17.2.2.4 On a psychological note, the Trikāya doctrine is clearly a reaction to the Buddha’s death, which seems to traumatize the proponents of Mahāyāna—they simply could not accept the Buddha’s death. It is as if the Mahāyāna itself is a protracted unresolved mourning process, denying his death, imagining his presence, waiting for his return—and endlessly looking for explanations of the Buddha’s state, and strengthening the psychological defence of denial—they worked to find ways to keep him alive somehow.

Unfortunately, we now well know that such a prolonged mourning is neither emotionally satisfying nor spiritually healthy. We have to leave the dead buried or cremated, and move on.<sup>417</sup> The best way to remember and respect our very first spiritual ancestor, the Buddha, is by honouring his instructions to accept

<sup>414</sup> See eg recent developments in Thai Buddhism: “[Supreme patriarch row won’t help clergy](#)” (Bangkok Post, 6 Jan 2015) & “[Supreme patriarch appointment: Dhammakaya or not?](#)” (Bangkok Post, 9 Jan 2016), reports by Sanitsuda Ekachai & Jon Fernquest.

<sup>415</sup> **Historicism**, as a philosophical term, is a mode of thinking that assigns major significance to a specific context, such as historical period, location and local culture.

<sup>416</sup> This def is based on that of Christian theology: Norbert Brox, *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte* 95. Kohlhammer Verlag, 1984: 3010-314. See also Anesaki, Masaharu, “Docetism (Buddhist),” in James Hastings (ed) *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics* (ERE) 1911, 4:835-840. The article is dated but is interesting reading: Access to [ERE](#).

<sup>417</sup> On the protracted mourning of the Buddha’s death, see SD 48.2 (6.2.2.4).

his own impermanence,<sup>418</sup> and to honour him with the “supreme worship,” that is, practise the Dharma by keeping the precepts, cultivating our minds, and carefully observing the impermanence in all things.<sup>419</sup> [12.3.1.1]

17.2.2.5 While in early Buddhism records only the “revelation” by way of the Buddha’s teachings, occurred in history, the Mahāyāna now imagined revelations as on-going, coming from the countless Buddhas that populate this vast cosmos. In literary terms, this is a remarkable licence that the Mahāyāna had obtained for themselves: they could not write (the Mahāyāna was a book-based movement) anything they wanted, and they did, in great profusion.<sup>420</sup>

### 17.3 THE DHARMA: THE ETERNAL AND THE TIMELY

#### 17.3.1 The eternal Dharma

17.3.1.1 We may think that early Buddhist teachings are historicist in approach [17.2.2.1]. This, however, is not always the case. It is often possible, even necessary, to read certain early Buddhist stories or teachings in a non-historicist manner, that is, as teachings that transcend time and space, a kind of universal truth. Indeed, we can say that the Buddha’s teaching—his “timeless truth” (*akalika, dhamma*,<sup>421</sup> *sanantana, dhamma*<sup>422</sup>)—is transhistorical.

17.3.1.2 In such discourses as **the Paccaya Sutta** (S 12.20) and **the Dhamma Niyāma Sutta** (A 3.1.-34), the Buddha famously declares that the 3 universal characteristics<sup>423</sup>—that all formations are impermanent and unsatisfactory, and all principles are non-self—and dependent arising<sup>424</sup> exist and operate all the same. Such teachings that the Buddha puts the Dharma first, even above himself: the teaching above the teacher, and also as a deterrent against any guru cult.<sup>425</sup> This is, in fact, clearly stated in **the Gārava Sutta** (S 6.2).<sup>426</sup>

17.3.1.3 The Mahāyāna innovators, however, reinterpreted this teaching to mean that the Dharma exists in itself—and since it is “above” the Buddha himself—must be “greater” than the Buddha, or that it is his true body (since it exists whether or not there is a human Buddha), as reflected in the *dharma, kāya* idea [17.2.2.3].

17.3.1.4 Ideas are memes: they perpetuate themselves to assimilate and consume whoever creates them or who holds them.<sup>427</sup> Since the Dharma pre-exists the Buddha, even after the Buddha’s death, the Dharma will continue teaching itself, so they think. This is a great idea, as it means that *everything* is Dharma; it’s everywhere.

17.3.1.5 The real problems begin when the Mahāyāna innovators allowed “everything” to speak the Dharma like the Buddha does. They have inevitably opened Pandora’s box of views, so that they now must have really great vehicles and greater paradises to transport and store these ideas! The Buddha has often warned us against this: beware of mental proliferation (*papañca*)<sup>428</sup>—there is no end to it! Ideas and views simply replicate themselves and consume us.

17.3.1.6 The Dharma may be everything, like the air around us. But the Dharma does *not* speak for itself. Just as the air may envelope us, we still need to breathe it in. We need to make our effort to internalize the Dharma—just as the Buddha teaches us. One of the most troubling errors of the Mahāyāna

<sup>418</sup> On the Buddha’s own impermanence, see **Mahā, parinibbāna S** (D 16,2.25.3 + 6.5-7), SD 9.

<sup>419</sup> The supreme worship (*pārama, pūjā*) is mentioned in **Mahā, parinibbāna S** (D 16,5.3.2/2:138) + SD 9 (7.2).

<sup>420</sup> See MacQueen, “Inspired speech in early Mahāyāna Buddhism,” *Religion* 11, 1981-1982.

<sup>421</sup> *Akalika (dhamma)*: D 2:93, 217, 3:5; M 1:37; S 1:9, 2:69, 4:41, 5:347; A 1:149, 2:56, 3:212, 285, 4:406, 5:183, 329.

<sup>422</sup> *Sanantana dhamma*: Dh 5 = Kosambī J (J 428/3:488\*); S 1:18\*, 189\* = Sn 453 = Tha 1229.

<sup>423</sup> **Dhamma Niyāma S** (A 3.1.34), SD 26.8.

<sup>424</sup> **Jāti Paccaya S** (S 12.20,3.2); also SD 39.5; SD 5.16 (4.3).

<sup>425</sup> See **The teacher or the teaching?** SD 3.14; also **Paṭhama Jhāna Pañha S** (S 40.1), SD 24.11 (1.3).

<sup>426</sup> S 6.2 = Uruvelā S 1 (A 4.21) (SD 12.3). The same sentiment is echoed by the Buddha in his last instructions: see **Mahā, parinibbāna S** (D 16,6.1/2:154), SD 9.

<sup>427</sup> See **Memes**, SD 26.3.

<sup>428</sup> On mental proliferation (*papañca*), see **Madhu, piṇḍika S** (M 18), SD 6.14 (2). On non-identifying with ideas, see **Atammayatā**, SD 19.13.



is that, despite their best efforts, they have externalized Buddhahood: they have removed Sakyamuni's buddhahood, capitalized it as Buddhahood, and transplanted it into the three Bodies.

17.3.1.7 Once Buddhahood is *externalized*, it appears to be concrete: a truth becomes a *thing*. The believer are now able to “see” these Buddhas; they not merely “living” relics or images. They are “living” in the sense that the believer think that the Buddhas are actually present therein, or that it is a kind of communication device to speak to them (as a God-believer would talk to his God).<sup>429</sup>

Even the Sutras, which were written down, became **objects of worship**. Works like the Lotus Sutra even extol the worship of themselves, promising great blessings.<sup>430</sup> In fact, the Mahāyāna Sutras—which are often lengthy and complex works—were “installed as objects of worship, concrete and appropriate symbols of the new movement.”<sup>431</sup> New sects grew around individual Sutras, such as these, and new Sutra-centred views arose to consolidate these sects.<sup>432</sup>

17.3.1.8 Being unawakened themselves, these innovators try to re-define enlightenment (but it simply remains undefinable). We are reminded of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley's *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus* (1818).<sup>433</sup> For our purposes here, we may reflect *Frankenstein* as showing the consequences of “playing God”—or, in Buddhist terms, “playing Dharma,” creating and defining their own Dharma, instead of simply practising it. Instead of taking the Dharma as refuge (*atta,saraṇa*), they have taken the refuge to be the self!

### 17.3.2 The Dharma in time

17.3.2.1 The nature of **early Buddhist non-historicist approach** is best depicted in the **Uttara Vi-patti Sutta** (A 8.8). The Sutta records how Sakra, leader of the gods, is so impressed by a Dharma teaching by the monk Uttara that he asks him whether it has arisen from his own wit or from the Buddha's word. Uttara replies by giving the parable of the grain heap: There is a great heap of grain from which people take what they need. When someone meets such a person, and asks him where he got the grain from, the person replies that it comes from the grain heap.

Then, Uttara makes this famous utterance: “**Whatever is well spoken, all that is the word of the Blessed One, the arhat, the fully self-awakened**” (*yaṃ kiñci subhāsitaṃ sabbaṃ taṃ tassa bhagavato vacanaṃ arahato sammā,sambuddhassa*) (A 8.8).<sup>434</sup>

17.3.2.2 The meaning of Uttara's utterance is that whatever good teachings or answers that we may have regarding the Dharma or in our other-helping efforts, even if they seem to arise from our own heart, can be regarded as “Buddha word” (*buddha,vacana*), that is, they are based on the Buddha's teachings. These teachings are, in turn, a reflection of the true reality that is our mind, our body, and everything else around us.

In the case of the arhat—and to a lesser, but still significant, extent, in the non-returner, the once-re-turner and the streamwinner—whatever they utter is Buddha word because they have risen above opinions. What separates us from the Buddha is our views: our views blind us, even if temporarily, or divert our attention elsewhere.

Once we abandon our views, doing so naturally, we see more of what the Buddha himself has seen. Then, we would truly speak what the Buddha would have spoken. It's like a guild of professionals in a certain skill: all the professionals would speak the same language, and would give the same answer to the same problems. Even where they seem to disagree or diverge, their purpose and intention remain the same: the healing and health of others.

<sup>429</sup> See MacQueen 1981-82:330.

<sup>430</sup> See Lotus Sutra ch 3 (See tr B Kato et al, *The Threefold Lotus Sutra*, Kosei, 1975:107-109). The chapter also has a long verse of powerful curses against those who reject the Sutra.

<sup>431</sup> MacQueen 1981-82:330 n85, quoting G Schopen, “The phrase *sa pṛthivīpradeśaś caityabhūto bhavet* in the *Vajracchedika*,” *Indo-Iranian Journal* 17, 1975:181.

<sup>432</sup> See Gomez 2005:5309 f.

<sup>433</sup> Shelley, in her epigraph, quotes Milton: we might as well imagine each of the Buddhas speaking these words to their Mahāyāna creators: “Did I request thee, Maker, from my clay | To mould Me man? Did I solicit thee | From darkness to promote me?” (John Milton, *Paradise Lost* X.743-745).

<sup>434</sup> A 8.8/4:164,7-10), SD 73.9; cf Sn 450, 454. See MacQueen 1981:314; McDermott 1984:28-30.



17.3.2.3 The Sanskrit version of Uttara's utterance is found in **the Adhyāśaya,saṃcodana Sūtra**, cited in Śāntideva's Śikṣā,samuccaya (1.15): "Whatever is well spoken, all that is the Buddha word" (*yat-kimcinmaitreya subhāṣitam sarvaṃ tadbuddhabhāṣitam*). In Mahāyāna logic, then, if the well spoken precedes, underpins and survives the Buddha, surely the "well spoken" is always and eternally available to them, even without the Buddha.

With this understanding, notes **Lewis Lancaster**, "Māhāyāna communities began to produce new works they called sūtra, to which they affixed the preamble, 'Thus have I heard,' indicating that these texts, like their counterparts in the Eighteen Schools, were originally spoken by the Buddha. The Mahāyāna texts severely attacked the other schools and called them the 'Lesser Vehicle' (Hīnayāna), thereby claiming that they understood only a portion of the higher teaching." (2005:1253)<sup>435</sup>

17.3.2.4 In stressing more on the "eternal Dharma" and rejecting or sidelining the historical Buddha, the Mahāyāna have taken a non-historicist approach [17.2.2.2]. There is a radical difference between the non-historical teachings of early Buddhism and those of the Mahāyāna. The early Buddhist teachings, even when *non-historical*, invariably go back to the Buddha word.

The Mahāyāna non-historical teachings are, however, as a rule, new revelations, taught by cosmic Buddhas, not Sakyamuni. In other words, these were original teachings, the creations of from the Mahāyāna imaginaire put into a Buddha's mouth. In this sense, the Mahāyāna is an "open" tradition with an "open Canon."<sup>436</sup>

### 17.3.3 Dharma projected and preserved

17.3.3.1 We have seen how when an oral teaching appears in writing or in **print**, it not takes on a palpable form—it is at least visible to the eye—but also takes on a life of its own. We have to allow here for the human captivated by the written word, and entranced by an early encounter with the magic of printing. The first material to be printed was sacred Buddhist words,<sup>437</sup> followed by sutras.<sup>438</sup>

It is not surprising at all that the first printing efforts should occur amongst the ancient Buddhists of China. After all, to this day, native speakers of Chinese, even the Buddhists, tend to see the printed word as sacred, even embodying the sacred. The teaching as words, as books or as audio-visual media can, for them, embody the Buddha as Dharma. This is a characteristic of a "**naive pietist**" Buddhism, false devotion marred by ignorance and superstition.

17.3.3.2 The naive pietist tend to view such sacred objects as living relics of the Buddha. Even where the sacred object is made or stored (such as a reliquary) is sacred, and is believed to have a sacred presence. To worship or supplicate such objects then would be to address the Buddha himself, so it seems. All this would be seen to work, if we disregard the Buddha's advice against adoring him [17.2.2.4].

Naive pietism is also seen in Theravada, especially its ethnic forms, where the pious believe in demons, spirits, fortune telling, luck, and attribute attainments and powers to monastics and lay persons, even when they do not live moral lives. These pietists have externalized the teaching, seeking happiness and liberation outside of themselves, instead of looking within, as advised by the Buddha.<sup>439</sup>

17.3.3.3 The key reasons for our susceptibility to such beliefs are cultural conditioning and ignorance of the Dharma teachings. A culture invariably tends to replicate itself by allowing us to grow only with its

<sup>435</sup> See also Gomez, "Buddhist literature: Exegesis and hermeneutics," 1987a; "Language: Buddhist views of language," 1987b; see also Collins 1990:110 n23.

<sup>436</sup> See MacQueen 1982:49-65.

<sup>437</sup> The oldest extant printed matter is the Korean *Mugu chōnggwang taedaram kyōng* (Great Dhāraṇī Scripture of Flawless Pure Light), a scroll, nearly 20' long and 3½" wide, printed from about 12 woodblock pages onto bamboo paper, rolled together and placed in the relics container of a stone pagoda at Pulguk Monastery in Kyōngju, in 751, and was discovered in 1966. See Richard D McBride II, "Printing technologies," in (ed) R E Buswell, Jr (ed), *Ency of Buddhism*, Thomson-Gale, 2004 2:676.

<sup>438</sup> The Pali canon was written down by the 1st century CE [8.1.1.1]. The Pali texts first appeared in print in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. The first printing of Buddhist texts were Chinese sutras, of which we still have the Diamond Sutra (Vajra-c,chedikā Prañā,pāramitā Sūtra) of 868—making it the first printed book—discovered in Dunhuang in 1907. See prec n.

<sup>439</sup> See eg **Teacher or teaching?** SD 3.14 & **Emotional independence**, SD 40a.8.

confines. Hence, our cultural leaders and mentors often remind us that we belong to a certain race, and we need to strengthen our community, and so on. This is a **tribalism** symptomatic of a fear of learning from others.

**Tribalism** is an inherent trait in evangelical cultures, where parents and tribal leaders dutifully condition themselves and their young not to be drawn into the “other” side: you are either with us or against us. The danger with such tribalism, when it becomes a dominant culture, will invariably persecute or limit the growth of outsiders. Culture limits, spirituality liberates.

17.3.3.4 **An understanding of the suttas**, especially with mentoring from compassionate and experienced teachers, educates us in the Buddha’s true teachings. This sutta-tutoring hones us with the wisdom to discern the truth from falsehood, and expose the false teachers. With this discerning wisdom, we will be able to inspire others to the Dharma, or at least help and heal others who need it.

The Dharma, properly cultivated, is a liberating force that frees our creative genius and opens our hearts to greater inclusivity, an unconditional acceptance of others. Dharma, then, is a spirituality that transcends both humanity and religiosity, allowing us, despite our differences, to be able to warmly connect with together, “mixing like milk and water, looking at each other with kindly eyes.”<sup>440</sup> Only when we accept and interact with one another spiritually that we are truly a wholesome community.

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<sup>440</sup> See (Anuruddhā) Upakkilesa S (M 128,10.2), SD 5.18.