

Recovering the Buddha's Message  
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## RECOVERING THE BUDDHA’S MESSAGE

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When Professor Schmithausen was so kind as to invite me to participate in his panel<sup>1</sup> on “the earliest Buddhism” and I accepted, I had to prepare a paper for discussion without being clear what my fellow-participants would assume that “earliest Buddhism” to be. In the nineteenth century, not all European scholars were even prepared to accept that such a historical person as Gotama the Buddha had ever existed; and though such an extremity of scepticism now seems absurd, many scholars since have been prepared to argue either that we no longer have the Buddha’s authentic teachings or that we have only a very few, the rest of the purported teachings being garbled or distorted by the later tradition. Since I believe that in order to make sense to an audience one needs to begin from its assumptions—the crucial point in part two of my paper below—this uncertainty was a handicap. On reading the papers of my colleagues, I realized that, like me, they all (except Professor Aramaki?) assumed that the main body of soteriological teaching found in the Pāli Canon does go back to the Buddha himself. The main thrust of recent work by Professors Schmithausen, Vetter and Bronkhorst in this area, as I understand it, has been to argue that there are inconsistencies in the earliest textual material, and that from these inconsistencies we can deduce a chronological development in the teachings, but that this development may well have taken place within the Buddha’s own lifetime and preaching career. On the other hand, the fact that the fundamental Buddhist teachings can be ascribed to the Buddha himself was more assumed than argued for by my colleagues, whereas I made some attempt to reconstruct how the scriptural texts came into being. It seems to me that if my reconstruction is anything like correct, it raises problems for the method of arguing from alleged inconsistencies and makes it unlikely that we can in fact ever discover what the Buddha preached first and what later. Accordingly, when I spoke on the panel I made little use of my prepared script and preferred to use my time to address the latter issues. It is obvious that the positions taken by some of us are incompatible; one can either politely ignore the fact (and leave the audience to make up its own mind) or try to address the issues and hope to progress by argument. Though the latter course is unusual in such intellectual backwaters as Indology and Buddhist studies, I ventured to take it at the conference. By the same token, I have for publication revised the first part of my paper along the lines on

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<sup>1</sup> At the 7th World Sanskrit Conference, held in Leiden, August 1987. The editor of the present publication wishes to express his gratitude to E.J. Brill for permission to reproduce here Professor Gombrich’s paper, originally submitted for publication in a volume edited by Professor Lambert Schmithausen and entitled *Studies in Earliest Buddhism and Madhyamaka* (forthcoming).

which I spoke while omitting criticisms of specific points. The second part of the paper is very little altered from the conference version.

## I.

We agree, then, that “the earliest Buddhism” is that of the Buddha himself. Unless a certain individual had propounded a doctrine that many found intellectually compelling and emotionally satisfying, and unless he had deliberately organized his following, there would now be no *Dhamma* and no *Saṅgha*. There could have been a *Dhamma* without a *Saṅgha*, but in that case Buddhism would have had no history. The function of the *Saṅgha* as an institution was twofold: to provide an institutional framework in which men and women could devote themselves to the quest for salvation (*nirvāṇa*), and to preserve the Buddha’s teaching. In an age without books, the latter function can have been no minor matter. World history can, I believe, offer hardly any parallels to the creation and preservation of so large a body of texts as the Buddhist Canon. I have argued elsewhere<sup>2</sup> that that Buddhists may have realized that it was possible because of the example before them of the brahmin preservation of Vedic literature, achieved by dint of a system of extraordinarily long and tedious compulsory education for brahmin boys.

None of the other religious leaders contemporary with the Buddha seem to have achieved such preservation of their teachings, and this may well reflect the fact that they did not organize settled religious communities like the Buddhist monasteries. I believe the Digambara Jaina tradition that their own canon was wholly lost, for I cannot see why such a story should arise if it were not true, whereas the temptation to claim the highest antiquity and authority for one’s scriptures is obvious. In any case, all Jains agree that many of their canonical texts were lost at an early stage. The Buddhists were aware of the contrast between themselves and the Jains. The *Saṅgīti-suttanta*<sup>3</sup> begins by recounting that at the death of Nigaṅṭha Nātaputta his followers disagreed about what he had said. The same passage occurs at two other points in the Pāli Canon; but it makes good sense in this context, for it is the occasion for rehearsing a long summary of the Buddha’s teaching in the form of mnemonic lists. The text says that the rehearsal was led by Sāriputta, in the Buddha’s lifetime. Whether the text records a historical incident we shall probably never know. But that is not my point. I would argue that unless we posit that such episodes took place not merely after the Buddha’s death but as soon as the *Saṅgha* had reached a size and geographic spread which precluded frequent meetings with the Buddha, it is not possible to conceive how the teachings were preserved or texts were composed. By similar reasoning, something like the first *saṅgāyanā* (communal recitation) must have taken place, otherwise there would simply be no corpus of scriptures. Details such as the precise time and place of the event are irrelevant to this consideration.

The Buddhists had to emulate the brahmins by preserving a large body of texts, but since membership of the *Saṅgha* was not ascribed at birth but achieved much later, usually in adulthood, they could not imitate the years of compulsory

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<sup>2</sup>“How the Mahāyāna began”, *Journal of Pāli and Buddhist Studies* I, Nagoya, March 1988, 29–46. This article is included in the present publication as part of Professor Gombrich’s seminar presentation.

<sup>3</sup> *Dīgha-nikāya, sutta* XXXIII.

education. To preserve orally the basic Buddhist texts—by which I mean something like the *Vinaya* minus the *Parivāra*, the four *Nikāyas* of prose sermons and the poetry of the *Khuddaka-nikāya*—must have required a vast amount of sustained and highly organized effort. Though there is evidence that extraordinary feats of memory are possible for individuals, whether or not they live in pre-literate civilizations,<sup>4</sup> these Buddhist texts amount to hundreds of thousands of lines, so much that only a very few individuals of exceptional mnemonic gifts can ever have mastered the lot. We know that in Ceylon monks (and presumably nuns) specialized in a specific collection of texts, and the logic of the situation suggests that this must have been so from the outset.

This must have implications for textual criticism. Segments of texts (sometimes called pericopes) are preserved in different contexts, but it may not be possible to deduce from this that one passage is earlier than another, let alone which comes first. For instance, most of the *Mahāparinibbāna-sutta* occurs elsewhere in the Pāli Canon, but that only shows that what the memorizers of the *Dīgha-nikāya* kept as a single text was preserved piecemeal by other groups. This is by no means to deny that one can occasionally show that a piece of text must have started in one context from which it was then transferred to another; but each such piece of evidence has to be teased out separately, and such demonstrations are still very few.<sup>5</sup>

No one was in a position to record or reproduce the Buddha's sermons as he uttered them. The texts preserved did not just drop from his lips; they must be products of deliberate composition—in fact, they were composed to be memorized. This inevitably introduces a certain formalization: such features as versification, numbered lists, repetition and stock formulae are all aids to memory. Vedic literature includes texts which display all these features. Early brahminical literature also includes prose texts, the *sūtras*, which were orally preserved and followed a different strategy: instead of redundancy, they aim for extreme brevity. There are however no early Buddhist texts in the *sūtra* style. A *sūtra* is so composed that it cannot be understood without exegesis. The Buddhist texts, by contrast, apparently aim to be self-explanatory.

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<sup>4</sup> See Ulric Neisser, ed., *Memory Observed: Remembering in Natural Contexts*, San Francisco, 1982, especially parts V and VII. On the topic “Literacy and Memory” Neisser writes, page 241: “Illiteracy cannot improve memory any more than my lack of wings improves my speed afoot. And while it would be logically possible to argue that literacy and schooling make memory worse, the fact of the matter is that they don't. On the contrary: cross-cultural studies have generally found a positive relation between schooling and memory.” On the other hand, he goes on, “particular abilities can be nourished by particular cultural institutions”. Bards performing oral poetry are one such institution; the Saṅgha memorizing Buddhist texts could well be another.

<sup>5</sup> Some notable efforts in this direction were made by Jean Przyluski in his huge four-part article “Le Parinirvāṇa et les funérailles du Buddha”. Many of his arguments now seem far-fetched and some of his statements have even been shown to be factually inaccurate; but I remain impressed by his analysis of the third chapter (*bhāṇavāra*) of the *Mahāparinibbāna-sutta* in the second part of the article, *JA*, XIème série, XII, 1918, 401–56. For a case study on a far more modest scale, see my “Three souls, one or none: the vagaries of a Pāli pericope”, *JPTS*, XI, 1987, 73–8.

Since there were religious texts being preserved in the Buddha's environment in both prose and verse, there seems to be no *a priori* ground for holding that Buddhist prose must be older than Buddhist verse or vice versa.<sup>6</sup> The ability to speak in verse *extempore* is not common and there is no reason to suppose that the Buddha had it; moreover, extended discourse in *extempore* verse in ancient India was generally in a rather free metre like the *anuṣṭubh*, not in the kind of lyric metres found in the *Suttanipāta*. A text which purports to reproduce an actual sermon by the Buddha is therefore likely to be in prose, and this implies no particular lapse of time after the event. As we know, many texts do purport to reproduce the Buddha's sermons. If in doing so they employ various of the conventions of oral literature, schematizing the material by the use of formulae and stock passages, this is no argument against their essential authenticity.

I turn now to consider the style of argument that attempts to discern chronological layers in the texts by finding inconsistencies in them. Before criticizing this approach, I must make it clear that I am in no way committed to assuming *a priori* that the early texts do all date from the Buddha's lifetime or to denying that stratification is possible. My wish is merely to expose what I see as faulty argumentation. I also think it sound method to accept tradition until we are shown sufficient reason to reject it.

The method of analysing Buddhist arguments with a view to establishing their coherence and development is I think largely inherited from the late Professor Frauwallner. I have the greatest admiration for his work and think that it has yielded many valid and interesting results. However, we must remember that most of that work was applied to philosophical texts which were undoubtedly written and read. I must begin my criticism by reiterating in the strongest terms that the kind of analysis which can dissect a *written* philosophical tradition is inappropriate for oral materials. As I have shown, the texts preserving "the Buddha's word" are not authored in the same sense as a written text. While it is perfectly possible that some of the texts (perhaps some poetry?) were composed by the Buddha himself, we cannot know this with any certainty, and almost all the texts are, strictly speaking, anonymous compositions. The one important exception to this may be the *Thera-* and *Therī-gāthās*, which may be by the individual monks and nuns whom tradition holds to have been the authors.

There is however a principle that we may learn from the critical study of written texts, for its validity does not depend on the medium. This is the principle known as *difficilior potior*, that it is the more difficult reading which is to be preferred. Colleagues have written on the assumption that the Buddha, since he was a great thinker, must have been consistent, so that inconsistencies must have been introduced later by the less intelligent men who followed him. But that is the reverse of how we should normally look at it. A tradition, whether scribal or oral,

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<sup>6</sup> Similarly, while versifiers differ in their ability, I can see no *a priori* ground for supposing that a poem which is metrically strict must be older or younger than one which employs metrical licence. Naturally this is not to deny that some metres were invented earlier than others.

always tends to *iron out* inconsistencies; when in any doubt, it goes for the obvious. It is this tendency to which *difficilior potior* refers. If our texts preserve something awkward, it is most unlikely to have been introduced by later generations of Buddhists who had been taught to accept the generally neat and uniform doctrine expounded in the commentaries.

The Buddha preached for many years—tradition says, for forty-five. Teachers, unless they are exceptionally stupid, change both their opinions and their way of putting things. That the Buddha varied his way of putting things according to what audience he was addressing is indeed a commonplace of the Buddhist tradition, which attributes to him supreme “skill in means”; but that tradition would balk at the idea that he ever changed his mind. However, I am not committed to the tradition; nor do the two kinds of change, in meaning and expression, necessarily show results which the observer can distinguish. It is mainly writing that freezes our past insights for us and so gives our *oeuvre* a certain consistency; even so, I suspect that there can be few university teachers today who have not had the experience of re-reading something they had written long ago and finding it unfamiliar. (Which is more depressing: to find that what we once wrote now seems all wrong, or to find that it contains facts we have forgotten and bright ideas we can no longer remember having thought of?) Thus, as hard-headed historians we cannot think that over 45 years the Buddha could have been entirely consistent—and especially when we take into account that he could not read over or play back what he had said. If the texts have any valid claim to be the record of so long a preaching career, they cannot be wholly consistent. Indeed, the boot is on the other foot: the texts are too consistent to be a wholly credible record. It is obvious that literary convention and human forgetfulness have contributed to the tendency recalled in my previous paragraph so as to iron out many of the inconsistencies of both message and expression which must have occurred.

To avoid any possible misunderstanding, let me add that naturally I am not suggesting that the Buddha’s teaching was incoherent. Had that been so, there would have been few converts and no enduring tradition. There is considerable agreement in the canonical texts themselves and the commentaries on those texts about the central features of the Buddha’s message; and Mr Norman seems to me to give an excellent account of them in his paper for this volume.<sup>7</sup>

Despite this, some of my learned colleagues have called the texts as witnesses into the dock, and declared after cross-examination that their testimony leaves much to be desired. Do the texts claim that there are Four Noble Truths? But our logic tells us that the third is a corollary of the second, so there should only be Three. Worse, it is alleged that the very accounts of the Buddha’s enlightenment are inconsistent. For example, he or his followers could apparently not make up their minds whether the crucial step is to get rid of all moral defilements or to know that one has done so. Many similar failings are alleged, each scholar selecting

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<sup>7</sup> Professor Gombrich is referring here to Mr Norman’s paper included in the volume edited by Professor Schmithausen.

his own and accordingly devising a different line of development for early Buddhism.

But what are we discussing here? The description of religious experience is notoriously difficult. There is good reason for this difficulty. Since language is an instrument of social communication, all private experiences tend to elude linguistic expression, as we know from our visits to the doctor. For linguistic communication, we depend on shared experience: the doctor will with luck be able to deduce from our account of where and how it hurts what is wrong with us, because of similar previous attempts at description which he has read or encountered in his practice. But if our pain is unique in his experience, we are unlikely to be able to make him understand. To describe our emotions or aesthetic feelings we resort to the conventions offered by our culture but generally feel dissatisfied by their inadequacy: common words cannot convey our singularity.

Following an overwhelming experience, the Buddha tried to describe it, in order to recommend it to others. He felt that it was new, at least in his time, so that he had no past descriptions to help him out; indeed, tradition records that he was reluctant to preach because he doubted whether anyone would accept his account.<sup>8</sup> Surely one would expect a highly intelligent and articulate person not to be content with one kind of description of his experience but to approach it from many angles and points of view. In particular, since his experience was felt to be an awareness, he would be bound to speak of it both in subjective, experiential terms, and in more objective terms to convey the truth realized. (In general Sanskrit terminology, I am referring to *yoga*, the experience, and *jñāna*, the knowledge.) Followers, no doubt including some who had not had such an experience, standardized and classified the accounts of it. But they did preserve two kinds of account, experiential and gnostic, and since the Buddha evidently had a *gnostic experience* I find it odd to argue that one kind of account must be earlier or more authentic than the other.

The dual nature of gnostic experience is less intractable than the sheer impossibility of describing the kinds of states of mind nowadays generally called “altered states of consciousness”. The typical reaction to having such an experience has been to say that it is beyond words and to describe it, if at all, in highly figurative language. Nevertheless, in societies in which altered states of consciousness are regularly sought and/or attained, standardized descriptions of the experience are naturally current, and people develop expectations that certain practices will lead to specific experiences. Fieldwork in Sri Lanka has convinced me that even in such a society the labelling of altered states of consciousness performs a social function but may completely falsify the experiences. Sinhala Buddhist culture defines possession, loss of normal awareness and self-control, as the polar opposite of the states achieved by the Buddhist meditator; and yet I have recorded<sup>9</sup> several cases in which it seems clear from circumstantial evidence that a person is experiencing a state of consciousness which is defined in completely

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<sup>8</sup> *Vinaya*, I, 5.

<sup>9</sup> R. Gombrich and Gananath Obeyesekere, *Buddhism Transformed*, Princeton, 1988.

different terms (for instance, as possession or *jhāna*) according to the institutional context and hence the cultural expectations. If the same state can be given contrasting labels, it is plausible that the same label may also be applied to very different states.

I am not claiming that the Buddha was so muddled that he could not distinguish between losing and enhancing normal awareness. But I am claiming that descriptions of meditative or spiritual experiences cannot profitably be submitted to the same kind of scrutiny as philosophical texts.

I would, however, go even further. Coherence in these matters is largely in the eye of the beholder. Few texts—taking that term in the widest sense—are up to the standards of the western lawyer or academic in their logical coherence or clarity of denotation, and by those standards most of the world’s literary and religious classics are to be found wanting. The first verse of St. John’s gospel informs us (in the King James version) that “the Word was with God, and the Word was God”. Does this stand up to our examination? Must St. John go to the back of the class?

Surely what we do with such a passage is not to decide that it is incoherent but try to learn what coherence the Christian tradition has found in it. Yet some of my colleagues are finding inconsistencies in the canonical texts which they assert to be such without telling us how the Buddhist tradition itself regards the texts as consistent—as if that were not important. My own view is not, I repeat, that we have to accept the Buddhist tradition uncritically, but that if it interprets texts as coherent, that interpretation deserves the most serious consideration.

The above critical remarks do not mean that I think we can do no more than rehearse the Buddhist tradition. We have historical knowledge and awareness denied to the commentators, and can use them to throw light on the earliest texts. In the second half of my paper I hope to make a positive contribution by illustrating this point.

## II.

Meaning is embedded in a cultural context and any message, however new, must be couched in terms the audience can understand. The speaker cannot communicate with his audience unless he shares not merely their language, in the literal sense, but most of the presuppositions reflected in their use of that language—though of course he need accept the presuppositions only provisionally. The new acquires its meaning by standing in contrast to the old; fully to understand a speaker, we need to know what he is denying. We shall never know all the assumptions in the minds of the audiences to whom the Buddha preached, but we can know a good deal, and I find that not enough use has yet been made of that knowledge.

The Buddha’s message is to be understood in opposition to the other articulated ideologies of his day. The most important of these was the brahminical. Jains maintain that Mahāvīra, the Buddha’s contemporary, was no great innovator but carrying on an older tradition. That may be so, but of that older tradition we have

no certain knowledge. Neither the other contemporary teachers mentioned in the Pāli texts nor, I believe, Mahāvīra, left any surviving record of their teachings, so we depend on what the Buddhist texts have to say about them. Even this, however, is quite helpful: the Buddha's view of moral causation was clearly meant to contrast with that of the other views described in the *Sāmaññaphala-sutta*<sup>10</sup> (whether those descriptions are historically accurate or not); and in the *Vinaya* the Buddha several times<sup>11</sup> defined what he meant by his middle way in contrast to the extreme asceticism of other sects. But clearly it is more illuminating to have independent evidence and then be able to see what the Buddha made of it.

Before trying to apply this principle, I must offer an observation which is certainly subjective and yet seems to me important. Again and again we find that the Buddha's references to brahmins and brahminism are humorous and satirical. Are jokes ever composed by committees? The guru is venerated in India. His words are treasured. That is not to say that later words which seem worth treasuring may not be attributed to the guru—certainly they may. But does one attribute to the guru a wide range of humorous observations, even remarks which border on flippancy? When the Buddha is recorded to have said<sup>12</sup> that brahmins claim to be born from the mouth of Brahmā, but don't their mothers menstruate and give birth?—then I wonder whether any monk would have dared to attribute such a remark to him unless he had actually said it.

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According to the Canon, many of the Buddha's sermons were addressed to brahmins. Moreover, of those monks whose caste origins were recorded by the tradition (mainly the commentary to the *Theragāthā*), about 40% were brahmins.<sup>13</sup> The original *Saṅgha* did not contain a typical cross-section of the population. What religious institution does? In the early *Saṅgha* the high-caste, the wealthy and the educated—three overlapping groups then as still (in India)—were heavily over-represented. It is hardly surprising that the Buddha should have tended to speak to the educated class. They were the professional educators—as to a large extent they have been ever since.

The word *veda* has been used to refer to certain texts, but its original meaning is simply “knowledge”. Another term for the *Veda*, those texts which constituted the knowledge which really counted, is *brahman*. A “brahman person” is a *brāhmaṇa*. The *Veda* had appeared among men through the mouths of such people, and in the Buddha's day (and long after) access to it still only lay in the same quarter. The *Veda*, embodying true knowledge, was the source of all authority; but what the *Veda* said—and indeed what it meant—one could learn only from brahmins. To deny the authority of the *Veda*, therefore, was to deny the authority of brahmins, and vice versa. This is precisely what the Buddha did.

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<sup>10</sup> *Dīgha-nikāya*, I, 52–59.

<sup>11</sup> e.g., *Vinaya*, I, 305; III, 212.

<sup>12</sup> *Majjhima-nikāya*, II, 148 = *Dīgha-nikāya*, III, 81–82.

<sup>13</sup> B.G. Gokhale, “Early Buddhism and the Brahmins”, in A.K. Narain, ed., *Studies in the History of Buddhism*, Delhi, 68–80.

The fact that the Buddha gave new values to terms like *brāhmaṇa* is of course very well known. For him the true brahmin is the man who displays not the traditional, largely ascribed characteristics of the brahmin, such as pure birth, but the achieved qualities of the good Buddhist, ethical and psychological traits.<sup>14</sup> The brahmin by caste alone, the teacher of the *Veda*, is (jokingly) etymologized as the “non-meditator” (*ajjhāyaka*).<sup>15</sup> Brahmins who have memorized the three *Vedas* (*tevijja*) really know nothing:<sup>16</sup> it is the process of achieving Enlightenment—what the Buddha is said to have achieved in the three watches of that night—which constitutes the true “three knowledges”.<sup>17</sup>

Some of the great modern scholars of Buddhism have said that the Buddha had no direct knowledge of Vedic texts,<sup>18</sup> but that is certainly wrong. The joke about how brahmins are born satirizes the *Puruṣasūkta*, the text in which brahmins are said to originate from the mouth of the cosmic Man.<sup>19</sup> There are similarly satirical allusions to the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*. One example is the anecdote about Brahmā’s delusion that he created other beings. It occurs in the *Brahmajāla-sutta*<sup>20</sup> of the *Dīgha-nikāya* to explain why some people think that the world and the soul are partly eternal and partly not; but, as Rhys Davids points out in the footnote to his translation,<sup>21</sup> it also occurs in the *Majjhima-* and *Samyutta-nikāyas* and in the *Jātaka*—just what one would expect if my view of the preservation of the *Buddhavacana* is anywhere near the truth. Brahmā is reborn (in Rhys Davids’ words) “either because his span of years has passed or his merit is exhausted”; he then gets lonely and upset and longs for company. Then, “either because their span of years had passed or their merit was exhausted”, other beings are reborn alongside him. *Post hoc, propter hoc*, thinks silly old Brahmā, and gets the idea that the other beings are his creation. I suppose that many who have read and even taught this passage (since it is in Warder’s *Introduction to Pali*)<sup>22</sup> have noticed that this is just a satirical retelling of the creation myth in the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*,<sup>23</sup> in which Brahmā is lonely and afraid and so begets for company; but I am not aware that anyone has pointed it out in print.

However, it was not just to joke on peripheral topics that the Buddha referred to brahmin doctrines, notably as expressed in the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*. For many years I have tried to show in my teaching and lecturing that the Buddha presented central parts of his message, concerning *kamma* and the *tilakkhaṇa*,<sup>24</sup> as a set of

<sup>14</sup> *Suttanipāta*, verse 142 (= *Vasala-sutta*, verse 27).

<sup>15</sup> *Dīgha-nikāya*, III, 94.

<sup>16</sup> *Tevijja-sutta*, *Dīgha-nikāya*, sutta XIII.

<sup>17</sup> *Anguttara-nikāya*, I, 163.

<sup>18</sup> e.g., L. de la Vallée Poussin, *La morale bouddhique*, Paris, 1927, 12.

<sup>19</sup> *Rgveda*, X, 90, 12.

<sup>20</sup> *Dīgha-nikāya*, I, 17–18.

<sup>21</sup> T.W. Rhys Davids, trans., *Dialogues of the Buddha*, Part I, SBB, London, 1899, 31.

<sup>22</sup> A.K. Warder, *Introduction to Pali*, London, 1963, 198–199.

<sup>23</sup> *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, 1, 4, 1–3.

<sup>24</sup> The three hallmarks of phenomenal existence (i.e. of life in this world as we unenlightened beings experience it): impermanence, suffering, non-self.

antitheses to brahminical doctrine.<sup>25</sup> I shall need much more time to read and think about the texts before I can hope to expound this interpretation at full length, but in this paper I can at least indicate with a couple of illustrations the general argument.

I am by no means the first to have pointed out the importance of the *Alagaddūpama-sutta*.<sup>26</sup> It was Mr Norman, my teacher and fellow-contributor to the panel, who first demonstrated<sup>27</sup> that it contains a deliberate refutation of Yājñavalkya's teaching in the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*. Since experience has shown me that this demonstration is still not widely known, I shall take the liberty of summarizing the argument in my own words.

The sutta has two relevant passages, which I translate<sup>28</sup> as follows:

- A. "There are six wrong views: An unwise, untrained person may think of the body, 'This is mine, this is me, this is my self'; he may think that of feelings; of perceptions; of volitions; or of what has been seen, heard, thought, cognized, reached, sought or considered by the mind. The sixth is to identify the world and self, to believe: 'At death I shall become permanent, eternal, unchanging, and so remain forever the same; and that is mine, that is me, that is my self.' A wise and well-trained person sees that all these positions are wrong, and so he is not worried about something that does not exist."<sup>29</sup>
- B. "So give up what is not yours, and you will find that that makes you happy. What is not yours? The body, feelings, perceptions, volitions and consciousness. What do you think of this, monks? If someone were to gather the grass, sticks, branches and foliage here in Jeta's wood or burn it or use it in some other way, would you think he was gathering, burning or

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<sup>25</sup> See also my *Theravada Buddhism: a Social History from Ancient Benares to Modern Colombo*, London, 1988. The relevant part of this book was written in 1980. It deals only with those aspects of the doctrine relevant to social history, mainly *kamma*; on that topic see further my "Notes on the brahmanical background to Buddhist ethics", in Gatara Dhammapala et al., eds., *Buddhist Studies in Honour of Hammalawa Saddhātissa*, Nugegoda, Sri Lanka, 1984, 91–101.

<sup>26</sup> *Majjhima-nikāya*, sutta XXII. See especially Kamaleswar Bhattacharya, "*Diṭṭham, Sutam, Matam, Viññātam*", in Somaratna Balasooriya et al., ed., *Buddhist Studies in Honour of Walpola Rahula*, London and Sri Lanka, 1980, 10–15, and references there cited. Bhattacharya's article deals with my passage A. He does not translate it, but he glosses it: "All these theories are false because they make of the Ātman an 'object', while the Ātman, the Absolute, the Being in itself, can never be an object." I can see no support in the text for this interpretation.

<sup>27</sup> K.R. Norman, "A note on Attā in the *Alagaddūpama Sutta*", *Studies in Indian Philosophy: a Memorial Volume in honour of Pandit Sukhlalji Sanghvi*, LD series 84, Ahmedabad, 1981, 19–29.

<sup>28</sup> In both extracts my translation eliminates repetitions.

<sup>29</sup> *Majjhima-nikāya*, I, 135–36.

using you? ‘No, sir.’ And why not? Because it is not your self and has nothing to do with your self.’<sup>30</sup>

Norman has shown that passage B, in the light of passage A, must be understood as a satirical allusion to the identification of the world and the self—the identification which constitutes the most famous doctrine propounded in the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka* and *Chāndogya Upaniṣads*. That identification was the culmination of a theory of the equivalence between macrocosm and microcosm; the need for multiple, partial equivalences was short-circuited by identifying the soul/essence of the individual and of the world. The Buddha in a sense kept the equivalence, or at least parallelism, for he argued against a single essence at either level and so made macrocosm and microcosm equally devoid of soul/essence.

There seem to be verbal echoes of Yājñavalkya. The sixth wrong view in passage A is that after death I shall be *nicco*, *dhuvo* etc. Compare *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 4,4,23: *eṣa nityo mahimā brāhmaṇasya* (the *brāhmaṇa* here being one who has realized his identity with *brahman*); 4,4,20: *aja ātmā mahān dhruvaḥ*. The third point of the *tilakkhaṇas*, *dukkha*, is not mentioned here, but is of course opposed to *ānanda*, as at *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 3,9,28: *vijñānam ānandaṃ brahma* and 4,3,33: *athaiṣa eva parama ānandaḥ, eṣa brahmalokaḥ*. It remains only to remind readers of the most important and closest parallel of all. The fifth wrong view is to identify with what has been *diṭṭhaṃ suttaṃ mataṃ viññātaṃ*. What exactly is that? The answer is at *Bṛhadāraṇyaka* 4,5,6: *ātmani khalv are dṛṣṭe śrute mate vijñāte idaṃ sarvaṃ viditaṃ*. So here is the form of the microcosm-macrocosm equivalence to which the Buddha is alluding; and we can further see that his fifth wrong view is Yājñavalkya’s realization of that identity in life, and his sixth the making real that identity at death. But, says the Buddha, this is something that does not exist (*asat*).

Note that none of these parallels is recorded by the commentary. How could one argue that these statements were not made by the Buddha but produced by the later monastic tradition when that tradition, which certainly did produce the commentaries, appears not fully to understand them?

The Buddha did not reject everything that Yājñavalkya said. At *Bṛhadāraṇyaka* 4,4,5, he says that by *puṇya karman* a person at death becomes *puṇya*, by *pāpa karman*, *pāpa*. Though the meaning of *puṇya karman* in brahminical literature had hitherto been “purifying ritual”, the context here suggests a more general meaning. The passage is terse, so the meaning of *karman* is not spelt out; but it would be reasonable to suppose that what is meant is “act”, ritual and ethical action are not being fully differentiated. The Buddha went much further in his revalorization of the term: “By act”, he said, “I mean intention”.<sup>31</sup> Familiarity has dulled our perception of how bold a use of language that is. Action is completely internalized—in fact, transformed into its opposite. This goes just as far as saying that

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<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 140–41.

<sup>31</sup> *Cetanāhaṃ bhikkhave kammaṃ vadāmi*, *Aṅguttara-nikāya*, III, 415.

someone whom the world thinks a brahmin could really be an outcaste, and vice versa.

The change in the meaning of “action” lies at the heart of Buddhism and is fundamental to the coherence of the system. The Buddha revalorized not only brahminical soteriology, but ritual too. I conclude by offering an important instance of such revalorization.<sup>32</sup>

According to the Buddha, our six senses (including the mind) and their objects are ablaze with the three fires of passion, hate and delusion, and the goal is to extinguish those fires. According to Buddhist tradition, the doctrine of the three fires was first enunciated in the Buddha’s third sermon, the *Ādittapariyāya Sutta*. The *Vinaya* (I, 23–35) presents this sermon as the culmination of a long story: the Buddha converts three brahmin ascetics (Uruvela Kassapa, Nadi Kassapa and Gayā Kassapa) by miracles he performs while staying in the building in which they keep their ritual fires; he persuades them to give up the *agnihotra* (Pāli *aggihutta*). Thus, just as the Enlightenment is represented by the allegory of the battle against Māra, the message of what T.S. Eliot<sup>33</sup> has made famous in our culture as “The Fire Sermon” is conveyed allegorically by the story of the three Kassapas. The link is made plain by the sermon’s use of the fire metaphor.

The fires the Buddha sees burning are three because that number corresponds to the three permanently burning fires of the *āhitāgni*.<sup>34</sup> There could after all have been some other number; were the reference less specific, the same message could have been conveyed by talking of one, generalized fire, or maybe two, e.g. *taṇhā* and *avijjā*. To reach three, *taṇhā* has to be split into *rāga* and *dosa*, positive and negative.

My claim seems to be corroborated by an interesting sermon in which the Buddha gives an allegorical interpretation of the three fires which is somewhat like the (much later) one in *Manu*,<sup>35</sup> but depends on puns. I know of no modern discussion of this sermon, *Aṅguttara Nikāya*, *Sattaka Nipāta*, *Mahāyañña Vagga*, *sutta XLIV*.<sup>36</sup> Since I find E.M. Hare’s translation unsatisfactory, I offer my own, with some comments.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Most of the rest of this paper represents a revised version of part of my paper “Why there are three fires to put out”, delivered at the conference of the International Association of Buddhist Studies in Bologna, July 1985. Though originally I revised it for publication in the proceedings of that conference, the convenor and editor, Professor Pezzali, has kindly let me know that the publication is still (in November 1987) not assured.

<sup>33</sup> “The Waste Land”, 1922, Part III, especially the note on line 308.

<sup>34</sup> The *āhitāgni* is the brahmin who has followed the ritual prescription of the Vedic (*śrauta*) tradition and keeps the fires burning for the purposes of his obligatory daily rites.

<sup>35</sup> “Tradition holds that one’s father is in fact the *gārhapatya* fire, one’s mother the *dakṣiṇa*, one’s teacher the *āhavanīya*; that triad of fires is the most important.” *Manusmṛti*, II, 231.

<sup>36</sup> Published by the Pali Text Society, *Aṅguttara-nikāya*, IV, 41–46.

<sup>37</sup> The Pāli commentary on this *sutta* is short; it is published in the PTS edition at *Manorathapūraṇī*, IV, 29–30.

“Once the Blessed One was staying at Jetavana in Anāthapiṇḍika’s park in Sāvattihī. At that time the brahmin (a) Uggatasārīra (b) (Extended-Body, i.e., Fatty) had prepared a great sacrifice. Five hundred bulls and as many steers, heifers, goats and rams had been brought up to the sacrificial post for sacrifice. Then the brahmin went up to the Blessed One and greeted him, and after an exchange of courtesies he sat to one side. Then Uggatasārīra said to the Blessed One, ‘Gotama, I have heard that it is very rewarding and advantageous to kindle (c) a fire and set up a sacrificial post’. The Blessed One agreed that he had heard the same; this conversation was twice repeated. ‘Well then, Gotama, your ideas and ours, what you have heard and we have heard, agree perfectly’ (d).

At this the Venerable Ānanda said, ‘Brahmin, you should not question the Tathāgata (e) by saying what you did, but by telling him that you want to kindle a fire and set up a sacrificial post, and asking him to advise and instruct you so that it may be for your long-term benefit and welfare.’ Then the brahmin asked the Blessed One so to advise him.

Brahmin, when one kindles a fire and sets up a sacrificial post, even before the sacrifice takes place one is setting up three knives which are morally wrong (f) and lead to painful results. The three are the knives of body, speech and mind. Even before the sacrifice, one thinks, ‘Let this many animals be slaughtered for sacrifice.’ So while thinking one is doing something purifying (g) one is doing something not purifying; while thinking one is doing right one is doing wrong; while thinking one is finding the way to a good rebirth one is finding the way to a bad. So the knife of mind comes first. Then one says, ‘Let this many animals be slaughtered for sacrifice’, and so under the same misapprehensions one is setting up the knife of speech next. Then one oneself initiates (h) the slaughter, and so sets up the third knife of body.

Brahmin, these are the three fires one should abandon, avoid, not serve: the fires of passion, hate and delusion. Why? Because a passionate person who is overcome and mentally controlled by passion does wrong in body, word and thought. So at the dissolution of the body, after death, he goes to a bad rebirth, to hell. The same goes for a hating and for a deluded person. So one should abandon these three fires.

Brahmin, these are the three fires one should honour, respect, worship and look after properly and well (i): the fire fit for oblations, the fire of the householder and the fire worthy of religious offerings (j).

Whoever the parents are (k), they, brahmin, are what is called the fire fit for oblations. Why? From that source, brahmin, was this person obliterated, did he come into existence. So he should honour it and look after it. Whoever your children, wives, slaves, servants or workers are, they are

what is called the householder's fire. So that fire too should be honoured and looked after. The ascetics and brahmins who keep from intoxication and negligence, who keep to patience and restraint, who control, pacify and cool themselves (l), they are the fire worthy of religious offerings. So that fire too should be honoured and tended.

But, brahmin, this fire of wood should from time to time be kindled, from time to time be cared for, from time to time be put out (m), from time to time be stored (n).

At these words Uggatasarīra said to the Blessed One, 'Excellent, Gotama! From today forth please accept me as your lifelong disciple; I put my faith in you. Herewith I release all the animals and grant them life. Let them eat green grass and drink cool water, and let cool breezes blow upon them.'

*Notes on the above translation*

- a. *Contra* Hare, I construe as a genitive of agent with a past passive participle.
- b. I assume a joke. The commentary (C) says he was so known because of both his physique (*attabhāva*) and his wealth.
- c. *ādhānaṃ* (Hardy) must be the correct reading, not *ādānaṃ* (C).
- d. C: *sabbena sabban ti sabbena sutena sabbam sutam. sameti sam sandati*. The word *suta* recalls *śruti*, "sacred text".
- e. Tathāgatā plural of respect?
- f. "morally wrong" translates *akusala*; "right" and "wrong" below *kusala* and *akusala*.
- g. "purifying" translates *puñña*; this is one of the fundamental puns or reinterpretations of Buddhism: for the Buddhist the term is virtually a synonym of *kusala*.
- h. C reads *samārambhati* with v.1 *samārabhati*, Hardy *samārabhhati*. Possibly connected with *ālabh* "to kill".
- i. Hare's translation is grammatically impossible: "These three fires, when esteemed, revered, venerated, respected, must bring best happiness." *Parihātabbā* must be passive; as C says, it = *pariharitabbā*. For the phonetic change cf. *kātabba* < Sanskrit *kartavya*. *Parihātabbā* answers *pahātabbā* in the previous paragraph. The real difficulty lies in *sukham*, which is not normally a synonym of *sammā*. I suspect a corruption and venture the suggestion that what was intended was another pun, on *sukkhāṃ*, "dry", which is what fires should be kept. Not all the Buddha's puns are phonetically perfect; one must bear in mind that these started as

oral texts, so that small differences could be blurred, quite apart from the fact that in the Buddha's original dialect they may have been obliterated anyway. I know no parallel for *sukhaṃ* / *sukkhamaṃ*, but occasional *dukha* for *dukkha* is guaranteed by metre.

- j. The punning names of the three fires are of course untranslatable. The first, *āhuneyya*, is however a precise Pāli equivalent to *āhavanīya*, so the reference is changed but not the meaning. The second, *gahapataggi*, has turned “the fire of householdership” into “the fire of the householder”; losing the final *i* of *gahapati* by *sandhi* increases the phonetic similarity. The third name shows a greater gap between Sanskrit *dakṣiṇa* “south” and Pāli *dakkhiṇeyya*; but the latter implies a punning interpretation of *dakṣiṇāgni* as “the fire of sacrificial fees (*dakṣiṇā*)”.
- k. Hare's “the man who honoureth his father and his mother” is impossible; it is they, not their son, who must be worthy of honour. *Yassa* is difficult; the text of this passage shows several variants. The parallel point in the text about the third fire has *ye te*, with no variants. I would restore *ye*, or better still *ye'ssa*,<sup>38</sup> at this point for the first two fires at lines 3 and 9, interpreting both *ye* and *te* as nominative plural, and posit that the corruption occurred because *te* was interpreted as *tava*, which would make good sense, and the relative changed to agree with it. For the third fire, *te = tava* would make little sense, so there was no corruption.
- l. *parinibbāpentī*. In an article elsewhere<sup>39</sup> I have shown that this whole phrase is hard to translate appropriately because it has been clumsily lifted from quite a different context.
- m. *nibbāpetabbo*.
- n. C: *nikkhipitabbo ti yathā na vinassati evaṃ thapetabbo*: “it is to be so placed that it does not go out”. The flame could be transferred to some sheltered place or vessel.

It may not be fanciful to see in the Buddha's first allegorical fire an allusion to the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*; the idea that one is obliterated from one's parents is the same, and there may even be a verbal echo. Our text says one is *āhuto saṃbhūto*. Compare *Bṛhadāraṇyaka* 6,2,13: “Gautama, woman is fire. Her lap is the firewood, her body-hair the smoke, her womb is flame, what he does inside is the embers, enjoyments are the sparks. In this very fire the gods offer semen; from that oblation (*āhuteḥ*) man comes into existence (*saṃbhavati*).”

Dr Chris Minkowski has kindly pointed out<sup>40</sup> that the last sentence of the sutta echoes a verse of the *Ṛgveda* X, 169, 1, which blesses cows, invoking for them

<sup>38</sup> I am grateful to Professor Schmithausen for pointing out that *ye'ssa* would be the neatest emendation.

<sup>39</sup> See my article “Three souls, one or none: the vagaries of a Pāli pericope” referred to above in note 5.

<sup>40</sup> In a letter to me after I had lectured at Brown University.

pleasant breezes, good grass and refreshing water. The words are different but the sentiments the same. The verse, which begins with the word *mayobhūr*, is prescribed for use in several *śrauta* and *grhya* rites.<sup>41</sup> He writes: “It appears to be an all-purpose benedictory verse for cows used both in daily routine and in ritual celebration. I think it is therefore quite possible that specifically this verse is echoed in the Buddhist text. As the Fatty Brahmin let the cows go he recited the verse he would recite in letting them out to graze.”

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Let me sum up. I have argued that we (unlike the commentators) can see the Buddha’s message in systematic opposition to beliefs and practices of his day, especially those of the educated class who inevitably constituted most of his audience and following. Texts, which by and large do not represent his precise words (or if they do, we can never know it), must have been composed during his lifetime. Unfortunately I have not made a close study of the *Aṭṭhaka* and *Pārāyana Vagga*, but I would certainly see no *a priori* problem in allowing them to date from the Buddha’s lifetime, because I believe that a lot of the texts must do so. To go further, and try to sort out which of the texts contemporary with the Buddha date from his early years I would think a hopeless enterprise.

Many years ago my aunt, a violinist, was employed to play in the orchestra attached to the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre in Stratford-on-Avon. She lodged with a working class family. She was astonished to discover one day that they did not believe that a man called Shakespeare had ever existed. “So who do you think wrote the plays?” she asked. “The Festival Committee, of course”, came the pitying reply. I am content to be a loyal nephew. On the other hand we must remember that if the plays had never been published the role of the Committee might indeed be crucial.

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<sup>41</sup> The verse is used in the *aśvamedha*, for instance; but its use in *grhya* rites may better account for its being known to Buddhists. Minkowski writes: “As [householders] let their cows out to graze they should recite *mayobhūḥ* etc. (*Āśvalayana Grhya Sūtra* 2,10,5). Or when they come back from grazing and are back in the pen (*Śāṃkhāyana Grhya Sūtra* 3,9,5). There is also a *grhya* festival performed on the full moon of Kārttikī when the cows are honoured and the *mayobhūr* verse is recited (*Śāṃkhāyana* G.S. 3,11,15).”