

Canadian Journal of Buddhist Studies

ISSN 1710-8268

<https://thecjbs.org/>

Number 14, 2019

## The Historical Buddha: Response to Drewes

Bryan Levman

University of Toronto

*Copyright Notice:* Digital copies of this work may be made and distributed provided no change is made and no alteration is made to the content. Reproduction in any other format, with the exception of a single copy for private study, requires the written permission of the author.



# The Historical Buddha: Response to Drewes

Bryan Levman  
UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO

## **Abstract**

This article is a response to David Drewes' hypothesis (2017: 1-25) that the Buddha was a mythic figure who did not necessarily exist as an historical fact. The article suggests that there are four criteria by which the Buddha's historicity can be established, none of which were discussed by Drewes: 1) the historical facts presented in the Buddhist canon which are corroborated by non-canonical sources, 2) the fact that there is no plausible alternative explanation for the provenance of the teachings 3) the humanness of the Buddha as presented in the canon belies the purported mythologization which Drewes asserts and 4) a core biography of the Founder can be discerned in the Buddhist canon, once later interpolations are removed.

**Keywords:** Historicity of the Buddha, biography of the Buddha, mythologization of the Buddha, humanness of the Buddha.

## Introduction

When I heard David Drewes' contention at his IABS 2014 presentation that "even if we adopt a lax standard of evidence, it is not possible to consider the existence of 'the historical Buddha' to be an established fact,"<sup>1</sup> I wrote to him suggesting that there were four questions he had to answer in order to prove his case:

- 1) Historicity. The *suttas* are situated in history. Historical places, historical personages, historical rulers and kings, historical conflicts. The earliest historical record we have of the Buddha are the Aśokan edicts of the mid-third century BCE. If the Buddha is not an historical figure how does one account for this?
- 2) Aetiology. If the Buddha is not an historical personage, someone(s) had to create him and his teachings out of whole cloth. Why? Isn't the simpler explanation (that requires no deliberate fraud) the more parsimonious solution? How do we account for the large body of unique, unified teachings, which he promulgated? Where did it come from if not from one insightful, brilliant individual?
- 3) Humanness. Much of the material in the Pāli scriptures portrays the Buddha not as a mythical figure, but as a human being, who lived, bled, aged, decayed and died. If he were an invented, mythical figure, why emphasize his common humanity?
- 4) Biographical. It is undeniable that some parts of the Buddha's biography have been historicized, that is, given the appear-

---

<sup>1</sup> Drewes, "The Idea of the 'Historical Buddha,'" Abstract (no page). When this article was being readied for publication, Alexander Wynne's new (2019) article "Did the Buddha exist?" came to my attention. Wynne's article too answers David Drewes' scepticism about the existence of the Buddha. While there is some overlap between Wynne's article and mine, his is quite different and complementary to this one.

ance of historical verity through pure invention, according to the hyperbolic standards of biography of the time. But discoverable in the canon is evidence of an early, core biography preserving the authentic history of a real person in an unembellished state. Is this also invented?

I don't know whether Drewes ever received my email, as there was no answer, and I see in his newest article published in *JiABS* 2017 vol. 40 that none of these issues have been addressed. In fact, his position has become even stronger than that presented at IABS four years ago. Not only is the Buddha's historical existence not an established fact, but he is, per Drewes, a mythical figure who did not *necessarily* exist historically at all:

we do not have the grounds for speaking of a historical Buddha at all. Of course, it is possible that there was some single, actual person behind the nebulous “śramaṇa Gautama” of the early texts, but this is very far from necessarily the case, and even if such a person did exist, we have no idea who he was. There may similarly have been an actual person behind the mythical Agamemnon, Homer, or King Arthur: Vyāsa, Vālmiki, Kṛṣṇa, or Rāma, but this does not make it possible to identify them as historical. If we wish to present early Buddhism in a manner that accords with the standards of scientific, empirical inquiry, it is necessary to acknowledge that the Buddha belongs to this group.<sup>2</sup>

In this article, I propose to examine these four questions in some detail to dispute Drewes' contention that the Buddha was a mythical figure and one who did not necessarily exist in history.

---

<sup>2</sup> Drewes, “The Idea of the Historical Buddha,” 19.

## Historical

Although Drewes repeatedly argues that there is no historical evidence for the Buddha's existence, he makes no attempt to review or qualify the historical evidence that does exist. The focus of his article is modern Western authors' opinions about the Buddha's historicity, which he claims is based on bias, not on any factual historical basis. Yet none of the historical information we do have is examined or even mentioned. The Asokan rock edicts for example, contain numerous references to the Buddha, the earliest going back to shortly after his coronation in 268 BCE. Asoka himself became a Buddhist *upāsaka* or layperson in his fourth regnal year, and in his twelfth year he published the famous Calcutta-Bairāt rock inscription outlining seven expositions of the law (*dhammapaliyāyāni*) for all to study,

*Vinayasamukkasse Aliyavasāṇi Anāgatabhayāni Muniḡāthā  
Moneyasūte Upatissapasine e chā Lāghulovāde musāvādaṃ adhigichya  
bhagavatā Budhena bhāsīte etāni bhaṃte dhammapaliyāyāni icchami  
kiṃti bahuke bhikkhupāye chā bhikkhuniye chā abhikkhinaṃ suneyu  
chā upadhālayeyū chā. hevaṃmevā upāsakā chā upāikā chā.*<sup>3</sup>

which one might translate (following Bloch, from the French),<sup>4</sup>

*“The Exaltation of the Discipline, the Genealogy of the Nobles, the Dangers of the Future, the Verses of the Sage, the Sutta on Moral Perfection, the Question of Upatissa, and the Discourse on Lying Addressed to Rahu-  
la by the Bhagavā Buddha. Reverend Sirs, these disquisitions on the  
dhamma I desire the majority of the monks and nuns to listen to*

<sup>3</sup> Hultzsch, *Inscriptions of Asoka*, 172-74.

<sup>4</sup> Bloch, *Les Inscriptions d'Asoka*, 154-55.

often and reflect on. And the same for the *upāsakas* and the *upāsikās*.

Exactly what these titles refer to has been the subject of speculation for well over a century and need not overly concern us here.<sup>5</sup> Some are recognizable as early works, like the *Muniḡāthā* from the *Sutta Nipāta*, generally regarded as one of the oldest of Buddhist teachings; others are more obscure. More important is that the edict provides proof of a nascent historical canon in the middle of the third century BCE, within approximately one hundred and fifty years of the Buddha's passing. They are all attributed to the Buddha by another famous historical figure, the king of Magadha Priyadassi ("lovely to look at"), who, according to tradition, was taught the *Buddhadhamma* through a succession of only four teachers (*ācariya-paramparā*) leading directly back to Upāli, the *vinaya* master in the Buddha's lifetime.<sup>6</sup> None of this proves the historicity of the Buddha, but the historical reality of Asoka has never been challenged, and it is certainly significant that neither he nor the other members of the Buddhist *saṅgha* had any doubts as to the historical existence of the Founder.

The presumed historical existence of the Buddha is reflected in many of the early *suttas* where the Buddha is situated in actual historical places alongside real historical figures. This is not to deny the possibility that some of this material could have been invented by skillful fabricator(s), but the style of the work, natural, uncontrived and immediate, all argue for its genuineness. We know, for example, from other sources,

---

<sup>5</sup> See, for example Oldenberg, *The Vinaya Piṭakam*, Vol. 1, xl; Hultzsch, *Inscriptions*, 174, note 1; Winternitz, *A History of Indian Literature*, Vol. II, 606-09; Talim, *Edicts of King Aśoka*, 142-44.

<sup>6</sup> Aśoka was converted by Nigrodha and his preceptor was Moggaliputtatissa, who also ordained Mahinda, Aśoka's son. The succession went from Upāli to Dāsaka, Soṅaka, Sig-gava to Moggaliputtatissa (see Mookerji, *Asoka*, 63 and Geiger *Mahāvamsa*, xlvii-1 for discussion).

that the kings (Ajātasattu, Bimbisāra, Pasenadi) the Buddha meets with were real historical figures; no one would thereby argue that the tales of the Buddha's encounters with them were uniformly authentic as to details (for there are certainly contradictions in the *suttas*), but that there were such encounters seems undeniable—they are reported from too many, diverse sources. The *Sāmaññaphalasutta* tells of one such meeting between the King Ajātasattu and the Buddha, where the latter is identified by the king's ministers as one of the leading ascetics living in and around Rajagaha at the time. All of these Ajātasattu had also visited,—including Nigaṇṭha Nātaputta, leader of the Jains, Pūraṇa Kassapa, an Ājīvaka, Makkhali Gosāla, an *ahetuvādin* who denied the efficacy of karma, Ajita Kesakambalī and Pakudha Kaccāyana, both nihilists, and Sañjaya Belaṭṭhaputta, a sceptic. We have independent verification of the existence of some of these leaders from the Jain and Sanskrit sources so there is no reason to question their authenticity.<sup>7</sup> The earliest mention in Sanskrit sources of the Buddha comes in the *Rāmāyāna*, where the Buddha is called both a thief and an atheist. The *Rāmāyāna* is believed to date perhaps from the mid-third century BCE,<sup>8</sup> —but this passage may be a later interpolation.<sup>9</sup> As is well known, many of the *Purāṇas* incorporate the Buddha as one of the ten *avatāras* of the Supreme Being;<sup>10</sup> however these are all relatively late works (no earlier than the third century CE).

---

<sup>7</sup> Jaina writings, for example, mention both Bimbisāra (Śreṇika) and Ajātasattu (Kūnika). See for example, Law, *Some Jaina Canonical Sūtras*, 142 mentioning King Śreṇika Bimbisāra of Magadha in the *Uttarādhyayana sūtra*. Ajātasattu is mentioned in the *Nirayāvalī Sūtra* (Jain, *Lord Mahāvīra and his Times*, 201). These kings are also mentioned in the standard Sanskrit genealogies of the Kings of India, viz., *Pūraṇas*, and so forth.

<sup>8</sup> Kane, *History of Dharmaśāstra*, vol. 1, part 1, 396.

<sup>9</sup> Kane, *History of Dharmaśāstra*, vol. 2, part 2, 721. *Ayodhyākāṇḍa* 109.34: *yathā hi coraḥ sa tathā hi buddhastathāgataṃ nāstikamatra viddhi*. Pollock mentions this line in his 1986 edition (Pollock, *The Rāmāyaṇa of Valmīki*, 513) of the *Ayodhyākāṇḍa* as occurring in “S [Southern] and most D [Devanāgarī manuscripts allied with Northern] manuscripts, but he says nothing about an interpolation.

<sup>10</sup> Kane, *History of Dharmaśāstra*, 720.



Yet it is surprising that, while virtually all brahmanical sources put down the Buddhists, none seem to adopt the (very condemnatory) Drewsian criticism, that he may never have existed at all.

The Buddhist *suttas* have a lot of material on the Buddha's rivalry with Nātaputta, and one would expect—assuming this material has not been made up—to find similar material in the Jaina canon; and indeed, there is mention of the Buddhists, and always in a pejorative context, although I am not aware of any specific attack on the Buddha himself or his authenticity. In the *Sūtrakṛtāṅga* 1.1.17, the Buddhists are called “fools” for rejecting an eternal soul:

Some fools say that there are five skandhas of momentary existence. They do not admit that (the soul) is different from, nor identical with (the elements), that it is produced from a cause (i.e. the elements), nor that it is without a cause (that is, that it is eternal).<sup>11</sup>

And later in the same work (2.6.27-28) they are ridiculed for their theory of karma = mental intention:

If a savage puts a man on a spit and roasts him, mistaking him for a fragment of the granary; or a baby, mistaking him for a gourd, he will not be guilty of murder according to our views. (27) If anybody thrusts a spit through a man or a baby, mistaking him for a fragment of the granary, puts him on the fire, and roasts him, that will be a meal fit for buddhas to break fast upon. (28)<sup>12</sup>

In the *Ācārāṅga Sūtra* 1.2.1 the Buddhists are likened to householders who only pretend to be renunciants, committing various harmful acts:

---

<sup>11</sup> Jacobi, *Jaina Sūtras Part II*, 238.

<sup>12</sup> Jacobi, *Jaina Sūtras Part II*, 414.

See! there are beings individually embodied (in earth; not one all-soul). See! there are men who control themselves, (whilst others only) pretend to be houseless (that is monks, such as the Buddhas, whose conduct differs not from that of householders), because one destroys this (earth-body) by bad and injurious doings . . .<sup>13</sup>

Although material like the above does not prove the historicity of the Buddha, it does prove the accuracy of the rivalry between the two groups (and their leaders) as presented in the Buddhist *suttas*. Surely, if the Buddha were a fake historical personage, the Jains would have been the first to make the accusation.

Another historical episode involving Ajātasattu that purports to be historical reportage, is his tutelarship of Devadatta, and his assistance in the latter's plot to kill the Buddha and take over leadership of the *saṅgha*. How accurate a story this is we cannot know, although the events are certainly credible, both because of the concern over the Buddha's succession which we know existed at that time (for Ānanda himself addresses it with the Buddha),<sup>14</sup>—and that probably exists in every such situation where a great religious leader approaches the end of life, —and also because of the very real and very un-Buddhistic human reaction of the Buddha to Devadatta's machinations, that is, his apparent anger and condemnation of Devadatta to hell for aeons, though a believer might justify that as prescience rather than deliberate intention. More on the human side of the Buddha below.

In terms of toponymy, according to the *suttas* the Buddha lived and worked in a fairly narrow geographical area of a few hundred kilometres, travelling by foot amongst the republics and kingdoms of an-

---

<sup>13</sup> Jacobi, *Jaina Sūtras*, Part I, 3-4.

<sup>14</sup> DN 2, 99<sup>21</sup>-100<sup>24</sup>.

cient India in the fifth century BCE. There were the sub-Himalayan *gaṇasaṅghas*, including his own Sakya clan (with their capital of Kapilavatthu), the Mallas (capitals Kusinārā and Pāvā) and the Licchavi federation (capital Vesālī) and the three main kingdoms to the west, Ajātasattu's Magadha centered in Rajagaha, Pasenadi's Kosala with its capital of Sāvatti and the Kingdom of Kāsi, also under Pasenadi's control, with its capital of Vārāṇasi. There is nothing mythological about these places; they are all real historical locales, which continue to exist today or, if forgotten (like Kusinārā) have been re-discovered by modern archaeologists.

The names of places often contain important, historic information embedded in the words. In the case of ancient Indian names where the Buddha lived and worked, though many are Indo-Aryan (IA) in origin (and therefore relatively late, post-dating the IA immigrations), others can be traced back to their Dravidian and/or Munda and/or Tibetan roots, that is, to the autochthonous peoples prior to the IA immigrations, preserving an authentic historical tradition grounded in the peoples of the land; corroborating not only the verity of the place itself, but also that of its original inhabitants. I have argued elsewhere that the Buddha “stood midway between two cultures”—the Indo Aryans from outside India, and the indigenous peoples from its native soil.<sup>15</sup> Much of the history of the Buddha and Buddhism has been “brahmanized” by his numerous brahmin followers' attempts to place him firmly in the dominant Brahmanical establishment and represent him as a leading light of Brahmanism. But this mythologizing of history is like a palimpsest which only partially conceals. For remnants of the earlier culture are not only discoverable, but abundant. One must ask the question, then, why would the later redactors of the Buddha's history want to obscure his indige-

---

<sup>15</sup> Levman, “Cultural remnants of the indigenous peoples in the Buddhist Scriptures,” 174.

nous roots, unless the latter were authentic? The answer of course is that the local peoples were looked down upon by the Brahmanical elite.<sup>16</sup>

The founder of the Sakya clan, King Ikṣvāku (Pāli: Okkāka) has a Munda name, suggesting that the Sakyas were at least bilingual.<sup>17</sup> Many of the Sakya village names are believed to be non-IA in origin,<sup>18</sup> and the very word for town or city (*nagara*; cf. the Sakya village *Nagakara*, the locus of the *Cūlasuññata Sutta*) is of Dravidian stock.<sup>19</sup> Most of the names of the villages in the Malla country that the Buddha visited before his *parinibbāna* were of autochthonous origin which is not surprising, given their locations in the tribal regions.<sup>20</sup> These place names are worth examining in more detail; by uncovering the Buddha's roots in the culture of the sub-Himalayan tribes, it demythologizes the subsequent Brahmanical historicization of his life and legitimizes him as a unique historical participant in his own tribal tradition.

Not only place names, but common flora, fauna and farming implements specific to this region, and various religious customs (including burial rites) are all indigenous in origin.<sup>21</sup> The *Jātaka* stories, for example,

---

<sup>16</sup> Levman, "Cultural remnants," 154-57.

<sup>17</sup> Kuiper, Aryans in the Rigveda, 7; Mayrhofer, *Etymologisches Wörterbuch des Altindischen*, vol. 2, 125.

<sup>18</sup> Thomas, *The Life of Buddha as Legend and History*, 23.

<sup>19</sup> Mayrhofer, *Kurzgefasstes etymologisches Wörterbuch des Altindischen, A Concise Etymological Sanskrit Dictionary*, vol. 2, 125.

<sup>20</sup> For example, Nalanda < Kannaḍa *naḷḷu*, "reed"; Koṭigāma < Tamil *kōṭu* "peak of a hill"; or Kuśinagara < Tamil *nakaram*, "town, city" and *kuśin*, "furnished *kuśa* grass," perhaps non-IA per Mayrhofer 1956-1980 (KEWA), vol. 1 245, ? < Koṇḍa *kusa*, "greens and vegetables."

<sup>21</sup> Emeneau, "Linguistic Prehistory of India," 286-91; Emeneau's article may also be found in Dil, *Language and Linguistic Area*, 92-99. see also Kuiper, "Rigvedic Loanwords" 137-85.

contain a rich storehouse of animal names, farming words and slang words which may well be non-IA in origin (*viḍāla/biḍāla* = “cat”; *kakaṅṅaka* = “chameleon”; *lāṅgala* or *naṅgala* = “plough”; *mora* = “peacock”; *nakula* = “mongoose”; *kamaṅḍalu* = “water pot”; *markaṭa* = “monkey”; *sakaṭa* = “cart”; *maṅgala* = “auspicious”).<sup>22</sup> Tree and serpent worship are found throughout the *suttas*, and the unusual funeral rites of the tribes, where the Buddha’s body is wrapped in *kappāsa* cloth, placed in a *tila*<sup>23</sup> oil vat or iron, covered with another pot and honoured with dance, songs and music for a week before cremation, are also indigenous customs, which have no place in Brahmanical ritual. I have covered this in detail elsewhere, so there is no need to repeat it here.<sup>24</sup> Underneath the attempted brahmanical mythologization of the Buddha was a vibrant, indigenous culture with its own rich and authentic, cultural, social and religious heritage.

One might argue that none of the above “proves” the existence of the Buddha as an historical personage. But it does provide the most parsimonious explanation for the facts that we have before us. The alternative, that somehow a pseudo-historical figure was fabricated out of whole cloth or evolved on its own does not make rational sense.

---

<sup>22</sup> *Jātaka* 128, *viḍāla/biḍāla*: KEWA: vol. 2, 429, “probably a foreign word, Dravidian origin suspected.” *Jātaka* 141, *kakaṅṅaka*: KEWA: vol. 1, 137, s.v. *kaṅkataḥ*: “Unclear and not satisfactorily explained.” *Jātaka* 542, *lāṅgala* or *naṅgala*: a Munda word per Kuiper 1955: 156. *Jātaka* 159, *mora/mayura*: Mayrhofer 1992 (EWA): vol 2, 317, problematic, possibly Dravidian or Munda; see also Emeneau 1954, 288; also in Dil 1980: 95; *Jātaka* 165, *nakula*: EWA: vol. 2, 2, “unclear, foreign word?” *Jātaka* 175, *kamaṅḍalu*: Kuiper 1948: 163, possible Munda word. *Jātaka* 273, *markaṭa*: EWA: vol. 2, 322, “unclear, foreign word?” from Dravidian or Austro-Asiatic. Turner 1962–85: 9882 < Kanada *maṅga* = monkey. *sakaṭa*: a Munda word per Kuiper 1955, 161; EWA: vol. 2, 601, “Not satisfactorily explained.” *maṅgala*: a Munda word per Kuiper 1955: 183. KEWA: vol. 2, 547, “Not securely explained.”

<sup>23</sup> *Kappāsa* is a local Munda word for cotton. *Tila* is a Munda word for sesame seed.

<sup>24</sup> Levman, “Cultural Remnants,” 166–173.

## Aetiology

If the Buddha is indeed a mythic figure, how did his teachings arise? They are unique and original insights into the nature of life, counter intuitive, difficult to see and comprehend, as he himself says in the well-known trope:

*adhigato kho my āyaṃ dhammo gambhīro duddaso duranubodho santo paṇīto atakkāvacaro nipuṇo paṇḍitavedanīyo.* (“The truth I have seen is profound, difficult to see, difficult to understand, peaceful, excellent, beyond the realm of reasoning, subtle, to be understood by the wise . . .”).<sup>25</sup>

They are difficult to see, and difficult to understand, running against the stream (*paṭisotaṃ*) of commonly accepted “truths” or societal norms. They turn everything upside down (*vippāllasa*), as what appears good is really the opposite; what appears permanent is impermanent; what one thinks of as pleasure is really suffering; what one sees as possessing intrinsic being, is really only a selfless, impersonal process of becoming and decaying.

Over the twenty-five centuries since the Buddha lived and taught, billions of people have responded to his teachings of relief from suffering through the realization of selflessness; the four-fold *saṅgha* of *upāsakas* and *upāsikās*, *bhikkhus* and *bhikkhunis* has lasted in an uninterrupted continuum from then to the present day. Are we to say that these teachings were simply invented or evolved? Is that even possible? Can a system of thought of such subtlety and insight, which has cast aside the veil of existence and provides the real possibility of liberation from *saṃsāra* after countless lifetimes, *not* be the result of a single, brilliant, insightful

---

<sup>25</sup> Vin. 1, 4<sup>32-34</sup> and throughout.

individual? Bronkhorst suggests that “systems of thought are never the result of organic developments,” but require a human agent.<sup>26</sup> Was there ever an instance in human history where this has not been the case?

Arguing that the Buddha was “not necessarily” a historical figure betrays a lack of understanding of just what it is that the Buddha has accomplished, a teaching unique in the history of humankind. It is a coherent, unified, internally consistent, liberative psychology, tried and tested by billions over the course of time. And the teachings certainly did not make themselves. They could only have originated with one rare, brilliant individual who in a flash of perspicacity was able to pierce the veil of illusion and see deeply into the nature of things as they truly are. As Childers said, “but to those who are familiar with the Pali sacred books nothing is more striking than the intense personality of Gotama, as the way in which he impresses his individuality on every detail of his system.”<sup>27</sup>

### Humanness

In his 2017 article, Drewes says

Early Buddhist authors make little effort to associate the Buddha with any specific human identity . . . Early texts, such as the *suttas* of the Pali canon, say hardly anything about the Buddha’s life, and identify him in only vague terms. Rather than a specific human teacher, he appears primarily a generic, omniscient supra-

---

<sup>26</sup> Bronkhorst, *Language and Reality, On an Episode in Indian Thought*, 24.

<sup>27</sup> Childers, *A Dictionary of the Pāli Language*, ix, note 2.

divine figure characterized primarily in terms of supernatural qualities.<sup>28</sup>

Certainly, there are lots of incidents in the Pali canon where the Buddha is portrayed in a mythic context. But there is also a very real human portrayal of the Buddha of which Drewes seems to be unaware and which we will discuss below. Many of the supernatural elements seem to have a blatant political and marketing purpose—to portray him as one of the leading lights of brahmanism, a king’s son, the epitome of a long line of heavyweight brahman ancestors, a “great man” (*mahāpurisa*) in the supposed Vedic tradition of great men, etc.<sup>29</sup>—to encourage the brahman social elite to join and/or support the movement. In other cases the Buddha is given various supernatural powers and made to perform various miracles, mythologized and almost deified to generate social acceptance, and demonstrate that he was “better” and more worthy than the other competing *samaṇa* (renunciant) sects. The *locus classicus* for this typology is the story of Ven. Piṇḍolabhāradvāja’s obtaining of the sandalwood bowl by flying up in the sky and the Buddha’s subsequent performance of the “twin miracles” (*yamaka-pāṭihāriya*) in a contest to show up the Jains and other *titthikas*.<sup>30</sup> But these are probably all late accretions to the canon. Some scholars use the absence or presence of the supernatural as a yardstick by which to judge the early or late provenance of a passage in question.<sup>31</sup> For in the earliest textual layers of the canon the Buddha appears very human, very real, very non-mythological. So much so that one wonders why the material was not

---

<sup>28</sup> Drewes, “Historical Buddha,” 16-17.

<sup>29</sup> Which is itself a fabrication. See Levman, “Cultural Remnants,” 162-65.

<sup>30</sup> The most complete account of this episode is found in Dhpa 3, 199<sup>8</sup>-230<sup>14</sup> *Yamakappāṭihāriyavatthu*, ad Dhpa 181.

<sup>31</sup> Waldschmidt, “Die Überlieferung vom Lebensende des Buddha,” 335-37; Bareau, *Recherches sur la biographie du Buddha dans les Sūtrapitaka et les Vinayapitaka anciens*.



excised by later editors who were intent on representing him as a mythic figure—undoubtedly some of it was removed.

Unlike brahmans, who were very class conscious, and didn't allow the lowest class, the *suddas*, to study the Vedic texts or be initiated into the Vedic rituals, the Buddha taught to all comers, from the highest to the lowest levels of society, from kings to *suddas* to courtesans. Even criminals were allowed in, at least initially.

In an often misogynist, male-dominated society where women had no place in brahmanical rites and rituals, the Buddha allowed them into his *saṅgha*. But the *suttas* record no attempt to idealize or idolize him in this respect. He at first refused women admission and only reluctantly agreed when Ānanda pressed him and reminded him that the would-be nun in question was his own foster mother who had nourished him when his mother had died. And even then, he chastised Ānanda for curtailing the longevity of the *dhamma* because of the admission of women, and made the nuns adopt eight *garudhamma* (“important rules of behaviour”) to keep them subservient to the monks. Even Buddhaghosa was at pains to rationalize the Buddha's apparent disparaging treatment of women, and goes to great lengths in the commentary to explain.<sup>32</sup> No

---

<sup>32</sup> AN-a 4, 134<sup>13-15</sup>, *Gotamīsuttavaṇṇanā: Satthā pi 'itthiyo nāma parittapaññā, ekayācīta-mattena pabbajjāya anuññātāya na me sāsanaṃ garuṃ katvā gaṇhantī' ti tikkhattuṃ paṭikkhipitvā* “The teacher (thinking) women are of limited wisdom, if they are admitted into the order upon only one request, they will not honour my teaching, they will not accept it, he refused three times . . .” And, in order to deal with the obvious contradiction that the admission of women to the *saṅgha* had not shortened its lifespan to five hundred years (as the Buddha said it would), Buddhaghosa comments (AN-a- 4, 136<sup>20</sup>-137<sup>3</sup>): *Mahato taḷākassa paṭikacceva ālin ti iminā pana etam atthaṃ dasseti: yathā mahato taḷākassa pāḷiyā abaddhāya pi kiñci udakaṃ tiṭṭhat'eva, paṭhamam eva baddhāya pana yaṃ abaddhapaccayā na tiṭṭheyya, tam pi tiṭṭheyya, evam eva ye ime anuppanne vatthusmiṃ paṭigacc'eva anatikkamanatthāya garudhammā paññattā, tesu hi apaññattesu mātuḡāmassa pabbajitattā pañca vassasatāni saddhammo tiṭṭheyya, paṭigacc'eva paññattattā pana aparāni pi pañca vassasatāni ṭhassatī ti evaṃ paṭhamam vutta-vassasahassam eva ṭhassatī ti.* “Just as a man might

attempt was made to excise any of this, despite the fact that it did not make the Buddha look good; rather he simply looks like a product of his time.

In fact, for a supposed “mythological figure,” it is surprising how un-mythological and human the Buddha often appears in the *suttas*. Above, I have mentioned his anger at Devadatta’s actions which seem very human and un-Buddha like. But this is not the only instance in the canon of such behaviour. When a monk espouses the wrong view, the Buddha is quick to chastise him, as in the case of Ariṭṭha who held the pernicious view (*pāpakaṃ diṭṭhigataṃ uppannaṃ hoti*) that “those things called obstruction by the Blessed One are not able to obstruct one who engages in them.”<sup>33</sup> The Buddha reproves him in front of the whole *saṅgha*, calling him a *moghapurisa* (“stupid/foolish/dense person”) and likens him to a snake-handler who does not know how to grasp the animal so that it turns back on him and bites him. Such people, “learn the Dhamma only for the sake of criticising others and for winning in debates, and they do not experience the good for the sake of which they have learned the Dhamma.”<sup>34</sup>

---

build a large dyke for a great lake as a precaution,” with this he shows this meaning: Just as a large lake has a certain amount of water even though there is no embankment constructed, which may not remain without the construction of an embankment, but it may remain, with the construction (of an embankment first); in the same way, those *garuddhamma* rules have been declared for the purpose of not transgressing them as a precaution against a matter which has not arisen; if they had not been declared, because of the going forth of women, the true *dhamma* would only last for five hundred years. But because they were declared as a precaution, it will last for a further five hundred years. Thus as originally said, the *dhamma* will last for a thousand years.”

<sup>33</sup> Nāṇamoli & Bodhi, *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha, a Translation of the Majjhima Nikāya*, 224. *Alagaddūpama Sutta*, MN 1, 130<sup>5-7</sup>: “yathā ye ‘me antarāyikā dhammā vuttā Bhagavatā te paṭisevato nālaṃ antarāyāyāti.

<sup>34</sup> Nāṇamoli & Bodhi, *The Middle Length Discourses*,” 227. MN 1, 133:<sup>23-31</sup> *Idha bhikkhave ekacce moghapurisā dhammaṃ pariyāpuṇanti... te taṃ dhammaṃ pariyāpuṇitvā tesam*

A similar, public *moghapurisa* reproof is given to the *bhikkhu* Sāti who maintained that “it is the same consciousness that runs and wanders through the round of rebirths, not another.”<sup>35</sup> The Buddha also criticizes Sunakkhatta as a *moghapurisa*, a *bhikkhu* who decides to leave the *saṅgha* because the Buddha has not performed any miracles, even though the Buddha made no such promise: “Then it appears Sunakkhatta, that I made no such promises, and you made no such conditions. Such being the case, you foolish man, who are you and what are you giving up?”<sup>36</sup> A similar reproof is dealt Ven. Mālunkyāputta who contemplates leaving the *saṅgha*, also for spurious reasons (MN 63), and it occurs in the Vinaya as a well-worn trope in the explanation of the origin of the *pārājika* and other monks’ rules:

“Foolish man, it is not suitable it is not becoming, it is not proper, it is unworthy of a recluse, it is not allowable, it is not to be done.

---

*dhammānaṃ paññāya atthaṃ na upaparikkhanti, tesaṃ te dhammā paññāya atthaṃ anupa-  
parikkhataṃ na nijjhānaṃ khamanti, te upārambhānisamsā c’eva dhammaṃ pariyāpuṇanti  
itivādappamokkhānisamsā ca, yassa c’atthāya dhammaṃ pariyāpuṇanti tañ-c’assa atthaṃ  
nānubhonti.*

<sup>35</sup> *ibid*, 349, re: *Mahātaṇhāsankhayasutta*.

<sup>36</sup> Walshe, *The Long Discourses of the Buddha: a Translation of the Dīgha Nikāya*, 382. DN 3,3<sup>12</sup>

<sup>26</sup> *Pāṭika sutta: api nu tāhaṃ Sunakkhatta, evaṃ avacaṃ — ehi tvaṃ Sunakkhatta, mamaṃ uddissa viharāhi, ahan te uttarimanussa-dhammā iddhipāṭihāriyaṃ karissāmi ti? no h’etaṃ, bhante. tvaṃ vā pana maṃ evaṃ avaca — ahan bhante Bhagavantaṃ uddissa viharissāmi, Bhagavā me uttari-manussadhammā iddhi-pāṭihāriyaṃ karissatī ti? no h’etaṃ, bhante. iti kira Sunakkhatta, n’evāhan taṃ vadāmi — ehi tvaṃ Sunakkhatta mamaṃ uddissa viharāhi, ahan te uttari-manussa-dhammā iddhi-pāṭihāriyaṃ karissāmi ti; na pi kira maṃ tvaṃ vadesi — ahaṃ bhante Bhagavantaṃ uddissa viharissāmi, Bhagavā me uttari-manussa-dhammā iddhi-pāṭihāriyaṃ karissatī ti. evaṃ sante, mogha-purisa ko santo kaṃ paccācikkhasi? As can be seen Walshe’s translation is more like a paraphrase. The commentary equates *mogha* with *tuccha* (“empty, vain”); “*ko santo kaṃ paccācikkhasi* is glossed, “Either one who requests may reject what is requested, or what is requested may reject the person requesting. But you are neither a person requesting or that which is requested, and that being the case, foolish man, who are you, what are you rejecting?” DN-a (Sv) 3, 817<sup>23-25</sup>.*

How could you go forth in such a well-proclaimed *Dhamma* and training and not be able for life to practice the perfectly complete and pure spiritual life? Have I not taught the *Dhamma* in many ways for the sake of dispassion . . .<sup>37</sup>

To our modern ears the name-calling is quite jarring and seems unnecessarily harsh and condemnatory. In any case, it certainly does not make the Buddha appear as a “mythical” character like Agamemnon, Rāma or Kṛṣṇa who speak in grandiloquent, heroic verse. The Buddha’s reaction—disapproving, reproachful, even angry—is a normal, uncontrived human response to the situation. In the dialogues, the colloquial, natural and spontaneous nature of the Buddha’s speech reflect a real person responding to the urgent question of suffering, its cause and its resolution.<sup>38</sup>

There is much similar to this in the *suttas* which makes no attempt to mythologize the person or make him into more than he is, a man, subject to the same laws of decay as all of us. This material co-occurs with idealizing material that is clearly later and sits quite uneasily with the earlier layers. For example, the *Mahāparinibbāna sutta* and parallel texts are quite diverse in their content, containing several different layers which have been identified by Waldschmidt as 1) the kernel of an original canon which all the schools shared, with occasional deletions,

---

<sup>37</sup> Horner, *The Book of the Discipline. Vinayaṭṭakam*, 111. This iteration at Vin 3, 20<sup>18-23</sup> in regards to a monk Sudinna (“Well-given”) who had sex with his former wife and concerning whom the first *pārājika* (expulsion for sexual intercourse) was established: “*ananucchaviyaṃ moghapurisa ananulomikaṃ appaṭirūpaṃ assāmaṇakaṃ akappiyaṃ akaraṇīyaṃ. Kathaṃ hi nāma tvaṃ moghapurisa evaṃ svākkhāte dhammavinaye pabbajitvā na sakkhissasi yāvajīvaṃ paripuṇṇaṃ parisuddhaṃ brahmacariyaṃ carituṃ. nanu mayā moghapurisa anekapariyāyena virāgāya dhammo desito, no sarāgāya...* In the course of his censure, the Buddha repeats the word *moghapurisa* 12 times, although Horner omits most of them.

<sup>38</sup> See Levman, *Pāli the Language: The Medium & Message*, forthcoming.

transpositions, additions and transformations; 2) a second layer which differs in spirit and diction and shows a tendency to exaggerated piety and religious sensationalism; and 3) a further elaboration where the supernatural majesty of the Buddha is demonstrated.<sup>39</sup>

One of those episodes belonging to the earliest layer of the text (which also occurs, somewhat altered in the Sanskrit, Tibetan, and Chinese versions) is the Buddha's touching and very human description of his physical state to Ānanda. He had just recovered from a severe sickness in Beluva that almost killed him; Ānanda was in great distress, worried about his sickness and possible death and who would lead the monks when the Founder had gone. The Buddha said that he would not appoint a successor to the *saṅgha* as he had given the monks all the teachings, withholding nothing, and the teachings would be the only refuge they needed.

---

<sup>39</sup> Waldschmidt, "Die Überlieferung vom Lebensende des Buddha," 335-337. Im ganzen gesehen herrscht sogar eine beachtenswerte Übereinstimmung in der Überlieferung der letzten Ereignisse im Leben des Buddha. In erheblicher Überzahl treten uns Vorgänge entgegen, die in den weitaus meisten Versionen ihre Entsprechungen haben und somit auf gemeinsamer Grundlage beruhen. Rein äusserlich betrachtet gehören drei Viertel aller überkommenen Texte in Sanskrit und Pāli zur alten Schicht und beruhen somit auf dem ursprünglichen Kanon. Allerdings hat von diesen drei Vierteln ein grösserer Teil stärkere Überarbeitungen in der einen oder anderen Version erfahren (page 336). "Comprehensively viewed, a noteworthy correspondence is indeed dominant in the transmission of the last events of the Buddha's life. In a considerable majority of cases we encounter episodes which by far in most versions, have correspondences and therefore rely on a common foundation. Purely externally considered, three quarters of all texts which have come down to us in Sanskrit and Pāli belong to the old layer and therefore are based on the original canon. Nevertheless, of this three-quarters a greater part has undergone revisions in one or the other versions."

Ānanda, I am now old, worn out, venerable, one who has traversed life's path, I have reached the term of life, which is eighty. Just as an old cart is made to go by being held together with straps, so the Tathāgata's body is kept going by being strapped up. It is only when the Tathāgata withdraws his attention from outward signs, and by the cessation of certain feelings, enters into the signless concentration of mind, that his body knows comfort.<sup>40</sup>

If the Buddha were indeed a mythic character, surely this kind of human material, where the Founder is portrayed as old and weak, would be the first to go. Immediately following this incident is the Buddha's visit to the Cāpāla shrine—a pre-Buddhist earth spirit's (*yakkha*) abode<sup>41</sup>—where he renounces the life principle (*āyusañkhāraṃ ossaji*); this event is accompanied by a great earthquake, following which the Buddha discourses on the eight causes of such a phenomenon. Because of its supernatural content and non-sequitur interruption of the narrative, the

---

<sup>40</sup> DN 2, 100<sup>11-19</sup>: *Ahaṃ kho pan'Ānanda etarahi jiṇṇo vuddho mahallako addha-gato vayo anupatto, āsītiko me vayo vattati. Seyyathā pi Ānanda jajjara-sakaṭaṃ veṭṭha-missakena yāpeti, evam eva kho Ānanda veṭṭha-missakena maññe Tathāgatassa kāyo yāpeti. Yasmiṃ Ānanda samaye Tathāgato sabba-nimittānaṃ amanasi-kārā ekaccānaṃ vedanānaṃ nirodhā animittaṃ ceto-samādhim upasampajja viharati, phāsu-kato Ānanda, tasmim samaye Tathāgatassa kāyo hoti.* Note that the cart that Buddha compares his body to (*sakaṭa*) is a non-Aryan indigenous Munda term (Kuiper, "Rigvedic Loanwords," 161). For a discussion of the different Sanskrit and Pali versions see Levman, "Vedhamissakena: Perils of the Transmission of the *Buddhadhamma*."

<sup>41</sup> Ud-a (Pv-a), 322<sup>23</sup>-323<sup>2</sup>: *Cāpāla-cetiyan ti pubbe Cāpālassa nāma yakkhassa vasita-tṭhānaṃ Cāpāla-cetiyan ti paññāyittha. Tattha Bhagavato kata-vihāropi tāya ruḥhiyā Cāpāla-cetiyan ti vuccati.* "The Cāpāla *cetiya*,' was formerly the dwelling place of a *yakkha* called Cāpāla; it is known as the 'Cāpāla *cetiya*.' There also a *vihāra* was built for the Bhagvan which was called the 'Cāpāla *cetiya*,' by convention."

earthquake discourse passage is generally considered to be a later interpolation.

The Buddha evidently had a bad back, for there are five instances recorded in the canon, where he complains that his back is hurting (*piṭṭhi me āgilāyati*) and he asks Sāriputta, Mogallāna or Ānanda to take over and finish the *dhamma* talk.<sup>42</sup> Exactly the kind of complaint one would expect from a real person, not a mythological character. Why did the mythologizers not excise it? Because it was part of an authentic tradition which was not easily removed without complaints from other monks who had memorized the scriptures. The same goes for this death, which was messy and painful, and not what one would expect of a mythic personage.<sup>43</sup>

It has long been recognized that the Buddhist scriptures are time-stratified, that is several early, middle and late layers are mixed together in an often haphazard fashion. In early layers, like the *Sutta Nipāta*, for example, the Buddha wanders alone, the *saṅgha* is inchoate and the supernatural elements are at a minimum. Here the Buddha is represented as a real person, not a mythological figure, abused by brahmans who

---

<sup>42</sup> DN 3, 209<sup>17</sup>, *Saṅgītisutta*: where the Buddha asks Sāriputta to give a discourse on the *dhamma* to the monks as “my back hurts, I will stretch it” (*piṭṭhi me āgilāyati, tam-ahaṃ āyamissāmi*); the *Sekkhassutta*, MN 1, 354<sup>25-26</sup> where he turns the *dhamma* talk over to Ānanda for the same reason; the *Avassutapariyāyasutta*, SN 4, 184<sup>8</sup> where Mogallāna is given the responsibility; and the *Paṭhamanaḷakapānasutta* and *Dutiyaṇaḷakapānasutta*, AN 5, 123<sup>1-2</sup> and AN 5, 126<sup>1-2</sup>, where again Sāriputta is assigned the task. There is also one incident in the *Vinaya* (*Saṅgabhedakathā*, Vin 2, 200<sup>12</sup>, where Devadatta imitates the very same words of the Buddha and hands over the *dhamma* talk to Sāriputta, who promptly convinces the five hundred monks who have left the *saṅgha* with Devadatta to return to the Buddha.

<sup>43</sup> DN 2, 127<sup>34-36</sup>: *Atha kho Bhagavato Cundassa kammāra-puttassa bhattaṃ bhuttāvissa kharo ābādho uppajji lohita-pakkhandikā pabāḷhā vedanā vattanti māraṇantikā*. “Then, having eaten the meal provided by Cunda the smith, a painful illness arose in the Bhagavan, and bloody diarrhoea, and painful, near-death feelings occurred.”

criticize him for not working for a living (*Kāsibhāradvājasutta*); called a *muṇḍaka*, *samaṇaka*, and *vasalaka* by the brahman Aggikabhāradvāja (*Vasalasutta*);<sup>44</sup> and discoursing on various subjects relevant to fifth century BCE society, like for example, vegetarianism, redefining *āmagandho* (“tainted fare”) not as eating meat, but as causing harm (*Āmogandhasutta*); and criticizing brahmins for their preoccupation with wealth and accumulation (*Brāhmaṇadhammikasutta*); and of course giving advice on how to overcome one’s afflictions. All this only scratches the surface. The picture of the Buddha that emerges in the early scriptures is not that of a supernatural being transcending *saṃsāra* and all those in it, but of an extraordinary but real person, socially aware, sensitive, compassionate and spontaneously responsive to others’ suffering.

## Biography

We have virtually no original records of the life of the Buddha; his detailed biography was created by his followers after his death and these compositions often postdate the events described by hundreds of years. Due to its concision and its repetition in other parts of the *Tipiṭaka*, many consider the *Ariyapariyesanāsutta* of the *Majjhima Nikāya* (Middle Length Discourses) to be the earliest biographical account we possess of Siddhārtha Gautama.<sup>45</sup> Here the Buddha tells us in one sentence how he began his search for enlightenment:

---

<sup>44</sup> Translated as “shaveling,” “wretched ascetic,” “outcaste,” by Norman, *The Group of Discourses (Sutta-Nipāta)*, 14. For an interpretation of *muṇḍaka* as meaning a member of one of the contemned eastern tribal groups, see Levman, “The *muṇḍa*/*muṇḍaka* crux. What does the word mean?” 46-47. The word itself is non-IA, being Munda in origin.

<sup>45</sup> Thomas, *The Life of the Buddha*, 62, n. 1; Bareau, *Recherches sur la biographie du Buddha*, 72-74; Norman, “Aspects of early Buddhism,” 25; Walters, “Four Approaches to the Sermon on the Noble Quest (*Ariyapariyesanā-sutta*),” 251-56.



Later, 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 yellow robe, and went forth from the home life into homelessness.<sup>46</sup>

This may or may not represent something close to the actual words of the historical Buddha; the simplicity and candor of the statement do seem to reflect a “certain genuineness” on the part of the speaker.<sup>47</sup> But the words certainly bear little resemblance to the superfluity of details which have accreted to his biography in later Theravādin and Mahāyāna writings, where his father is a king, his mother a queen, and various supernatural events accompany his going-forth. As E. J. Thomas puts it in his classic *The Life of Buddha as Legend and History*:<sup>48</sup>

all of them [the legends] belong to a period far removed from the stage which might be considered to be the record, or to be based on the record of an eyewitness. Everything, even in the Scriptures, has passed through several stages of transmission, and whatever the period of the actual discourses, the legends by which they are accompanied are in no case contemporary. Some

---

<sup>46</sup> Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi 1995, 256. MN 1,163<sup>27-31</sup>: *So kho ahaṃ bhikkhave aparena samayena daharo va samāno susu kāḷakeso bhadrena yobbanena samannāgato paṭhamena vayasā akāmakānaṃ mātāpitunnaṃ assumukhānaṃ rudantānaṃ kesamassuṃ ohāretvā kāsāyāni vatthāni acchādetvā agārasmā anaḡāriyaṃ pabbajiṃ*. The same phrase is repeated almost verbatim in the *Mahāsaccakasutta* (MN 1, 240<sup>25-29</sup>), the *Cankīsutta* (MN 2, 166<sup>27-29</sup>), the *Saṅgārasutta* (MN 2, 211<sup>33f</sup>), the *Soṇadaṇḍasutta* (DN 1, 115<sup>15-20</sup>) and the *Kūṭadantasutta* (DN 1, 131<sup>30-34</sup>), the *Bodhirājakumārasutta* (MN 2, 93<sup>18-20</sup>) and the first part of the sentence (*daharo yuvā susu kāḷakeso bhadrena yobbanena samannāgato paṭhamena vayasā*) also occurs three times in the *Aṅguttara Nikāya*.

<sup>47</sup> Walters, “Four Approaches to the *Sermon on the Noble Quest*,” 253.

<sup>48</sup> Thomas, *Life of the Buddha*, 1-2.

of the scriptural legends, such as the descent from heaven, and the miracles of the birth and death, are just those which show most clearly the growth of apocryphal additions, as well as the development of a dogmatic system of belief about the person and functions of Buddha. Another development is that which makes Buddha the son of a king, and the descendant of a line of ancestors going back to the first king of the present cycle.

Many of the Buddha's converts were brahmins, and his biography has been thoroughly brahmanized, with the many legends that have attached to his life-story showing his teachings as the "crowning and consummation of the Brahmanical religion."<sup>49</sup> In Aśvaghoṣa's *Buddhacarita*, the *Lalitavistara*, the *Mahāvastu*, and the *Nidānakathā*, his father is portrayed as a *kṣatriya* king with his own retinue of brahmin priests; the young Buddha is represented as the fulfillment of a long line of famous brahmanical and Vedic ancestors; he is given a brahmanical *gotta* (family or clan name), Gotama; recognized as a *Mahāpuruṣa* (P. *Mahāpurisa*) by the court *purohitas* (priests) with all the marks of a great man, 'handed down in our Vedic mantras' (*āgatāni . . . amhākam mantesu*); likened to the Vedic gods; and administered the *saṃskāras* (sacred Vedic rites) starting with the naming ceremony.<sup>50</sup> Interpreting this trend as an attempt on the part of the colonized to imitate the hegemonic, colonizing culture may not be far from the mark; for the Buddha was from the Sakya clan, one of the eastern ethnic groups that were looked down upon by the increasingly dominant brahmanical immigrants from the northwest.<sup>51</sup>

---

<sup>49</sup> Olivelle, *Life of the Buddha by Aśvaghoṣa*, xix.

<sup>50</sup> Rhys Davids, *Buddhist Birth-stories; Jataka tales*, 160; Cowell, *The Jātaka or Stories of the Buddha's Former Births*, 8-9; Olivelle, *Life of the Buddha*, 15-17, 23.

<sup>51</sup> Levman, "Cultural Remnants," 152-57.

From a close reading of the canon we know that the Buddha was not a brahman, and though he calls himself a *khattiya*, he considered himself apart from the Aryan *vaṇṇa* (social class) system. We know his father was not a king, but an elected member of a *gaṇasaṅgha* republic. And we know his teachings are radically different from orthodox brahmanical beliefs and not simply the continuation and/or culmination of brahmanical doctrine. Of his true roots we know very little, beyond the few snippets which are buried in the canon, or can be reasonably surmised based on the evidence. All of the material I have been able to find is summarized in my 2013 article. But though his background has been mythologized, this does not make him a mythological character, just someone whose true roots have been obscured and excised for purposes of social and political acceptance.

### Conclusion

I am not sure how an article almost wholly concerned with the encounters of nineteenth-century Western academics with Buddhism can be expected to prove or disprove the historical authenticity of its Founder. There is nothing in Drewes' article about the historical content of the canon, the history of India at the time, whether of Asoka, the brahmins, the Jains or others, personal and/or biographical information about the Founder, nor a plausible account of why or how he might have been invented as a mythological figure or how the teachings may have come to pass, if not from one person. Nor do I understand what he means by the so-called "standards of scientific, empirical enquiry" to which he refers in his article.<sup>52</sup> Bareau addressed this question in his attempt to establish the earliest and most authentic layers of the *Mahāparinibbāna sutta* (and

---

<sup>52</sup> Drewes, "Historical Buddha," 17.

its Sanskrit equivalent, the *Mahāparinirvāṇasūtra*). He isolated the story of the Buddha's death as the earliest core of the *sutta* and established a time-line based on three criteria: 1) multiple source (the earliest episodes appear in all or most versions), 2) description of the Buddha (the more human, that is, the less supernatural, the treatment, the older the episode) and 3) presence in other parts of the canon (indicating a borrowed, or later accretion).<sup>53</sup> None of these are absolute standards—for multiple source may be the result of later harmonization and, while criterion “2” is a potential cogent argument, criteria “3” is not *prima facie* definitive, as several other explanations are possible. Nevertheless they do provide a useful yardstick by which to evaluate authenticity, at least in the case of a single work, which has, as in the *Mahāparinibbānasutta*, several recensions.

As I have shown above, we have all of these elements present in the canon, especially multiple reports and the portrayal of the Buddha as a human, rather than supernatural, figure. Unlike the founder of Christianity, who is often portrayed in the Gospels as a transcendental, mythic figure, in the Pāli writings Gotama of the Sakya clan emerges as a real person, a mendicant who for almost fifty years taught his philosophy of liberation to kings and commoners without regard for social class, who (reluctantly) admitted women into the monkhood, and who suffered the same irritations, aches and pains as we all do. The Pāli writings list the places Buddha travelled to, names and descriptions of everyone he spoke to and the gifts he received from lay followers. Toponymy, floral, fauna and other cultural names preserve a pre-IA record of autochthonous peoples and their cultural traditions of which the Buddha was a part. The scriptures relate stories of wars amongst kings and of patricides. They detail early conflict within the monkhood including Buddha's disa-

---

<sup>53</sup> Bateau, “La composition et les étapes de la formation progressive du Mahāparinirvāṇasūtra ancien.”

greements with his cousin Devadatta, the latter's attempts to kill him and Buddha's angry reaction and condemnation. They show the aging Buddha with an aching back turning over the teaching to his disciple Sāriputta so he can rest, a man whose body at the end of his life is falling apart and held together "like an old cart with straps." He is a man like the rest of us and did not purport to be otherwise. Yet the inner, liberating path he discovered was unique in history, and open to all.

The story is told over and over again, in different locales, to different people, sometimes with minor factual inconsistencies, but the overall philosophy/psychology is always congruent and internally consistent. The teachings claim to be the work of one man, and to all appearances are indeed so, and historically, no one has ever claimed differently, not any of Buddha's competitors or enemies; nor have any of the various Buddhist sects that have arisen over the centuries questioned his historical veracity,<sup>54</sup> though they have questioned virtually everything else, including his basic teaching on *anatta*. It is difficult to conceive how his discoveries, might *not* have been the work of one man. Because much of his early history has been mythologized and overprinted with political bias, it may be impossible to ferret out the "real" historical Buddha. But we have ample proof that such a person existed, even if we can only come to know him in depth through the content and style of his teachings and the compassionate humanity which is evident throughout.

---

<sup>54</sup> One might object here, citing the *Lotus Sutra's* contention that he only appeared as an historical figure as a teaching artifice, but they were not of course questioning his ultimate facticity.

### List of Abbreviations

AN = *Aṅguttara Nikāya*

DN = *Dīgha Nikāya*

EWA = Mayrhofer, 1992

IA = Indo Aryan

KEWA = Mayrhofer, 1956-1980

MN = *Majjhima Nikāya*

SN = *Samyutta Nikāya*

Sn = *Sutta Nipāta*

### Bibliography

Bareau, André. *Recherches sur la biographie du Buddha dans les Sūtrapīṭaka et les Vinayapīṭaka anciens*. Paris: École française d'Extrême-Orient, 1963.

\_\_\_\_\_. “La composition et les étapes de la formation progressive du Mahāparinirvāṇasūtra ancien.” *Bulletin de l'École française d'Extrême-Orient*. Tome 66: 45-103, 1979.

Bloch, Jules. *Les Inscriptions d'Asoka*. Paris: Société d'Édition “Les Belles Lettres,” 1950.

Bronkhorst, Johannes. *Language and Reality, On an Episode in Indian Thought*. Boston: Brill, 2011.

Childers, Robert. C. *A Dictionary of the Pāli Language*. New Delhi: Asian Educational Services, 1875 [2003].

Cowell, Edward Byles. *The Jātaka or Stories of the Buddha's Former Births*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1895 [2008].

Dil, Anwar S. *Language and Linguistic Area* Stanford. CA: Stanford University Press, 1980. Alternative source for most Emeneau articles.

Drewes, David. "The Idea of the 'Historical Buddha.'" IABS abstracts, Early Buddhism section. <http://iabs2014.univie.ac.at/academic-program/list-of-sections/13-early-buddhism/>, 2014.

Drewes, David. "The Idea of the Historical Buddha." *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 40 (2017): 1-25.

Emeneau, Murray B. "Linguistic Prehistory of India." *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 98 (1954): 282–92. Also available in Dil, *Language and Linguistic Area*, 1980: 282–292.

Geiger, Wilhelm. *Mahāvamsa*. London: Pali Text Society, 1912.

Horner, I. B. *The Book of the Discipline. Vinayapīṭakam*. Oxford: Pali Text Society. Digital edition prepared by Bhikkhu Brahmali for Sutta Central, 1938-1966 [2014].

Hultzsch, E. *Inscriptions of Asoka*. Delhi: Indological Book House, 1925 [1969].

Jacobi, Hermann. *Jaina Sūtras, translated from Prākṛit. Part I, The Ācārāṅga Sūtra, the Kalpa Sūtra*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1884 [1964].

Jacobi, Hermann. *Jaina Sūtras, translated from Prākṛit. Part II, The Uttarādhyayana Sūtra, the Sūtrakṛtāṅga Sūtra*. Delhi: Motilal

Banarsidass, 1895 [1968].

Jain, Kailash Chand. *Lord Mahāvīra and his Times*. Delhi: Motilal Banaridass, 1974 [1991].

Kane, Pandurang Vaman. *History of Dharmasāstra*. Five volumes. Pune: Bhandarkar Oriental Reserch Institute, 1968-1974.

Kuiper, F. B. J. *Proto-Munda Words in Sanskrit*. Amsterdam: N.V. Noord-Hollandsche Uitgevers Maatschappij, 1948.

\_\_\_\_\_. "Rigvedic Loanwords." In *Studia Indologica Festschrift für Willibald Kirfel zur Vollendung seines 70 Lebensjahres*. Edited by H. v. O. Spies, 137-185. Bonn: Selbstverlag des Orientalischen Seminars der Universität Bonn, 1955.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Aryans in the Rigveda*. Amsterdam-Atlanta, GA: Rodopi. 1991

Law, Bikala Churn. 1949. *Some Jaina Canonical Sūtras*. Bombay: Royal Asiatic Society, 1991.

Levman, Bryan. "Vedhamissakena: Perils of the Transmission of the *Buddhadhamma*." *Canadian Journal of Buddhist Studies* 5 (2009): 21-38.

\_\_\_\_\_. "The *muṇḍa/muṇḍaka* crux. What does the word mean?" *Canadian Journal of Buddhist Studies* 7 (2011): 45-76.

\_\_\_\_\_. "Cultural remnants of the indigenous peoples in the Buddhist Scriptures." *Buddhist Studies Review* 30.2 (2013): 145-189.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Pāli, the Language: The Medium & Message*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing. Forthcoming.



- Mayrhofer, Manfred. *Kurzgefasstes etymologisches Wörterbuch des Altindischen, A Concise Etymological Sanskrit Dictionary*. Heidelberg: Carl Winter – Universitätsverlag, 1956-1980.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Etymologisches Wörterbuch des Altindoarischen*. Heidelberg: Carl Winter Universitätsverlag, 1992.
- Mookerji, Radhakumud. *Asoka [Gaekwad Lectures]*. London: Macmillan and Co., Limited, 1928 [2007].
- Ñāṇamoli, Bhikkhu, and Bhikkhu Bodhi. *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Majjhima Nikāya*. Boston, MA: Wisdom Publications, 1995.
- Norman, Kenneth R. “Aspects of early Buddhism.” In *Early Buddhism and Madhyamaka*, 24-35. Edited by D. S. Ruegg and L. Schmithausen. Leiden: Brill, 1987.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Group of Discourses (Sutta-Nipāta)*. Lancaster: Pali Text Society, 1992 [2006].
- Oldenberg, Hermann. *The Vinaya Piṭakaṃ. Vol. I*. Oxford: Pali Text Society, 1879 [1997].
- Olivelle, Patrick. *Life of the Buddha by Aśvaghoṣa*. New York: New York University Press, JJC Foundation, 2008.
- Pollock, Sheldon. *The Rāmāyaṇa of Valmiki, An Epic of Ancient India, Volume II Ayodhyākāṇḍa*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986.
- Rhys Davids, Thomas William. *Buddhist Birth-stories; Jataka tales. The*

*commentarial introduction entitled Nidānakathā; the Story of the Lineage.* London: G. Routledge, 1878.

Talim, Meena. *Edict of King Aśoka, A New Vision.* New Delhi: Aryabn Books International, 2010.

Thomas, Edward J. *The Life of Buddha as Legend and History.* 3rd ed. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1927 [1960].

Turner, R. L. *A Comparative Dictionary of Indo-Aryan languages.* London: Oxford University Press, 1962–1985.

Waldschmidt, Ernst. “Die Überlieferung vom Lebensende des Buddha, Erster Teil, Vorganagsgruppe I–IV; zweiter Teil, Vorganagsgruppe V–VI.” *Abhandlungen der Akademie der Wissenschaften in Göttingen, Philologisch-Historische Klasse*, Nr. 29, 30. 1944–1948.

Walshe, Maurice. *The Long Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Dīgha Nikāya.* Boston, MA: Wisdom Publications, 1995.

Walters, Jonathan S. “Four Approaches to the *Sermon on the Noble Quest (Ariyapariyesanā-sutta)*.” *History of Religions* 38.3 (1999): 247–284. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1086/463543>

Winternitz, Moritz. *A History of Indian Literature.* Vol I and II. Translated from the Original German by S. Ketkar and Revised by the Author. Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1933.

Wynne, Alexander. “Did the Buddha exist.” *Journal of the Oxford Centre for Buddhist Studies.* 2019 (16): 98–148.