Did the Buddha exist?

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Abstract

Extreme scepticism about the study of early Buddhism is common in Buddhist Studies. Sometimes it is even claimed that the Buddha never existed; myth is all we have. Going against this view, this paper shows that early Buddhist discourses are largely authentic, and can be regarded as a reasonably accurate historical witness. Special attention is paid to the personality of the Buddha, and the way in which his idiosyncrasies flow into the teachings. The resulting 'Dharma' has a very particular character, and should be regarded as a singular creation which could not have been invented by a committee.

The historical Buddha occupies a curious position in the academic study of Buddhism. Despite, or perhaps because of, large collections of texts reporting his teachings, uncertainty about their authorship and doubts about the Buddha's existence are commonplace. In the words of Jonathan Silk (1994: 183), the Buddha 'is essentially historically unknowable', there being 'no certain evidence even that such a man lived … there is no actual "fact" or set of "facts" to which any picture of the Buddha might correspond.' Bernard Faure (2016) allows the Buddha a little more leeway than this. In answering the question 'what do we actually know about the Buddha?', he comments that while '[i]t is fair to say that he was born, he lived, and he died … [t]he rest remains lost in the mists of myth and legend'.

Other scholars have focused their attention on a different type of myth-making. According to Philip Almond (1988: 12) the problem is much bigger than the Buddha, since even 'Buddhism' was a creation of the nineteenth

century Western mind. Donald Lopez Jr. has been more specific than this about the Western creation of Buddhism. In his study of Western views of the Buddha up to the mid-nineteenth century, he has focused on one eminent Orientalist. For Lopez Jr., the modern picture of the Buddha is nothing more than a trend, 'the result of a series of historical accidents' (2013: 226) which was not manufactured 'in India in the fifth century BCE', but created 'in Paris in 1844' (2013: 3), by none other than Eugène Burnouf:

> Relying only on his prodigious Sanskrit skills, his dogged analysis, and his imagination of what must have been, he created a historical narrative of Buddhism—from pristine origin, to baroque elaboration, to degenerate decline—based entirely on his reading of a random group of texts that arrived on his desk as if from nowhere. And from those same texts, he painted a portrait of the Buddha that remains pristine. (2013: 211)

The Buddha as a creation of nineteenth century Orientalist imagination is a feature of a recent paper by David Drewes, who has claimed that late Victorian scholars created a 'flesh and blood person … from little more than fancy' (2017: 1). Extending the perspective of Jonathan Silk, Drewes stresses the failure of 'more than two centuries of scholarship' to 'establish anything' (2017: 1), and sketches a depressing story of scholarly failure since Burnouf:

> Following the publication of Burnouf's Introduction, [scholars] shifted their focus to the final Buddha and spent roughly four more decades proposing one answer or the other on the question of whether or not he was historical. Though the historical faction won out, the scholars involved never cited any relevant facts, or made any significant arguments in support of their views. Burnouf cited no more than pious Nepali belief. Hardy cited nothing, and eventually abandoned the idea. Max Müller treated Wilson's doubts as legitimate until he later rejected them without any explicit justification. Koeppen, early Oldenberg, and Lamotte relied on versions of the Great Man theory, according to which it is inconceivable that Buddhism could have arisen without a powerful founder. Rhys Davids, later Oldenberg, and Bareau relied on *ad populem* arguments, which are inherently fallacious. (2017: 15)

Although Drewes claims that no 'relevant facts' or 'significant argument' have ever been produced in favour of the Buddha's existence, he says neither what the facts might be, nor what kind of historical argument might be acceptable. And he does not explain himself when calling for 'the standards of scientific, empirical inquiry' to be upheld (2017: 19). We will here try to rectify this problem by adopting an approach that is empirical and inductive: by adducing the relevant facts and making significant arguments, we will build up a general picture which proves, beyond reasonable doubt, that the Buddha did indeed exist and that we have a good record of his teachings. We must begin by considering the problem of 'proof'.

1. What is proof?

Good evidence for the Buddha would perhaps be his mention in a non-Buddhist document from the fifth century BC. Although no such document exists, at least one Indian religious figure from the fifth century BC is mentioned in an objective source: Mahāvīra, founder of the Jains and a contemporary of the Buddha, is mentioned in the early Buddhist texts. Were we to believe this non-Jain evidence for Mahāvīra, it would leave us in a quite curious situation. For it would mean accepting Mahāvīra's existence based on the very same sources deemed inadequate as proof for the Buddha. This should surely make us pause for thought. Might not the early Buddhist texts be more reliable than the sceptics claim?

Even if we do not accept the Buddhist depiction of either Mahāvīra or the Buddha, canonical Buddhist texts are the only possible source of evidence about the Buddha; material evidence for the very earliest period of Buddhism is non-existent. What, then, should we make of the Tipiṭakas of various Buddhist schools, a complete version of which exists in the Pāli tradition, but with large collections also in Chinese, Sanskrit, Tibetan and (now) Gāndhārī translation? Scepticism is only one of many possible approaches to canonical Buddhist literature. Bronkhorst (2000: ix) has summed up the three most common opinions as follows:

i. stress on the fundamental homogeneity and substantial authenticity of at least a considerable part of the Nikāyic materials;

ii. scepticism with regard to the possibility of retrieving the doctrine of earliest Buddhism;

iii. cautious optimism in this respect.

The first position is more or less that of the Theravāda tradition: the Pāli canon is authentic, and while academic study can help recover obscure aspects of early Buddhism, there is no doubt about the general nature of the Buddha's teaching. Most critical studies, however starting with scholars such as T. W. Rhys Davids and Hermann Oldenberg, incline towards the third position, and assume that careful scholarship can reveal 'facts' about the Buddha and early Buddhism. Both scholars, and many more after them, have presented arguments about early Buddhism based more or less entirely on the texts.

The possibility of such proof is, of course, doubted by those who adhere to the second position. Those who doubt that there was a historical Buddha in the first place must assume that there was a period of creative activity lying behind, and hence not recorded in, the canonical texts. This is a quite extreme position, and the notion of an unrecorded period in which the 'idea' of the Buddha was fabricated surely requires some justification. Sceptics must thus provide reasonable arguments to support the claim that the extant texts are later inventions.

In short, sceptics must present 'proofs'; they must *argue* that the content of the Tipiṭaka(s) is of such a nature that the Buddha's historicity cannot be assumed, and is indeed quite unlikely. This point has been elegantly made by E. J. Thomas, author of the influential *Life of Buddha as Legend and History* (1927):

> Is there a historical basis at all? It must be remembered that some recognised scholars have denied and still deny that the story of Buddha contains any record of historical events. We further have the undoubted fact that various … well-known characters once accepted as historical are now consigned to legendary fiction, such as Dido of Carthage, Prester John, Pope Joan, and Sir John Mandeville. The reply to those who would treat Buddha in the same way is not to offer a series of syllogisms, and say, therefore the historical character is proved. The opponents must be challenged to produce a theory more credible… An indolent scepticism which will not take the trouble to offer some hypothesis more credible than the view which it discards does not come within the range of serious discussion.[1]

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[1] Drewes (2017: 12-13), citing Thomas (1927: xvii–xviii).

E. J. Thomas here provides an eloquent summary of the normal 'standards of scientific, empirical inquiry': all parties involved in a debate must be judged on the basis of their arguments, with the most credible theory gaining general acceptance. Bur Drewes misreads this simple and obvious point:

> For Thomas, rather than something that has been or can be proved, the existence of the historical Buddha is simply a realistic hypothesis. Though he suggests that we must accept this hypothesis unless we can provide a better one, a third option would simply be to acknowledge that we do not know how Buddhism originated. (2017: 13)

This is a perverse interpretation of Thomas' approach. At no point does Thomas merely ask for 'a realistic hypothesis'; rather, he assumes that in text-critical history, knowledge is created by advancing credible theses, which are to be judged against each other. Thomas thus points out that the 'we don't know anything' line of thought must stand or fall based on the strength of its arguments:

> [Extreme scepticism] however is not the generally accepted view, and for it to be accepted it would be necessary to go on and show that the theory that the records are all inventions … is the more credible view.[2]

Sceptics such as Drewes fail to understand that such a claim as 'we do not know how Buddhism originated' is a thesis which requires 'proof'. Drewes' analysis is mistaken in another respect. He claims that E. J. Thomas followed 'Rhys Davids' old *ad populum* argument' (2017: 13). But neither Thomas nor Rhys Davids claimed anything like 'we know that X is the case because most people believe that it is'. While Thomas refers to the 'generally accepted view' that the Buddha existed, he makes it quite clear that the reason for its acceptance is its persuasive power. Thomas' point goes something like this: 'Most scholars accept the Buddha's existence as a far more credible thesis than the sceptical view that he did not exist'; this is quite different from the *ad populum* claim 'I accept it because it is the majority opinion.'

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[2] Drewes (2017: 13), citing Thomas (1927: 233–34).

With regard to the view of the Buddha as mere myth, it is also true that T. W. Rhys Davids claimed that 'no one … would now support this view'.[3] But once again this is not an *ad populum* deference to a popular position. Rhys Davids' point is rather that the general lack of support for an entirely mythic view of the Buddha is due to its inadequacies. He instead believed that the historical value of the canonical discourses is proved by their careful study. In this regard, we can consider Rhys Davids' comments on the *Mahā/Kassapa-sīhanāda Sutta* (DN 8):

> When speaking on sacrifice to a sacrificial priest, on union with God to an adherent of the current theology, on Brahman claims to superior social rank to a proud Brahman, on mystic insight to a man who trusts in it, on the soul to one who believes in the soul theory, the method followed is always the same. Gotama puts himself as far as possible in the mental position of the questioner. He attacks none of his cherished convictions. He accepts as the starting-point of his own exposition the desirability of the act or condition prized by his opponent – of the union with God (as in the *Tevijja*), or of sacrifice (as in the *Kūṭadanta*), or of social rank (as in the *Ambaṭṭha*), or of seeing heavenly sights, etc. (as in the *Mahāli*), or of the soul theory (as in the *Poṭṭhapada*). He even adopts the very phraseology of his questioner. And then, partly by putting a new and (from the Buddhist point of view) a higher meaning into the words; partly by an appeal to such ethical conceptions as are common ground between them; he gradually leads his opponent up to his conclusion. This is, of course, always Arahatship …

> There is both courtesy and dignity in the method employed. But no little dialectic skill, and an easy mastery of the ethical points involved, are required to bring about the result … On the hypothesis that he was an historical person, of that training and character he is represented in the Piṭakas to have had, the method is precisely that which it is most probable he would have actually followed.

> Whoever put the Dialogues together may have had a sufficiently clear memory of the way he conversed, may well have even

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[3] Drewes (2017: 10).

remembered particular occasions and persons… However this may be, the method followed in all these dialogues has one disadvantage. In accepting the position of the adversary, and adopting his language, the authors compel us, in order to follow what they give us as Gotama's view, to read a good deal between the lines. The *argumentum ad hominem* can never be the same as a statement of opinion given without reference to any particular person.[4]

Stated in the abstract, Rhys Davids claims that the Pāli Suttas attribute a very particular, even idiosyncratic, dialectical style to the Buddha; that this style is fleshed out in realistic dialogues, which delicately unfold, involving other carefully drawn participants; that the meaning of many such *argumentum ad hominem* often remains implicit, requiring us to 'read between the lines'; and thus that the best explanation for such a complex arrangement of persons, places, ideas and implied meaning is that it actually happened. The argument for inauthenticity, on the other hand, would require us to believe the barely credible notion that compositional committees created didactic scenarios of such a peculiar nature that they contain semantic lacunae. More recently, Richard Gombrich has built on Rhys Davids' understanding of the canonical dialogues to draw a compelling picture of an original and groundbreaking thinker. According to Drewes, however, Gombrich has no argument:

Though Richard Gombrich scornfully rejects skepticism about the Buddha's historicity in his *What the Buddha Thought*, surely the boldest recent publication on the matter, he does not present any clear argument to defend it (2017: 16 n.28).

By any sensible standards, Gombrich's *What the Buddha Thought* consists of a series of arguments about the Buddha. Perhaps Drewes expects an argument in the form of a syllogism, but as E. J. Thomas realised, this would be to set unreasonably precise standards for historical enquiry. Gombrich instead develops a reading of the Buddha rich in textual detail and conceptual mastery, and offers it as a credible hypothesis of the evidence. In particular, he distinguishes his position from the sort of scepticism (in this case, personified by Christian Wedemeyer) which claims we can never know the truth:[5]

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[4] Rhys Davids (1923: 206-07), as cited in Gombrich (1996: 17-18).

[5] Gombrich is here responding to the comments of Christian Wedemeyer, made on the

I have tried in the pages above to show that the Buddha's main ideas are powerful and coherent. If I had a more thorough knowledge of the Pali Canon than, alas, I can claim, I would have made a better job of it; but surely I have done enough to show that this coherence is not imposed by my fantasy, but exists in the texts. Yet, according to the fashionable view represented by my critic, Buddhism, which at least in numerical terms must be the greatest movement in the entire history of human ideas, is a ball which was set rolling by someone whose ideas are not known and – one may presume from what he writes – can never be known. So the intellectual edifice which I have described came together by a process of accumulation, rather like an avalanche. I am reminded of the blindfolded monkeys whose random efforts somehow produce a typescript of the complete works of Shakespeare. (2009: 194)

Gombrich's argument against scepticism implies that the wide variety of teachings attributed to Buddha are so profoundly coherent that the notion of invention is implausible. Idiosyncrasies form part of this coherence; elsewhere, Gombrich has asked 'Are jokes ever composed by committees?' (1990: 12). Whether or not one is convinced by this argument, one can hardly deny that it is an argument, and one that according to Gombrich should be closely evaluated:

I suggest that readers take as a provisional hypothesis, a working basis, that what I have written is more or less correct; and then test it on the touchstone of their own experience by reading the evidence, the texts of the Pali Canon. Then, if they think the evidence is against me, they should say so publicly, and we shall all be the wiser. (2009: 201)

Drewes shows no inclination to take such claims seriously: he asks for 'facts' and 'proofs' without saying what they are; he fails to understand that text-critical history is an empirical discipline; he ignores E. J. Thomas' point that sceptics are also required to present arguments; he accuses Thomas, Rhys Davids et al. of making *ad populum* arguments, as opposed to credible interpretations; and he dismisses Gombrich as having no clear argument, against Gombrich's own claim

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that his reading of the texts is a provisional hypothesis. All this suggests not just a profound epistemic confusion about what knowledge is and how it is created, but also a nihilistic tendency to take previous generations of Buddhist scholars in bad faith. And yet, as we will see, the approach to the Buddha pioneered by scholars such as T. W. Rhys Davids is not only valid, but is the only way to study early Buddhism.

2. Buddhist texts, Buddhist myth

What is the sceptical approach to the text-critical study of Buddhism? What are the sceptical arguments about the Buddha, and what do sceptics make of the canonical literature? Gregory Schopen has provided a succinct overview of the sceptical reading of canonical Buddhist literature:

> We know, and have known for some time, that the Pali canon as we have it – and it is generally conceded to be our oldest source – cannot be taken back further than the last quarter of the first century B.C.E, the date of the Alu-vihara redaction, the earliest redaction that we can have some knowledge of, and that – for a critical history – it can serve, at the very most, only as a source for the Buddhism of this period. But we also know that even this is problematic since, as Malalasekera has pointed out: "…how far the *Tipiṭaka* and its commentaries reduced to writing at Alu-vihāra resembled them as they have come down to us now, no one can say." In fact, it is not until the time of the commentaries of Buddhaghosa, Dhammapala, and others – that is to say, the fifth to sixth centuries C.E. – that we can know anything definite about the actual contents of this canon.[6]

So the Pali canon cannot be taken back to the early Buddhist age, and is to be dated to the redaction of the commentaries on it; whether it contains anything older than this cannot be known. On the question of content, Drewes reads early Buddhist texts as essentially mythological:

> [I]t is not clear that the tradition itself envisioned the Buddha as an actual person. Early Buddhist authors make little effort to associate the Buddha with any specific human identity. Familiar narratives

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[6] Schopen (1997: 23-24), on which see Wynne (2005: 37*ff*).

of the Buddha's life may seem to tell the story of a specific person, but these are only found in late, non-canonical texts. 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 as a generic, omniscient, supra-divine figure characterized primarily in terms of supernatural qualities. Indeed, although this fact is almost invariably obscured in scholarship, early texts fail to provide us with a proper name… (2017: 16-17)

Thus the Buddha of the early texts is equivalent to apparently fictitious characters of the ancient world such as Abraham, Moses, Lao-tzu, Vyāsa and Vālmīki:

[T]he traditions associated with each of these figures were founded by multiple people whose roles were later either obscured or effaced. Most religious traditions with premodern origins do not preserve an actual memory of their initial formation. Since the actual processes tend to be complex, difficult to remember, and not particularly edifying, they tend to be overwritten with simpler, mythical accounts. (2017: 18)

The mythological tendency was apparently richly and vividly elaborated in classical India:

In ancient India, attributing the origin of family lineages, religious traditions, and texts to mythical figures was not only the norm, but the rule, with very few known exceptions predating the Common Era. (2017: 19)

It follows that even the Buddha's family were an invention:

Linking the Buddha to the Śākyas certainly seems to provide realistic historical texture, but as Wilson pointed out long ago, the Śākyas are not mentioned in any early non-Buddhist source. Further, according to ancient tradition, the Śākyas were annihilated prior to the Buddha's death, suggesting that Buddhist authors themselves may have been unaware of their existence. The entire clan could easily be entirely mythical. (2017: 17)

Such invention was not unprecedented. Drewes points out that in the late Vedic or early Buddhist period, a realistic religious world was invented by the authors of the early Upaniṣads:

> The early Upaniṣads, like Buddhist *sūtra*s, take the form of realistic dialogues with great teachers, and in fact provide significantly more biographical information for several of them than the vastly larger corpus of Buddhist sūtras provides for the Buddha …

> Brian Black suggests that the main figures, such as Uddālaka Āruṇi and Yājñavalkya, first appeared in the Brāhmaṇas "merely as names that add authority to particular teachings," and were later developed in the Upaniṣads into complex figures with distinct backgrounds, families, ideas, and personalities … (2017: 18)

Drewes concludes that early Buddhist texts give no reasonable grounds to conclude that we know anything about the Buddha, or even if such a person existed:

> Though there has long been an industry devoted to the production of sensational claims about the Buddha, nothing about him has ever been established as fact, and the standard position in scholarship has long been that he is a figure about whom we know nothing. My only real suggestion is that we make the small shift from speaking of an unknown, contentless Buddha to accepting that we do not have 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, Vālmīki, 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. (2017: 19)

3. The formation of the Tipiṭaka

The sceptical estimation of the antiquity of canonical Buddhist literature is not remotely credible. Canonical fragments are included in the Golden Pāli Text, found in a reliquary from Śrī Kṣetra dating to the late 3rd or early 4th century AD; they agree almost exactly with extant Pāli manuscripts.[7] This means that the Pāli Tipiṭaka has been transmitted with a high degree of accuracy for well over 1,500 years. There is no reason why such an accurate transmission should not be projected back a number of centuries, at the least to the period when it was written down in the first century BC, and probably further. A few key facts suggest this:[8]

- Indian Inscriptions from the 2nd and 1st century BC indicate indicates the existence of a substantial Buddhist canon, in the form resembling the extant Pali Tipiṭaka; the Aśokan inscriptions suggest a mass of such material was already in existence considerably more than a century earlier.

- Canonical Buddhist texts are the product of a complex system of oral recitation, intended to ensure accurate transmission. Scepticism about the reliability of this means of transmission is unwarranted: information about the Buddha could have been preserved for hundreds of years before the Buddhist canons were transmitted in writing.

- After the Buddha's death, the early Buddhist tradition did not appoint a leader to direct the work of composition/transmission. The work must have been carried out within a decentralised network. Hence there was no central committee which exercised editorial control, and if so, invention would have resulted in a plurality of perspectives and significant disagreement. The general lack of such disagreement suggests against invention.

With regard to the first point, inscriptions from early Buddhist sites include such terms as *dhamma-kathika*, *peṭakin*, *suttantika*, *suttantikinī* and *pañca-nekāyika*. Rhys Davids has commented on the significance of this as follows:

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[7] Stargardt (1995), Falk (1997).

[8] On the antiquity of the Pali Tipiṭaka and parallel materials, see Rhys Davids (1911, especially chapter VIII), Wynne (2005), Anālayo (2012), Sujato and Brahmali (2015).

They are conclusive proof that some time before the date of the inscriptions (that is, roughly speaking, before the time of Asoka), there was a Buddhist literature in North India, where the inscriptions are found. And further, that that literature then had divisions known by the technical names of Piṭaka, Nikāya, and Suttanta, and that the number of Nikāyas then in existence was five. (1911: 169)

So a large canon, organised already into the divisions of the extant Pāli Tipiṭaka, existed in the Mauryan period, allowing Aśoka not only to name individual texts (in his Calcutta- Bairāṭ edict),[9] but also to allude to many more texts throughout his inscriptions (Sujato & Brahmali, 2015: 86-90). Although there is no evidence for writing before Aśoka, the accuracy of oral transmission should not be underestimated. The Buddhist community was full of Brahmins who knew that the Vedic educational system had transmitted a mass of difficult texts, verbatim, in an increasingly archaic language, for more than a thousand years.[10] Since the early Buddhists required a different means of oral transmission, for quite different texts, other mnemonic techniques were developed, based on communal chanting (saṅgīti).[11] The texts explicitly state that this method was to be employed, and their actual form shows that it was, on a grand scale.

In the *Pāsādika Sutta* (DN III.127-28) the Buddha tells his followers to 'recite communally and not argue, so that the holy life will be long lasting and endure'. This is to be done by 'meeting together again and again, (comparing) meaning with meaning (*atthena atthaṃ*), (comparing) letter with letter (*byañjanena byañjanaṃ*)'.[12] Many more canonical texts say the same thing, and so suggest a concern to ensure accurate transmission even when the Buddha was alive. Indeed, a common refrain, contained in more than 150 discourses and uttered by the Buddha as he is about teach, requests everyone to listen very carefully: 'Well then … listen, pay close attention, I will speak.' (*tena hi … suṇohi sādhukaṃ manasi-karohi bhāsissāmi*). The *Aṭṭhakavagga* (Suttanipāta IV) is even said to have been recited in the Buddha's presence.[13] While not proving that such events

[9] There is some doubt about the identification of the texts Aśoka names, but it is generally accepted that what Aśoka calls 'Muni-gāthā' is probably the *Muni Sutta* (Sn 2017-21). See Norman (1992: xxix-xxx).

[10] Gombrich (2009: 101-02).

[11] Allon (1997), Wynne (2004), Anālayo (2007).

[12] Wynne (2004:115).

[13] See Udāna 46 (Ee p.59).

happened, the texts show that a concern for accurate transmission is implicit in the teachings themselves.

Little is known about the process of composing and collecting canonical discourses, although the four 'great authorities' (DN II.123*ff*: *mahāpadesa*) mentions four sources of material: the Buddha himself, a particular monastic community (*āvāse saṅghe*), certain elders in such a community (*āvāse sambahulā therā bhikkhū*), and just one elder (*āvāse eko thero bhikkhu*).[14] In other words, material was gathered from multiple sources, and then assessed in a comparative process; new works were compared with an existing collection, and if they agreed with it, they were added to it.

The focus of comparative endeavour was doctrine: the words and meaning (*pada-vyañjana*) of the teachings. Such things as persons and places were not under consideration, and this means that the agreement of contextual aspects of the teachings is historically significant. For the early tradition was acephalous: the Buddha refused to appoint a successor, and there is no evidence for a Buddhist 'pope' or 'Saṅgha-rāja' in the entire Indian tradition. The general agreement of incidental details, probably unchecked and possibly 'uncheckable', lends support to their historical veracity:

> [F]or a document of such scale constructed from multiple oral sources, [the Tipiṭaka] contains very few inconsistencies. This lends credibility to its authenticity. Within a decentralised ascetic culture, and in an age of oral composition, it would have been difficult — perhaps almost impossible — to fabricate a coherent version of the Buddhist past. The significant disagreements to be expected of a multi-authored imagination of the past are more or less completely absent, a fact which rules against large-scale invention. (Wynne 2018: 256)

If there was no effort to check the canonical texts' social and political details, their general coherence suggests that they are, as a whole, trustworthy. The confirmation of some incidental details in the material record supports this view.

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[14] Wynne (2004: 100*ff*).

4. Stones and bones

Apart from Lumbinī, which has layers going back to the 5th century BC and earlier,[15] remains attesting the existence of the Buddhism exist from the Mauryan period (mid 3rd century BC) onwards. Some of these early sites confirm what is contained in the canonical and post-canonical texts. A deep influence from Buddhist teachings on Aśoka's inscriptions has already been noted; we will now focus on more precise correspondences.

a) The Sanchi relics

A coincidence of epigraphy and post-canonical Buddhist literature was noted by Erich Frauwallner in his seminal *The Earliest Vinaya and the Beginnings of Buddhist Literature* (1956). The Pāli commentaries and Sinhalese chronicles state that a number of Buddhist missions, in groups of five, were sent out during the reign of Aśoka. The number 'five' is important, as it is the minimum number of monks required to ordain new monks in distant lands, according to the Vinaya.[16] The names of the missionaries apparently despatched to the Himalayas were found inscribed on two reliquaries from Sanchi, or ancient Vedisā,[17] where they are called 'Himalayan' (Hemavata) monks. The inscriptions thus confirm the Pāli accounts of Aśokan missions, and this lends credibility to other textual details, such as the claim that the group led by Mahinda to Sri Lanka stopped in Vedisā on the way.[18]

A further correspondence between the epigraphic and literary sources of the Aśokan missions can be noted. Aśoka's thirteenth Rock Edict implies that 'envoys' played an important role in achieving his 'Dhamma victory':

> Even those [regions] to whom His Majesty's envoys (*dūtā*) do not go, having heard of His Majesty's duties of morality, the ordinances, (and) the instruction in morality, are conforming to morality and will conform to (it).[19]

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[15] Despite Coningham's claims (Coningham et al. 2013), the site's early layers provide no evidence for the existence of Buddhism in the 6th century BC (Gombrich, 2013).

[16] Frauwallner (1956: 13-14), Wynne (2005: 48-50).

[17] Frauwallner (1956: 14), Willis (2001).

[18] Wynne (2005: 50-51).

[19] Wynne (2005: 52).

The wording of the edict suggests that Aśoka's 'Dharma victory' was achieved by envoys (*dūta*s), and not other Aśokan officials such as 'Dhamma ministers', as has sometimes been assumed (Norman, 2004: 70, 79). This agrees with the account in the Pāli chronicles, for example the *Mahāvaṃsa* (XI: 33-35), which states that Aśokan envoys (*dūta*s) carried 'palm-leaf messages with the true doctrine' (*saddhamma-paṇṇākāraṃ*).[20] The *Dīpavaṃsa* (XII.5-9) makes exactly the same point, and mentions that Mahinda arrived in Laṅkā soon after the activity of Aśoka's envoys.[21] The coincidence of epigraphic and literary evidence is uncanny: the Sanchi relics agree with what the Pali sources say about Buddhist missions, and RE XIII agrees with later Pāli sources by indicating that Aśoka's 'Dhamma victory' was aided or enabled by imperial envoys.

b) The Piprahwa relics

The agreement between Aśokan and post-canonical Pali literature is not an isolated occurrence. A few other inscriptions go further than this by confirming a few details in the Pali Tipiṭaka. Although Drewes claims (2017: 17) that 'the Śākyas are not mentioned in any early non-Buddhist source', this ignores the Piprahwa reliquary, which dates to the late 3rd century BC or not long afterwards (Falk, 2017: 60) and refers to the Sakyas:

> *sukitibhatinaṃ sabhagiṇikanaṃ saputadalanaṃ iyaṃ salilanidhane budhasa bhagavate <saki>yanaṃ*

Falk translates as follows:

> This enshrinement (*nidhāna*) of the corporal remnants (*śarīra*) of the Buddha [1: of the Śākyas], the Lord, (is to the credit) of the [2: Śākya] brothers of the 'highly famous', together with their sisters, with their sons and wives. (Falk 2017: 60)

Falk's translation shows that the term *sakiyanaṃ* 'of the Sakyas' is somewhat ambiguous. If it qualifies *budhasa bhagavate*, the inscription would perhaps only record the mythic idea that the Buddha 'belonged' to the Sakya clan. But it would be strange to refer to the Buddha as 'belonging to the Sakyas', rather

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[20] Wynne (2005: 57).
[21] Wynne (2005: 58).

than using the more normal epithet *sakya-muni*, 'sage of the Sakyas'. Indeed, Falk also connects the term *sakiyanaṃ* to *sukiti-bhatinaṃ sabhagiṇikanaṃ saputa-dalanaṃ*:

> The final *sakiyanaṃ/śākyānāṃ* can be drawn to *sukīrtibhrātṛṇāṃ*, so that all the people mentioned are specified as Śākyas, or to the Buddha, implying that he as well was one "of the Śākyas." The double meaning was probably intended. (Falk 2017: 59)

Falk argues that the inscription refers to the rehousing (*nidhane*) of a portion of the Buddha's bones. This portion of relics probably established in Lumbinī by Aśoka (Falk 2017: 50, 55, 67); for some reason these relics were then moved to a new *stūpa* (Falk 2017: 58*ff*) in Piprahwa, under the care of the Sakyas:

> Seen this way, the dimension of the statement changes completely, from a simple "this is the reliquary box [*nidhane*] of the Śākyas holding the relics of the Buddha" to mean "this whole *stūpa* construction has been installed [*nidhane*] by us Śākyas for the relics of the Buddha." (Falk 2017: 60)

The Piprahwa inscription thus offers material support for the historical reality of the Sakyas, situated more or less exactly where the canonical texts place them. Even if the exact site of Kapilavatthu has yet not been definitely fixed,[22] Gupta-era seals from Piprahwa, recording the 'Kapilavastu monastic community' (*kapilavastu-bhikhu-saṃgha*),[23] show that Kapilavatthu was nearby, indicated in the canonical texts.[24]

c) The Deorkothar inscription

Recent papers by Salomon and Marino (2014) and before them Skilling and von Hinüber (2013) have drawn attention to two recently discovered, early second century BC inscriptions from Deorkothar.[25] The inscriptions record lineages associated with Anuruddha, a prominent disciple of the Buddha.

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[22] Falk (2017: 57): 'the search for the palace area of Kapilavastu can continue'.

[23] Srivastava (1980: 106), Falk (2017: 56).

[24] According to Falk (2017: 57), the seals imply that Piprahwa was 'a place which definitely was close to Kapilavastu'.

[25] Salomon and Marino (2014: 30-31, 37) consider the date of 200 BC, offered by von Hinüber and Skilling (2013: 13-14), as slightly too early.

Inscription 1 mentions the Kukkuṭika-Bahusutiya school (line 5: *kokuḍikena bahūsūtiy[e]*), where *kokuḍika-* is derived from the Kukkuṭārāma monastery of the nearby ancient city of Kosambī, capital of Cedi/Vatsa, a region associated with Anuruddha in the Pāli Suttas. The term *bahūsūtiya-* refers to the Bahuśrutīyas, a branch of the Mahāsāṃghikas which in later accounts of the Buddhist sects is closely aligned with the Kukkuṭikas.[26] Salomon and Marino draw the following conclusions:

> The Deorkothar inscriptions provide strong and unexpected support for the historical veracity of traditional voices with regard to both of these issues, that is, the origin and affiliation of the sects and the lineage of the patriarchs and their disciples, and by implication with regard to other issues in the early history of Buddhism as well. On the one hand, they corroborate, at a surprisingly early date, the association between the Bahuśrutīyas and the hitherto little-known Kaukkuṭika/Gokulika schools which is attested in most of the traditional accounts of the schools; on the other hand, they attest to local patriarchal lineages derived from the Buddha and one of his most favored disciples, Anuruddha, in a geographical context – and again, at a surprisingly early date – which is consistent with canonical information about Anuruddha. We could hardly hope for a clearer warning against the excessive skepticism regarding canonical and post-canonical traditions, as Bareau and Hofinger have eloquently explained. This is not, of course, to argue that we should naively accept traditional accounts at face value, but only that we should not dismiss them out of hand for lack of corroboration. We should keep in mind, in other words, that lack of corroboration does not prove that a statement or claim is false, but only that it is unproven. Sometimes, corroboration comes when least expected, so the door should always be left open (2014: 38-39)

Salomon and Marino (2014: 37) thus warn against 'the danger of letting skepticism take over one's thinking, leading to the mindset of "In the end, we know nothing." Unfortunately, these remarks made no effect on David Drewes, who dismissed Salomon and Marino's points as unproven, because

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[26] Salomon and Marino (2014: 34-35).

'unsubstantiated lineage claims cannot be treated as historical evidence, as has clearly been shown, e.g., by studies of early Chan lineages.' (2017: 16, n.28). This misses the point entirely. Either the inscription substantiates the textual information about Anuruddha, or it is a fabrication by Buddhists from Kosambī/ Cedi, who identified as Kukkuṭikas/Bahussutīyas. If the textual evidence is a fabrication too, as sceptics believe, it would imply a double conspiracy. Sometimes it makes sense to believe the evidence.

A pattern emerges whenever ancient remains from Buddhist India are found: they tend to agree with the texts, which they thus confirm. The Piprahwa inscription might not exactly say 'the Sakyas woz here', just as the Deorkothar inscriptions and the Sanchi reliquaries do not literally say 'Anuruddha woz here' and 'the Aśokan missionaries woz here', respectively. But by any reasonable estimation of the evidence, all those persons probably were there.

5. A pre-imperial world

So far we have established that canonical Buddhist texts existed during the Aśokan period, already composed under exacting standards of mnemonic accuracy, and in arrangements as we still have them. We have now seen that some of their contents is verified in material evidence going back as far as Aśoka. But how much of their content had come into existence then? Were multiple additions made after Aśoka? According to Sujāto and Brahmali (SB, 2015), early Buddhist Texts (EBTs) are consistent in depicting a particular time and place:

> The EBTs depict the emergence of several moderate sized urban centres, a state of development which falls between the purely agrarian culture of the earlier Upaniṣads and the massive cities of the Mauryan empire. (2015: 21).

The canonical texts are set in a 'small scale and low level of urbanisation' and 'do not contain descriptions of large cities' (2015: 109). To pick but one minor example, although Mathurā is a major cultural centre from the 2nd century BC onwards, in the EBTs it is an insignifcant place 'mentioned only once' (2015: 105). There is also a general agreement with the archaeological record, 'where large scale urban development comes later, in the 4th century' (2015: 18). The canonical texts thus pre-date the emergence of Indian empires from Magadha, beginning with the Nandas and followed by the Mauryas:

This is a citation, and so needs to be indented, and it also needs line gaps between the text surround it.

The canonical references to the Mauryan capital of Pāṭaliputta are illuminating. This place is almost entirely absent from the early texts,[27] but during his final journey the Buddha is said to travel through Pāṭaligāma, 'the village of Pāṭali', apparently then in the process of being expanded (DN II.86-87). The Buddha makes a prediction that the site will become the major city of Pāṭaliputta.[28] Perhaps this story was invented to relate Pāṭaliputta to the Buddha. But the consistency with which this place is mentioned throughout the early texts is remarkable. The *Aṭṭhakanāgara Sutta* (MN 52), set after the death of the Buddha, is situated in Pāṭaliputta (SB 2015: 17); the *Ghoṭamukha Sutta* (MN 94), also set after the Buddha's death, mentions the Buddhist community of Pāṭaliputta and money (MN II.163); and AN 5.50 mentions King Muṇḍa, apparently the great-grandson of Ajātasattu, ruling in Pāṭaliputta (the same texts features venerable Nārada, a figure associated with a more developed phase of early Buddhist doctrine).[29]

Beyond the early texts, the post-canonical *Milindapañha* refers to a battle fought by the first Mauryan emperor Candagutta (SB 2015: 19). The consistency of historical development within and beyond the EBTs is therefore impressive: from Pāṭaligāma as a minor site during the Buddha's lifetime, but already being enlarged, to the city of Pāṭaliputta known after the Buddha's death, in a period when money was being used, and then the early Mauryan period, beginning with Candragupta in the late 4th century BC, and known only in post-canonical Pali literature.

It is also worth pointing out that early Buddhist mythicism also reflects pre-imperial India. Sujato and Brahmali note that although the myth of a 'wheel turning monarch' (*cakkavatti*), who is said to 'rule from sea to sea, justly, without violence' (DN 26), is sometimes said to 'date from Ashokan times' (2015: 24), Aśoka's edicts do not mention it. Why is this? Probably because the myth assumes pre-imperial polities, and was unworkable in the Mauryan period. According to the myth of DN 26, the *cakkavatti* visits neighbouring

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[27] Sujato and Brahmali (2015: 17) have noted that at DN II.147, Pāṭaliputta is not included in a list of north Indian cities.

[28] DN II. 87-88 = Vin I.229: *idaṃ agganagaraṃ bhavissati pāṭaliputtaṃ puṭabhedanaṃ*.

[29] According to Sujato and Brahmali (2015: 9), Muṇḍa can be dated to c.350 BC, meaning that AN 5.50 is possibly the latest period referred to in EBTs. In the Vinaya commentary (Sp I.72-73), the length of reigns of the kings of Magadha, starting with Ajātasattu, ruler at the time of the Buddha's *parinibbāna*,is as follows: Ajātasattu (24), Udayabhadra (16), Anuruddha and Muṇḍa (8 or 18). On Nārada see Wynne (2018c: 84*f*).

kingdoms and teaches them his Dhamma. This scenario assumes small states pacified as vassals by a powerful centre, a situation which fits India in the 5th BC, rather than the imperial situation in the generations leading up to Aśoka.

Within a pre-imperial world of moderate socio-political development, Sujato and Brahmali further note that economic conditions could in general be described as small-scale localism:

> King Pasenadi of Kosala is said to have used Kāsi sandalwood (MN 87.28), indicating that even the highest social strata used locally produced luxuries. This situation is perhaps to be expected given the political divisions in North India at the time, which may have complicated long-distance trade. (2015: 23)

In contrast, non-EBTs depict a quite different world of long-distance trade: the Jātakas mention 'trade by sea to Suvaṇṇabhūmi (possibly lower Burma), and also over desert to Sovīra (Rajasthan) and Baveru (Babylon)' (SB 2015: 23). Within an economy largely based on agricultural produce, in particular rice, the early texts also go into remarkably realistic detail, knowing of such things as the 'red rot' sugar cane disease (*mañjeṭṭhika*, Vin II 256,26), still found across northern India today (SB 2015: 72). It is also important to note that early Buddhist texts hardly mention two material developments of great importance in the 4th century BC: coins and bricks. [30] The early texts refer to wealth in terms of 'gold and silver'; the Brahmin Kūṭadanta, for example, is said to have 'great wealth and possessions, and much property, utensils, gold and silver'.[31] And an essential aspect of Buddhist renunciant discipline is abstaining from accepting gold and silver.[32]

These references to gold and silver cannot refer to coinage or money, for

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[30] Rhys Davids has shown that there are barely any clear references to coins in the Pāli canon (1877: 13): 'We have, therefore, no evidence in Buddhist literature that in Magadha before the time of Asoka, or in Ceylon before the fifth century a.d., there were any coins proper, that is, pieces of inscribed money struck by authority.' According to Cribb (1985) the oldest coins from the Gangetic civilization date to the early fourth century bc, i.e. shortly after the Buddha's death in around 400 bc. See Kulke (1995: 162 n.6) for further remarks.

[31] DN I.130: *bhavañ hi kūṭadanto aḍḍho mahaddhano mahābhogo pahūtavittūpakaraṇo pahūtajātarūparajato*.

[32] Vin III.237: *yo pana bhikkhu **jātarūparajataṃ** uggaṇheyya vā uggaṇhāpeyya vā upanikkhittaṃ vā sādiyeyya, nissaggiyaṃ pācittiyan ti*; DN I.5: ***jātarūparajata**-paṭiggahaṇā paṭivirato samaṇo gotamo*; DN I.64: ***jātarūparajata**-paṭiggahaṇā paṭivirato hoti*; Khp 2: ***jātarūparajata**-paṭiggahaṇā veramaṇī-sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi*.

the simple reason that the earliest Indian coins, dating to at least the mid-4th century BC, were made of silver, not gold. The Vinaya commentary on the rule forbidding the acceptance of gold and silver confirms this, by glossing silver (*rajataṃ*), but not gold (*jātarūpa*), as coins such as *kahāpaṇa*s.[33] This later stratum of the canonical texts shows, however, that the Vinaya was open long enough to reflect a period when money was being used; the same is true of the Suttas, in which *kahāpaṇa*s are mentioned a few times.[34] But even at the second council of Vesālī, generally placed in the mid to late fourth century BC or even later, one of the contentious practices was the acceptance, by the community of Vesālī, of gold and silver.[35] The Buddha and the first generations of his followers lived in the period before money.

Brick buildings are also rare. The 'brickhouse' (*giñjakāvasatha*) of Nātika/ Ñātika is mentioned in a number of discourses;[36] apparently it was in the Vajji republic on the way to Vesālī from the Ganges.[37] The DPPN states that 'bricks were evidently a special architectural feature, and this confirms the belief that buildings were generally of wood.'[38] Bricks (*iṭṭhaka*) are mentioned in the mythological *Mahāsudassana Sutta* (DN II.178-84), when King Sudassana builds lotus ponds lined with bricks of four colours (*catunnaṃ vaṇṇānaṃ iṭṭhakāhi*), and has a triple storied mansion, and a lotus pond in front of it, built with bricks of the same four colours.

As with coins, more references to bricks occur in later strata of the Tipiṭaka. The Vinaya (III.80-81) mentions building the foundations (*vihāra-vatthuṃ*) and walls (*kuṭṭaṃ*) of a vihāra with bricks and stone (*iṭṭhaka, silā*), and also mentions (Vin IV.266) three types of walls (*kuṭṭa-*) and enclosures (*pākāra-*): of brick, stone and wood (*iṭṭhaka-, silā-, dāru-*). The same three substances are mentioned in sections of the Vinaya (Vin II.118-23, 141-42, 152-54) which refer to the same materials to be used when building other constructions, such as: walking

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[33] Vin III.238: ***rajataṃ*** *nāma kahāpaṇo lohamāsako dārumāsako jatumāsako ye vohāraṃ gacchanti.*

[34] Four discourses mention *kahāpaṇa*s: MN 94, SN 3.13, AN 3.101 (Ee I.250-51) and AN 10.46 (Ee V.83*ff*). On MN 94 see above p.16.

[35] Vin II.294: *kappati jātarūparajatan ti.*

[36] DN II.91, II.200; MN I.106; SN II.75, II.153, IV.90, IV.402, V.356; AN III.303, III.306, III.391, IV.316, IV.320, V.322. See also Vin I.232.

[37] According to the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta* (DN II.92), it was the second place the Buddha visited (after Koṭigāma) after crossing the Ganges at Pāṭaligāma.

[38] DPPN s.v. *giñjakāvasatha*.

terraces (*caṅkamana*) with railings (*vedikā*), hot steam rooms (*jantāghara*), foundations (*vatthuka*), raised platforms (*caya*), staircases (*sopāna*) and balustrades (*ālambana-bāha*) of the halls for stitching robes (*kaṭhina-sālā*).

The Pāli Vinaya thus records the development of more complex forms of communal life after the Buddha's death, including the building of Buddhist monasteries with bricks, a development which occurred in the same period in which money began to be used. But the vast majority of canonical discourses set the Buddha's life in a pre-imperial period before long-distance trade, money and buildings of brick and stone.

6. Early Buddhist realism, or what committees do not invent

According to Sujato and Brahmali, the EBTs 'convey a picture of India and Indian society at the time that is vivid and realistic; it could not easily have been made up at a later time or in a different society' (2015: 71). We read of kings, queens, princes, children, farmers, merchants, mendicants, wanderers, Brahmins, grizzled ascetics, faithful (and not so faithful) lay-disciples, parks, meeting-halls, roads, villages, market-towns, cities, kingdoms, seasons, flora, fauna, customs, habits, politics, economics, culture, musicians, courtesans, drunks, gamblers, and on and on. The canvas is vast and portrayed in close and realistic detail, allowing one to enter the world of North India in the 5th century BC. S. Dhammika's study of flora and fauna in canonical Buddhist texts has shown the extent to which early Buddhist authors went in their depictions of the natural world; nothing quite like this exists outside of canonical Buddhist texts, in either Buddhist or non-Buddhist literature from classical or even medieval India. [39]

The attempt to describe a whole world should not be underestimated; nor should the fact that later Buddhist texts lose this realistic perspective entirely. Remarkably, the attempt to record time and place is internally consistent, no mean feat given the scale of the literary endeavour. If such realistic attention was given to wildlife, trades, hobbies and so on, we should not assume the treatment of the Buddha to be any different. Thus we should pause to consider whether the following details could be mythic inventions:

- Major sites associated with the Buddha were insignificant in the 5th century BC. Kapilavatthu was a minor market-town along the northern trade route; Lumbinī was still an insignificant locality

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[39] Dhammika (2015).

in the Aśokan period;[40] and Kusinārā is called a 'minor town, a barren town, a provincial town' in the *Mahāparibbāna Sutta* (DN II.147). It would have served no purpose to place the story of a mythic hero in these backwaters.

- Perhaps most surprising of all, apart from the Vinaya Mahāvagga's mythic and late account of Buddhist beginnings – studied in the next section – hardly any Pāli Suttas are set in Uruvelā/Gayā (i.e. Bodhgayā) after the initial events surrounding the awakening.[41] If the canonical discourses are to believed, the Buddha barely returned to the place where he achieved his awakening.

- The first person to visit the Buddha after the awakening is an Ājīvika ascetic who disregards the Buddha's rather grandiose claims. Not only is this ascetic sceptical of the Buddha, he also speaks with touches of an Eastern dialect different from regular Pāli.[42] The area around Uruvelā/Bodhgayā is thus depicted as non-Buddhist territory in terms of language and religious culture; of course, this fits with the story that immediately before the awakening the Buddha had been practising severe austerities (MN 38).

- In the *Sāmaññaphala Sutta* (DN 2), set in Rājagaha, capital of Magadha and not very far from Uruvelā, King Ajātasattu is said to have heard of other religious leaders, but is unaware of the Buddha and cannot recognise him when he visits him; it appears that while other, more ascetic, teachers were renowned in Magadha, the Buddha was not.

This very brief survey suggests it is anachronistic to view Magadha as the homeland of Buddhism. Partial confirmation of this comes in the report of

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[40] Falk (2017: 56): 'Lumbinī was a village, or a garden'.

[41] There are only three Suttas set in Uruvelā/gayā not obviously situated in the period of the awakening (although this could be implied): SN 10.3 (= Sn 2.5), SN 4.24 and AN 8.64. A couple of other texts set in Uruvelā/Gayā should probably be situated at the beginning of the Buddha's teaching career: SN 35.28 is placed by the Vinaya (Vin I.34-35) at the beginning of the Buddha's ministry, and Ud 1.9 is grouped with other Suttas describing events just after the awakening.

[42] Vin I.9 = MN I.172.: **hupeyy' āvuso ti**, 'maybe, sir'. The text of MN I.72 is abbreviated by the PTS editors of MN 85.

Megasthenes, Greek ambassador of Seleucus I at Chandragupta's Mauryan court in Pāṭaliputta in the late 4th century BC. Megasthenes described a political world which 'post-dates the descriptions in the EBTs', and which is 'broadly in agreement with the archeological evidence' (Sujato and Brahmali, 2015: 12). But while mentioning Brahmins and fairly ascetic *samaṇa*s, most probably Jains or Ājīvakas, Megasthenes does not mention the Buddhists. This argument from silence is perhaps not particularly convincing, but it is at least broadly consistent with the canonical depiction of Magadha as primarily ascetic rather than Buddhist territory.

Canonical Buddhist texts mostly locate the Buddha in the kingdom of Kosala, particularly its capital Sāvatthī; King Pasenadi of Kosala even states that 'the Blessed One is a Kosalan'.[43] Although the Buddha is a frequent visitor to Rājagaha, he is represented as a marginal figure in its more ascetic religious climate. Given the importance of Magadha in Indian Buddhism, starting with Aśoka, its depiction as less than central to the Buddha's career is remarkable; the consistent depiction of Magadha as not quite, but almost, a fringe area of early Buddhist activity can only go back to the pre-imperial age. A similar heritage is suggested by a couple of peculiarities contained in the account of the Buddha's death.

- Although the Buddha says his relics should be placed in *thūpa*s at the sites of his birth, awakening, first sermon and death, the relics were instead distributed to local clans and various kingdoms.[44] A mythic invention would not include such an obvious discrepancy.

- No representative from Sāvatthī comes to claim a share of the Buddha's relics. And yet not only is Sāvatthī closer than the capital cities of some of the other kingdoms mentioned in the account (i.e. Rājagaha and Vesālī), as we have seen it is also central to the canonical account of the Buddha's life. But this absence fits a historical tradition, mentioned in the Pāli commentaries, of hostility between Kosala and the Sakyas at the time of the Buddha's death, soon leading to a battle in which the Sakyas were massacred.[45]

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[43] MN II.124: *bhagavā pi kosalo*.

[44] See DN II.164-65 on the clanships/kingdoms which claim a share of the Buddha's relics.

[45] The account of the battle and the events leading to it are told in the commentary on the *Bhaddasāla Jātaka* (Ja 465).

7. Mythic elaboration: the first sermon and the five disciples

We have seen that early Buddhist texts are pre-imperial, realistic and contain numerous peculiarities in their depiction of places and persons associated with the Buddha. None of this looks like a mythic creation. At best, the canonical discourses make a number of excursions into myth, but these are always easy to identify. A simple example is the *Mahāpadāna Sutta*, which besides elaborating the myth of seven Buddhas, also refers to Kapilavatthu as a 'royal city' (*rājadhānī*). This term is only applied to mythic places in the Pāli canon, whereas Kapilavatthu is a small town in the early texts; Ānanda even fails to mention it among the great cities in which the Buddha could have died, despite it being not far from Kusinārā, and certainly closer than four cities he mentions (D II.146: Sāvatthī, Sāketa, Kosambī and Bārāṇasī).

A mythic elaboration of a pre-mythic core of textual realism can also be seen in the Vinaya Mahāvagga account of the beginning of the Buddha's mission. This account constitutes a small part of what, according to Erich Frauwallner, was once a lengthy myth, composed around the time of the second Buddhist council of Vesālī (mid-late 4th century BC) and concluding with an account of this council.[46] Regardless of Frauwallner's reconstruction, the Vinaya Mahāvagga opens with a thoroughly miraculous version of Buddhist beginnings, a good example being the Buddha's conversion of the Kassapa ascetics (in Uruvelā) through a series of fire miracles (Vin I.24*ff*).

The account of the conversion of the first disciples (Vin I.9*ff*) is also somewhat remarkable. All are said to attain 'vision into the Dhamma' (*dhamma-cakkhu*): Koṇḍañña's attainment is first, followed by Vappa and Bhaddiya, and then Mahānāma and Assaji. With Koṇḍañña's realisation, the event at which 'the wheel of Dhamma' was 'set in motion' (*pavattite ... dhammacakke*), various classes of deities announce the good news, in a relay of information which resounds throughout the cosmos (Vin I.11-12). Soon enough, all the disciples go beyond their preliminary 'Dhamma vision' by attaining liberation, as the Buddha delivers not-self teachings (Vin I.13-14).

This account expands the simpler and apparently older Sutta version of MN 26. But MN 26 also contains legendary episodes, such as the god Brahma Sahampati's request that the Buddha teach (M I.168*f*). MN 26 does not name the five disciples, and does not say anything about a preliminary 'vision into

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[46] Frauwallner (1956, chapter 3).

Dhamma' – or its celebration by the gods – before their final attainment of liberation (M I.173). At first glance, it seems as if the simpler mythicism of MN 26 was expanded by the authors of the Vinaya account. Apart from these two accounts, however, the group of five disciples barely figures in the canonical literature. Nothing more is said about Vappa, Bhaddiya and Mahānāma, unless they have been confused with other *bhikkhu*s of the same names;[47] Koṇḍañña and Assaji are mentioned in a few other texts, but their appearance is quite peculiar.[48]

Koṇḍañña is mentioned in Ud 7.6, where he sits in meditation 'observing the state of release attained through the destruction of craving' (Ee p.77: *taṇhā-saṅkhaya-vimuttiṃ paccavekkhamāno*). But at SN 8.9 (I.193-94), Koṇḍañña visits the Buddha in Rājagaha after an unspecified long period of time (*sucirass' eva*); perhaps because he is old and the Buddha no longer recognises him, he announces 'I am Koṇḍañña, I am Koṇḍañña!' (I.194: *koṇḍañño 'haṃ bhagavā, koṇḍañño 'haṃ sugatā ti*). Venerable Vaṅgīsa calls him a 'little Buddha' (*anubuddha*) and an heir of the Buddha (*buddha-dāyāda*), and praises him for his austerity (*tibba-nikkamo*), and for attaining the goal through diligent training;[49] just as in the Vinaya, he refers to Koṇḍañña as 'Aññāsi-Koṇḍañña' – 'Koṇḍañña who understood (the Dhamma first)'.

Despite this praise of Koṇḍañña as a liberated being, SN 8.9 strikes a rather discordant note. Koṇḍañña is said to lie down at the Buddha's feet, stroking and kissing them, behaviour which elsewhere is associated with lay supporters of the Buddha, such as King Pasenadi of Kosala.[50] SN 8.9 thus suggests that Koṇḍañña did not attain liberation. Perhaps his general absence from the Buddhist texts, an absence confirmed in SN 8.9, indicates that he left the Buddha early on, before returning, emotionally, later in life to see the Buddha once more. At the least, the affirmation that Koṇḍañña left the Buddha for a long spell hardly looks like a mythic invention.

SN 22.88 is clearer about Assaji's non-liberated state. It tells how, after becoming ill while staying in 'Kassapa's park' in Rājagaha, Assaji says that

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[47] DPPN s.v.

[48] The Burmese edition of MN 68 mentions Bhaddiya and Koṇḍañña as 'well-known mendicants, gone forth from home to homelessness with reference to the Buddha' (MN I.462). But in the PTS edition, these names are replaced by Nandiya and Kuṇḍadhāna.

[49] SN I.194: *yaṃ sāvakena pattabbaṃ satthusāsanakārinā, sabbassa taṃ anuppattaṃ appamattassa sikkhato*.

[50] SN I.193-94: *bhagavato pādesu sirasā nipatitvā bhagavato pādāni mukhena ca paricumbati, pāṇīhi ca parisambāhati*. See also MN II.120, MN II.144, SN I.178, AN 5.65.

whereas he could pacify (*passambhetvā passambhetvā*) his bodily 'volitions' (or activities, *kāya-saṅkhāre*) when ill in the past, he is unable to do so now. Assaji uses the same vocabulary as is found in the account of mindfulness of breathing,[51] and so must be talking about a former ability to attain *jhāna* through practising mindfulness, and thus abide without feeling the effects of ill-health (*gelañña*). This time things are different. Assaji is unable to attain absorption (*samādhi*) and is worried about regression (*parihāyāmi*). The Buddha replies that only ascetics and Brahmins for whom 'absorption is the essence' (*samādhi-sārakā*) think like this, before giving a not-self teaching about experiencing sensations in a state of detachment. Despite what the Vinaya says about the first sermon, in SN 22.88 Assaji is certainly not liberated.

The depictions of Koṇḍañña and Assaji in the Pāli canon are a simple guide to distinguishing mythic invention from realism. The accounts of the first sermon, especially the Vinaya but to a lesser extent also in MN 26, are artificial, mythic, and of course unbelievable. But SN 8.9 and 22.88 strike a different tone. Both are idiosyncratic and realistic: one text (SN 22.88) obviously disagrees with the first sermon's myth of liberation, and the other (SN 8.9) inclines in this direction, and at least confirms Koṇḍañña's long absence from the Buddhist movement. Unlike the Vinaya Mahāvagga and MN 26, these texts serve no obvious didactic or dogmatic purpose. What else could they be, apart from an attempt to record what actually happened? With reference to such peculiarities, T. W. Rhys Davids, a trained barrister, has commented as follows:

> It is a recognised rule of evidence in the courts of law that, if one entry be found in the books kept by a man in the ordinary course of his trade, which entry speaks against himself, then that entry is especially worthy of credence.[52]

In other words, the early texts are especially trustworthy when they contain details that contradict later or mythic ideas. Moreover, 'since the EBTs were edited and transmitted through many generations, during which time there would have been many opportunities to edit oddities out, there must have been a general principle of conservatism among editors. This makes the entire corpus trustworthy.' (SB 2015: 75).

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[51] See e.g. DN II.291, MN I.56: *passambhayaṃ kāya-saṅkhāraṃ assasissāmī ti* …
[52] Rhys Davids (1923: x), on which see Sujato and Brahmali (2015: 75).

8. The idiosyncratic Buddha

We have seen that the canonical discourses are full of unexpected and non-mythic details about persons and places related to the Buddha. It is hardly surprising that the Buddha is described in similar terms. We can first of all note a few details about his relatives:

> • His father Suddhodana, his mother Māyā, his son Rāhula, his aunt Pajāpatī, his half-brother Nanda and paternal cousin Tissa are all named in the canon. The Buddha is never said to have had a wife; Rāhula's mother is anonymous and referred to merely as 'Rāhula's mother'.[53]

Drewes has claimed that the early Upaniṣads 'provide significantly more biographical information' for several of its teachers than 'the vastly larger corpus of Buddhist *sūtra*s provides for the Buddha' (2017: 18). Strangely, however, neither does the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* mention the name of Yājñavalkya's cousins, nor does the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* mention Uddālaka Āruṇi's aunt; both mention only Yājñavalkya's wife (Maitreyī) and Āruṇi's son (Śvetaketu).

These few details show that the early Buddhist do not present 'an unknown, contentless Buddha' (Drewes, 2017: 19). But there is much more content about the Buddha than this. Sujato and Brahmali have shown that the early teachings 'leave room for many quirky details about the Buddha that convey a realistic flavour; despite the awkwardness they were not removed' (2015: 74). Such 'quirky' details include (2015: 74-75):

> • The Buddha sleeping on a pile of leaves in the winter (AN 3.35);
>
> • The Buddha washing his own feet (MN 31);
>
> • The Buddha being seen as a simple *bhikkhu*, and not being recognised (MN 140);
>
> • The Buddha claiming to enjoy going to the toilet (AN 8.86);
>
> • The Buddha teaching Pasenadi how to lose weight (SN 3.13);
>
> • The Buddha avoiding Brahmin householders, because they are noisy (AN 5.30);

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[53] See Vin I.82, *rāhula-mātā*, although she could be Bhaddakaccānā at AN I.25; DPPN s.v. Sakya (Sakka/Sakiya).

- The Buddha dismissing monks because they are noisy, but then changing his mind because lay people persuade him (MN 67);

- The Buddha complaining of back pain and then lying down in a Dhamma talk (MN 53);

- The Buddha warming his back in the sun; his skin is flaccid and wrinkly, his body stooped (SN 48.41);

- Bhaddāli refusing to keep the Buddha's rule about eating after midday (MN 65);

- The Buddha dying of bloody diarrhoea (DN 16).

The early texts even contain unflattering details about the Buddha, such as the story that he became annoyed with the *bhikkhu* Upavāṇa, who was fanning him just before he died (DN II.138-39). Such details are valuable in their own right, but much more important is the fact that they convey a sense of the Buddha as a person. Moreover, the Buddha's personality can be seen to run directly into early Buddhist teaching, which cannot be separated from it:

> The EBTs present a highly distinctive personal style, together with a number of revolutionary ideas, which conveys the flavour of a single and exceptional creator. This can be seen in a number of aspects of the EBTs, such as the large number of similes, analogies and metaphors that are vivid, precise in application, realistic and local, and formal in presentation; the analytical approach to language, which was unknown before the Buddha; use of irony and humour; and internal consistency and coherence. Moreover, many of the ideas presented in the EBTs are revolutionary for the time. This distinctive personal style is quite different from anything found in other Buddhist literature, or even in the Upaniṣads. (SB 2105: 67)

The early texts 'frequently depict the Buddha and his disciples in dialogue with members of other religions and with sceptics' (2015: 27). Texts with an outward-looking perspective, containing a diversity of encounters and teachings embodied in personal idiosyncracy, are exactly what is to be expected of an historical record. Later Buddhist texts in comparison 'contain very little innovation and are mostly concerned with filling in any perceived gaps in the

EBTs, working out their consequences, and systematising them' (SB 2105: 72). Apart from lacking the innovation of the EBTs, later Buddhist literature

> consists almost entirely of Buddhists speaking to other Buddhists. This difference makes sense if we consider that the EBTs largely stem from the life of the founder, one of whose tasks was to persuade others to his path. (SB 2105: 27)

If the founder had an original and vital message to transmit, it explains much about the focus of the early teachings:

> The EBTs are interested in the Dhamma, while after the Buddha's death interest shifted to his life story. The EBTs display little interest in the Buddha's biography. This is in stark contrast to other Buddhist literature. This is most naturally explained by the EBTs stemming mainly from the Buddha himself. He was interested in teaching the Dhamma, not telling his life story. (SB 2105: 79)

Impersonalism is prominent throughout the canonical teachings. It can be seen in the Buddha asking King Pasenadi why he offers 'such elevated respect to this body';[54] more importantly, the same impersonalism can be seen in the Buddha's refusal to appoint a leader after his death, and his admonition that others be 'lights unto yourselves, with the Dhamma as your lamp'.[55] Early Buddhist doctrine is of course defined by impersonalism at the metaphysical level, for example in the Buddha's negation of an individual self or soul (*attan*). Impersonalism, as an idiosyncratic feature of the Buddha's personality, agrees with impersonalism at the metaphysical level, a fundamental coherence which can be extended into other areas.

9. The silent Buddha

Reading between the lines of the canonical discourses, a slightly peculiar story begins to unfold, of a movement with humble beginnings, emerging from Magadha but not based there, whose main events occur in the backwaters of a

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[54] MN II.120: *kiṃ pana tvaṃ mahārāja atthavasaṃ sampassamāno imasmiṃ sarīre evarūpaṃ parama-nipaccakāraṃ karosi.*

[55] DN II.100: *tasmāt ih' ānanda attadīpā viharatha, attasaraṇā anaññasaraṇā dhammadīpā dhammasaraṇā anaññasaraṇā.*

small-scale urban society. The Buddha's place in this world and movement is depicted in quite fine detail, with no shortage of idiosyncracy and yet without much mythic elaboration. Idiosyncracy is notable in one peculiar feature of the Buddha's personality: his strangely silent nature. We have seen that MN 67 and AN 5.30 attest to the Buddha's quietistic nature. In fact, the canonical record is full of instances of the Buddha's preference for silence:

- The Buddha's initial response to attaining awakening is to avoid the hassle of teaching (MN I.168: *so mam' assa kilamatho, sā mam' assa vihesā*).

- When agreeing to a request (e.g. to come for a meal), the Buddha stays silent (*adhivāsesi bhagavā tuṇhībhāvena*).

- The Buddha often recommends mendicants either to talk about the Dhamma, or else maintain a 'noble silence' (*dhammī vā kathā, ariyo vā tuṇhībhāvo*).

- When the Buddha claims to enjoy going the toilet (AN 8.86), he actually says he is at ease (*phāsu me*) when he sees nobody in front or behind him on the road, *even* when going the toilet (AN IV.344); the text is really about the joy of solitude.

- The Buddha claims to enjoy being alone in the forest (SN 1.15).

- The Buddha is accused in MN 37 of taking afternoon naps (MN I.249).

- When the Buddha approaches a raucous assembly of ascetics in DN 9, Poṭṭhapāda asks everyone to be quiet, because Gotama 'is fond of little noise, and speaks in praise of quietude' (DN I.179: *appasaddakāmo kho so āyasmā appasaddassa vaṇṇavādī*).

- When King Ajātasattu of Magadha visits the Buddha in Jīvaka's mango grove in Rājagaha, he is impressed by the deep silence of the community of mendicants, which is 'just like a pellucid pond' (DN I.50: *tuṇhībhūtaṃ tuṇhībhūtaṃ bhikkhusaṅghaṃ anuviloketvā rahadam iva vippasannaṃ*). Just before this, Ajātasattu cannot recognise the Buddha.

- In MN 85, the Buddha will not enter Prince Bodhi's new 'Kokanada' mansion, because the stairs have been covered in new cloth. Instead

of explaining himself, the Buddha just stands next to the staircase and remains strangely quiet, despite the Prince's request that he go up. The Buddha eventually gives a telling glance (*apalokesi*) at Ānanda, who tells the prince to roll up the cloth: 'the Tathāgata has sympathy for later generations of people' (MN II.92: *pacchimaṃ janataṃ tathāgato anukampatī ti*), and will not step on white cloth.

In agreement with the Buddha's quietism, the texts mention his self-effacing nature, for example being congenial and polite, and not frowning but speaking first.[56] These details paint a picture of a quiet and sensitive individual inclined towards retreat and even escapism. This point is elaborated in fascinating detail in the *Attadaṇḍa Sutta* (SN IV.15), 'The discourse on taking up the stick (of violence)', in which the Buddha explains his former anxiety at social conflict:

> Observe people engaged in quarrels: fear arises from those who take up the stick; I will explain anxiety, just as I experienced it. (935)

> Seeing creatures floundering, like fish in (a pond with) little water, and people hostile to each other, I became fearful. (936)

> A world utterly devoid of essence, all its quarters trembling, wanting (to find) a home for myself, I did not see any unoccupied. (937)

> But in the end, seeing (people) hostile (to each other), I became dissatisfied, and then saw the dart here, so difficult to see, nestling in my heart. (938)

> Pierced by this arrow, one runs around in all directions, but when that very arrow is removed, one neither moves nor sinks. (939)

These verses read as a quietist's reaction to a troubled world; experiencing hostility and the threat of violence, the speaker focuses on his own fear and dissatisfaction with the world, an inward gaze which leads to a spiritual solution. Such verses add a more personal note to formulaic accounts of the Bodhisatta's renunciation (e.g. MN 26), and of course the mythic version of witnessing four sights in the *Mahāpadāna Sutta* (DN 14).

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[56] DN I.116: *samaṇo khalu bho gotamo ehisvāgatavādī sakhilo sammodako abbhākuṭiko uttānamukho pubbabhāsī ...*

10. Pragmatism and metaphysical reticence

The Buddha's silence finds expression in the early teachings in a number of fascinating ways. This is quite literally the case when the Buddha uses silence as a didactic tool to steer others away from misconceived notions. In a less literal sense, the Buddha's silence is expressed as a *via negativa* form of teaching, in which words are used sparingly, their main purpose being to negate misconceptions rather than affirm metaphysical truths. As a self-professed 'analyst' (*vibhajjavādī*), the Buddha's interest does not lie in abstraction or abstruse debate; his purpose is the psychological transformation of others, achieved mostly by a dialectic of silence.

a) Unanswered questions

Silence is applied as both an analytical and psychological tool in the Buddha's non-response to certain questions. The early texts record a number of occasions when the Buddha, upon being asked a question, remains silent. One text inclining in this direction, although focused on ascetic discipline rather than metaphysical speculation, is AN 8.20/Ud 45: while the community of mendicants is sitting in silence through the night, Ānanda asks the Buddha to recite the Pātimokkha, but the Buddha remains silent (AN IV.204-05: *evaṃ vutte bhagavā tuṇhī ahosi*); after the third request, he reveals that the Saṅgha is impure, prompting Moggallāna to root out the person at fault. At AN 10.95, the layman Uttiya asks the Buddha whether he 'saves the whole world, or half or a third of it, but in response the Buddha just stays silent.[57] More importantly for the present enquiry, at SN 44.10 the Buddha remains silent when the wanderer Vacchagotta asks him if the self exists or not.[58]

In many other texts, the Buddha resorts to a different type of silence when faced with certain metaphysical questions. In DN 9, when asked a series of ten questions by Poṭṭhapāda – about the eternality or infinity of the world, or the reality of the soul/'life principle' (*jīva*), or the existential status of a Tathāgata after death – to each question the Buddha replies 'This too, Poṭṭhapāda, has not been explained by me' (DN I.187-88: *etam pi kho poṭṭhapāda mayā avyākataṃ*). In MN 63, a former wanderer who has converted to Buddhism, Māluṅkyaputta, ponders in private the fact that the Buddha has 'put aside' (*ṭhapita*) or 'rejected'

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[57] AN V.195: *sabbo vā tena loko nīyati upaḍḍho* vā tibhāgo.

[58] AN IV.400: *kiṃ nu kho bho gotama, atth' attā ti? evaṃ vutte bhagavā tuṇhī ahosi. kiṃ pana bho gotama, n' atth' attā ti? evaṃ vutte bhagavā tuṇhī ahosi*.

(*paṭikhitta*) these questions. In these situations, the Buddha is not literally silent but rather adopts a position of silence with regard to questions of metaphysical importance.

The Buddha's silence is sometimes explained through the simile of the man shot by a poison arrow (e.g. MN 63). Just as the man might die if he insists on asking pointless questions about being shot, rather than seeking out a doctor, so too is abstract philosophising a spiritual hindrance, which must be put aside. In other places, the Buddha indicates that the problem is with the questions: in MN 72, each of the ten unanswered questions is in turn said to 'constitute view, the thicket of views … the twitching and writhing of view' (MN I.45: *diṭṭhigatam etaṃ diṭṭhigahanaṃ … diṭṭhivisūkaṃ diṭṭhivipphanditam*). And at SN 7.54, each of the different positions about the Tathāgata's post-mortem state is said to be 'a conceptualisation, an idea, mental profusion' (SN IV.68-69: *saññāgatam etaṃ ...pe... maññitam etaṃ ...pe... papañcitam etaṃ*). The Buddha's point appears to be that the ideas are based on cognitive malfunctioning, which reflect only the constructive power of a person's cognitive capacities, including language, by which reality is distorted. Truth lies beyond the word.[59]

Pragmatism and metaphysical reticence are two foundational pillars of early Buddhist teaching. The Buddha is often portrayed as a spiritual pragmatist, for example in MN 58, where the Buddha tells Prince Abhaya that he only speaks if what he says is not just true but also beneficial. The focus on the problems with language, and the distortions of cognitive conditioning, are also prominent in the early texts, for example in the *Brahma-jāla* and *Madhu-piṇḍika Sutta*s (DN 1, MN 18), and in most texts on the 'dependent origination' of consciousness (e.g. MN 38). The critique is embodied in the list of five aggregates, which presents the construction of cognition in the form of a simple fivefold list: form, sensation, apperception, volitions and consciousness/sentience.

The pragmatic and the analytic perspectives come together in the simile of the raft. Stating that his Dhamma is for crossing over, not for grasping,[60] the Buddha compares it to a raft for crossing a dangerous flood: just as one puts aside the raft after it has served its purpose, rather than carrying it around on one's head, so too are the teachings to be put aside once their purpose has been

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[59] AN 7.54 (Ee IV.68-69).
[60] MN I.134: *kullūpamaṃ vo bhikkhave dhammaṃ desessāmi, nittharaṇatthāya no gahaṇatthāya*.

reached. Pragmatism is not the only point the teaching makes, for in stating that the Dhamma is to be eventually put aside, the Buddha suggests that the goal lies beyond words, which must be transcended. Language cannot capture the truth, and hence misleads the truth-seeker; since it misleads it must be used carefully, and ultimately abandoned if truth is to be realised. Quietism and pragmatism are thus two sides of the same coin.

The reason for leaving certain 'unanswered' (*avyākata*) questions is therefore consistent with the twofold purpose of the early teachings. Nevertheless, the mode of expressing – or not expressing – this point through actual silence or metaphysical reticence is potentially misleading. This can be seen in the post-canonical *Milindapañha*, where King Milinda claims there are only two possible reasons for the Buddha's silence: either he did not know, or else he kept the matter secret (*ajānanena vā guyhakaraṇena*). Nāgasena explains the Buddha's silence as spiritual pragmatism: providing answers could not have 'illuminated' Māluṅkya (*na tassa dīpanāya hetu*). Such an exchange shows how easily the dialectic of silence could be misunderstood and criticised.[61]

As an unusual choice in response to certain didactic contexts, silence is a highly peculiar, deeply ambiguous and potentially misleading style of teaching. The argument that a committee imagined an eccentrically silent or non-committal character is implausible. If committees generally do not make jokes, they certainly do not invent religious founders who appear lost for words.

b) The not-self teaching

The simile of the raft is employed in the *Alagaddūpama Sutta* (MN 22) alongside the simile of the water snake (*alagadda*). The latter simile also warns of the dangers of attachment to words rather than understanding their meaning and purpose. Appropriating the Dhamma wrongly, by grasping onto the words rather than their meaning, is like taking hold of a snake badly, by the tail, which allows the snake to wrap itself around a person's wrist and bite. Like the simile of the man shot by an arrow, the obsession with words is said to be like poison. The simile thus combines the pragmatic and analytic perspectives of the Buddha: words are a means to end, rather than an end in themselves. In the same discourse, another peculiar teaching expresses the same dual orientation:

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[61] Mil 145 (IV.2.2): *na tassa dīpanāya hetu vā kāraṇaṃ vā atthi, tasmā so pañho ṭhapanīyo. n' atthi buddhānaṃ bhagavantānaṃ akāraṇam ahetukaṃ giram udīraṇ ti.*

> What do you think, mendicants, is form permanent or impermanent?
>> 'Impermanent, sir.'
>
> Is that which is impermanent satisfactory or unsatisfactory?
>> 'Unsatisfactory, sir.'
>
> And is it suitable to regard that which is impermanent, unsatisfactory and subject to change as 'This is mine, I am this, this is my self'?
>> 'Certainly not, sir.'

The same questions are applied to the different aspects of conditioned experience: sensation, apperception, volitions and consciousness. This 'not-self' teaching (MN I.138) thus employs a curious method. First, its approach is fundamentally pragmatic: the Buddha's questions require empirical reflection, so that the *bhikkhus* effectively take part in a thought experiment and hence discover important truths by themselves; the teaching is framed to trigger reflection and hopefully transformation. Second, the analysis negates rather than affirms, so that the Buddha once again assumes a position of metaphysical reticence. Through a *via negativa* examination of experience, the Buddha indicates that a self cannot be found in conditioned experience, but ultimately bypasses statements of ontological truth – what exists or does not. Thus the Buddha avoids stating whether the 'self' exists or not, an ambiguity which emerges from the teaching's formal method, and which was to become a source of speculation and puzzlement for every subsequent generation of Buddhist thinkers.

In the not-self teaching, pragmatism and metaphysical reticence are deeply interwoven; questions work to negate misunderstanding, so that the teaching opens up the way to spiritual transformation, bringing disillusionment, dispassion and then release.[62] The unanswered questions, the similes of the raft, water snake, and man shot with a poisoned arrow all express the same perspective and purpose. Indeed, pragmatism and metaphysical reticence, infused with deep shades of ambiguity, are foundational pillars of a much larger doctrinal edifice, including ethics, meditation, philosophy of mind and much more. There is nothing supernatural or mythic about this system of thought. Quite the opposite: the system is highly original, and brought to life

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[62] MN I.139: *evaṃ passaṃ bhikkhave sutavā ariyasāvako rūpasmim pi nibbindati ... nibbindaṃ virajjati, virāgā vimuccati ...*

in realistic discourses in which the Buddha appears as a rational, courteous, but thoroughly singular teacher.

11. Like a flame gone out

In the Buddha's teachings, the dialectic of silence and metaphysical reticence are combined in another tantalising and ambiguous idea: the present moment ineffability of the person who attains Nirvana. This idea finds highly unusual expressions, for example in the word *tathāgata*, which as Richard Gombrich has pointed out, means 'being in the state thus',[63] and not 'thus gone (or come)'. As such, the compound does not denote a person who has simply 'gone to' (*gata*) the state of Nirvana, in the sense of attaining it, but indicates that the attainer of Nirvana is actually in the state 'thus'. 'Being thus' is, of course, a way of denying that the liberated person can be described, and is consistent with the Buddha's critique of language.

A profoundly ambiguous simile used to describe the realisation of Nirvana is that of the extinguished flame. Perhaps its most famous occurrence is in the *Aggivacchagotta Sutta* (MN 72). Asked by the Buddha in which direction a flame goes when it is extinguished, Vacchagotta replies as follows:

> The issue does not arise, Gotama, for the fire burnt dependent upon its fuel and when the fuel has been consumed, and no more is provided, being without fuel it is reckoned as 'blown out.'[64]

The Buddha's response to this is somewhat mysterious:

> In just the same way, Vaccha, the form (feeling, apperception, volitions and consciousness) with which one might designate the Tathāgata has been abandoned, destroyed, extirpated, annihilated, [and] is not liable to arise in the future for him. The Tathāgata, Vaccha, is released from what is reckoned as 'form': he is deep, immeasurable, unfathomable, just like a great ocean. (The notion) 'he is reborn' is inapplicable…[65]

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[63] Gombrich (2009: 151) and Wynne (2015: 62).

[64] MN I.487: *na upeti bho gotama yañhi so bho gotama aggi tiṇakaṭṭhupādānaṃ paṭicca ajali tassa ca pariyādānā aññassa ca anupahārā anāhāro nibbuto tv eva saṅkhyaṃ gacchatī nibbuto tv eva saṅkhyaṃ gacchati*.

[65] MN I.477-78; Wynne (2007: 83).

The Buddha here uses the most challenging language to indicate the present moment attainment of Nirvana. A nihilist interpretation is not logically possible, for the Buddha and Vaccha are discussing the experiential state of a Tathāgata in the here and now, and not after death; the simile of the extinguished flame is not applied to a dead person; rather, it is mundane experience which has been annihilated, in other words transcended. But taken out of context, the notion of a Tathāgata's 'destruction' (*ucchinna*) or 'annihilation' (*anabhāvaṃkata*) of the five aggregates suggests his ultimate non-existence. Indeed, in the *Alagaddūpama Sutta*, the Buddha complains of those who say 'the ascetic Gotama is a nihilist who proclaims the destruction, annihilation and non-existence of an existing being'.[66] The Buddha instead claims to have taught the indefinability of a liberated *bhikkhu* in the present,[67] and so declared nothing more than suffering and its cessation[68].

Another text which employs these ideas allows us to peer with a little more clarity into the Buddha's intellectual background. The Buddha's dialogue with Upasīva, in the *Pārāyanavagga* of the Suttanipāta (Sn 1069-76), is especially important for its context: the statement of original ideas against the meditative presuppositions of early Brahminism. The dialogue can be summarised as follows (Wynne 2007: 85-86):

- 1069–70. Upasīva asks on what object one should meditate in order to escape suffering; the Buddha answers that one should observe 'nothingness' (ākiñcaññaṃ) mindfully. The term 'nothingness' suggests meditative absorption, whereas the word 'mindful' (*satimā*) suggests clear awareness. Indeed the focus on mindfulness is clear, with the Buddha saying that a person should watch (*abhipassa*) the destruction of thirst 'night and day'.

- 1071–72. Upasīva asks if this state of meditation can be sustained without falling away (*anānuyāyī*); he appears surprised to hear that an absorbed state ('nothingness') can be maintained and mindfulness practised at the same time. The Buddha answers that the practice can be sustained without falling away from it.

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[66] MN I.140: *venayiko samaṇo gotamo, sato sattassa ucchedaṃ vināsaṃ vibhavaṃ paññāpetī ti.*

[67] MN I.140: *diṭṭhe vāhaṃ bhikkhave dhamme tathāgataṃ ananuvijjo ti vadāmi.*

[68] MN I.140: *pubbe cāhaṃ bhikkhave etarahi ca, dukkhañ c' eva paññāpemi dukkhassa ca nirodhaṃ.*

- 1073–74. Upasīva asks if there is still consciousness (*viññāṇaṃ*) in the one who 'becomes cool' (*siti-siyā*), probably a reference to attaining liberation at death. The Buddha uses the simile of the extinguished flame (*accī ... atthaṃ paleti*) to point out that a liberated sage (*munī*) is released from the category 'name' (*nāma-kāyā vimutto*) and cannot be 'reckoned' (*na upeti saṅkhaṃ*).

- 1075–76 Upasīva asks if the liberated person exists in a state of eternal bliss (*sassatiyā arogo*), or ceases to exist (*so n' atthi*). The Buddha states that ways of 'measuring' (*pamāṇaṃ*), i.e. modes of speaking (*vādapathā*), do not apply to the one who has 'gone out' (*atthaṅgatassa*), because 'experiential phenomena have been uprooted' (*sabbesu dhammesu samūhatesu*).

This dialogue deals with familiar Buddhist concepts: absorption, mindfulness, the simile of the extinguished flame, the Tathāgata's transcendence and so on. The obscure idea of becoming cool (*sīti-siyā*) is the most difficult concept. A Buddhist meaning of the simile should not be assumed, since Upasīva is a Brahmin, and at the opening of the dialogue the Buddha mentions 'nothingness', a non-Buddhist meditative state associated with one of the Buddha's teachers (Aḷāra Kālāma). In v.1075, moreover, Upasīva asks whether the person who has 'become cool' exists in a state of eternal bliss, or ceases to exist, states which can only refer to a dead liberated person. Such questions are equivalent to the unanswered questions about the Tathāgata's existence and so on after death. There being no change in the subject of discussion in v.1073-75, it means that Upasīva's question about 'becoming cool' must somehow refer to death, most likely the liberation achieved at death.

This analysis suggests that Upasīva's questions are in line with a speculative pattern discernible in the early Upaniṣads and post-Buddhist Mokṣadharma. The general position of these texts is that liberation is achieved at death, when a person's *karma* is finally exhausted, at which point the meditative anticipation of *brahman* in life, through meditation, is actualised.[69] In the Mokṣadharma, the simile of the extinguished flame is even used to refer to liberation at death: just as a flame gone out enters the ether, rather than becoming non-existent, so too is the meditative adept liberated at death by being absorbed into *brahman*.[70]

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[69] See Wynne (2007: 59*ff*).

[70] See Wynne (2007: 77) on Mbh XII.192.122

In response to Upasīva's Brahminic ideas, in the final verse the Buddha states his position of ineffability in life: the cessation of 'phenomena' is not an early Buddhist way of talking about death, and must refer to mental or experiential phenomena. The lack of mundane experiential phenomena, including 'all modes of speaking', cease, and this that the sage is ineffable in the here and now. This understanding also applies to Buddha's use of the simile of the extinguished flame in v.1074: *nāmakāy*ā *vimutto* must mean 'released from the category name', a meaning attested elsewhere in the canonical discourses, whereas the meaning 'name *and* form' is unattested for the compound *nāma-kāya*.[71]

In the highly peculiar dialogue with Upasīva, the Buddha is aware of the finer points of Upasīva's questions, including their Brahminic presuppositions, and yet he responds to them with ease, and indeed with no small degree of conceptual mastery. New ideas, about mindfulness, liberation in life and ineffability, are inserted into Upasīva's older conceptual framework, of concentration as an anticipation of the liberated state achieved at death. Rhys David's point about the depiction of the Buddha in canonical dialogues is apt here:

> On the hypothesis that he was an historical person, of that training and character he is represented in the Piṭakas to have had, the method is precisely that which it is most probable he would have actually followed. Whoever put the Dialogues together may have had a sufficiently clear memory of the way he conversed, may well have even remembered particular occasions and persons. (1923: 207)

Did the composers of the Pārāyanavagga have a 'sufficiently clear memory of the way the Buddha conversed' with the Brahmin Upasīva? And if they did, what hypothesis does it suggest about the Buddha 'as an historical person'? The canonical discourses say that before his awakening, the Buddha was taught meditation by Āḷāra Kālāma and Uddaka Rāmaputta. The canonical material on these teachers, and on the 'formless' (*āruppa*) meditations connected to them, belongs to the same conceptual stream documented in early Brahminic texts (the early Upaniṣads and Mokṣadharma). Indeed, the meditative goals of the two teachers – 'the sphere of nothingness' (*ākiñcaññāyatana*) and 'neither perception nor non-perception' (*nevasaññā-nāsaññāyatana*) respectively – can be understood as two ways of conceptualising *brahman*.[72]

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[71] Wynne (2007: 79).
[72] Wynne (2007: 37*ff*).

Assigning the two teachers to this stream of thought does not mean that they were Brahmins. It only means that they were early figures in a stream of spiritual speculation, reaching back into pre-Buddhist times and continuing into the early Buddhist period, documented in certain Brahminic texts. The canonical material on the teachers suggests a particular 'training and character' of the Buddha: his emergence from the speculative world of the early Upaniṣads, followed by the creation of a new doctrine. Although original and idiosyncratic in its expression, the Buddha's Dhamma was in many ways formulated with the old Upaniṣadic ideas in mind, as can be seen in the dialogue with Upasīva.

Such a theory makes good sense of the not-self teaching, which negates a thoroughly Upaniṣadic conceptualisation of the self as permanent (*nicca*), unchanging (*avipariṇāma-dhamma*) and blissful (*sukha*).[73] It also explains the dialogue with Upasīva, in which the Buddha responds to Brahminic ideas quite deftly, at the same time introducing new ideas into the old framework. We have also seen that the simile of the extinguished flame agrees with the Buddha's dialectic of silence; indeed, both are used in response to Vacchagotta's questions, indicating the impossibility of conceptualising the liberated state. The Buddha's interaction with Upasīva is similar: when faced with the assumption that liberation is achieved at death, the Buddha articulates his doctrine of ineffable realisation in the present.

The few aspects of the Buddha's teachings studied here suggest that the 'great man' theory of history must certainly apply to the origin of Buddhism. In early Buddhist teaching, quietism, pragmatism, the dialectic of silence, ambiguity and ineffability all come together in a singular doctrinal system, one that is consistent with a particular account of the Buddha's intellectual background. A close study of the origin of Buddhist meditation helps explain the specific historical circumstances behind the highly idiosyncratic formulation of early Buddhist Dhamma.

12. The big picture

The main points which *prove* the Buddha's existence can be summarised as follows:

- If a massive corpus gathered from multiple sources included significant invention, discrepancies would have been unavoidable.

- If the texts had not been composed before the rise of Magadhan empires in the mid-4th century BC, their social and political

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[73] Norman (1981: 20*ff*), Gombrich (1990: 15), Wynne (2010: 201*ff*).

content would reach into the imperial age; even if great care was taken to depict an earlier period, unintended features of the imperial age would have leaked into the texts.

• Coins and bricks are two features of the imperial age which have a marginal presence in the early texts. While this suggests that the period of Sutta composition remained open just about long enough to record these material advances, it is also obvious that little was added to an older corpus, which remained largely intact without revision.

• If the Buddha had been invented, the mythic trends of such texts as the *Mahāpadāna Sutta* would be more apparent, and the canonical discourses would not be so realistic and modest in tone.

• If even the marginal amount of mythic elaboration did not belong to the pre-imperial age, the idea of the 'wheel-turning monarch' (*cakkavatti dhamma-rāja*) would not be conceptualised as it actually is (in DN 26).

• We know what happens when composers or compositional committees create Buddhist discourses with no historical reality whatsoever: the corpus of Mahāyāna Sūtras comprise a monumental edifice of myth, which in style and content is quite different from the canonical discourses.

• If earlier composers had invented many of the extant Suttas, they would not be full of so many ambiguous and peculiar teachings.

• If there had not been an historical Buddha given to quietism, the idea of a metaphysically reticent teacher, employing such didactic means as negation and the dialectic of silence, could not have been created.

• A highly original doctrinal edifice, in which pragmatism, philosophical reticence, negation and ineffability blend in and out of the Buddha's quietistic personality, is too unusual to have been invented. We are forced to conclude that it was not.

These points prove that the historical pedigree of early Buddhist texts is very high, and if so the corpus can virtually be regarded more or less as an objective witness to the Buddha's life and teaching. Indeed, the Buddha of the canonical discourses has as clear a personality as the character of the Dhamma attributed to him. The latter reflects the former: both are thoroughly idiosyncratic and yet consistent, in both content and expression. And both are situated not just in the socio-political world of 5th century BC, but also in the intellectual or spiritual landscape of northern India in the 5th century BC. The latter point can be seen in the following network of connections:

- Information about the Buddha's teachers suggest they emerged from, or were situated in, early Upaniṣadic milieux.

- The 'not-self' teaching, the most important aspect of early Buddhist doctrine alongside Dependent Origination, negates a concept of 'self' in distinctly Upaniṣadic terms.[74]

- The not-self teaching has a *via negativa* form for two reasons:

    i.   Pragmatism: the truth must be discovered, not told.

    ii. Metaphysical reticence: truth cannot be conceptualised.

- The Buddha did not answer fundamental questions about the ultimate reality of the self and the world, because:

    i.   Pragmatism: they do not help a person realise the truth.

    ii. Metaphysical reticence: the questions assume truth can be conceptualised.

- The similes of the raft, of the man shot by a poisoned arrow and of the water snake all express the same ideas: spiritual pragmatism and the inability of concepts to capture truth.

- When asked about the liberated state, early Buddhist teachings sometimes use the simile of an extinguished flame to express the ineffability of a Tathāgata; apart from the fact that the goal must be attained in the present, nothing else can be said.

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[74] Some versions of Dependent Origination are also formulated against an Upaniṣadic background, e.g. MN 38 and DN15, on which see Wynne (2018b: 110*f*) and (2010a: 132*ff*) respectively.

• The Buddha's dialogue with Upasīva employs the simile of the extinguished flame to negate the Upaniṣadic idea of liberation at death.

With the final point we come full circle, for the dialogue with Upasīva belongs to the same world of speculation as the Buddha's training under two meditation masters. The sequence as a whole forms a complex network made up of many particulars, all rooted in realistic depictions of persons, time and place. It also extends out into the entire doctrinal edifice of the early texts, and so forms a much wider web of meaning and particularity that is remarkably consistent.

This is not to say that every single detail of the early texts is reliable; realism and coherence do not necessarily amount to homogeneity. Mythic elaboration already occurred in the pre-imperial period, and if new claims were made about the Buddha, we should not be surprised to find new interpretations of his teachings. There are, indeed, many reasons to think that numerous calm-insight teachings were added after the Buddha.[75] But the likelihood of diverse strata need not push us towards extreme scepticism, and the conclusion that nothing can be known for sure. Rather, it is sensible to approach the canonical texts with cautious optimism about identifying authentic teachings of the Buddha, based on the undeniable point that he really existed. According to this approach, certain teachings will probably be shown to have a later origin than the Buddha himself; but this is a subject for future research and debate.

13. Fear and loathing in Buddhist Studies

This study has hopefully shown that extreme scepticism about the Buddha is unfounded. Beyond any reasonable doubt, we can conclude that early Buddhist texts are ancient and sufficiently objective for us to 'know' the Buddha. Details can be doubted – whether this or that text was really spoken by the Buddha. But this does not detract from the overall coherence of the texts, in terms of both their socio-political and doctrinal particulars. As Sujato & Brahmali have put it (2015: 143-44), we need not be concerned with the sort of sceptic who says, after all this, that 'we can't know for certain whether any specific phrase was spoken by the Buddha'. About this sceptical objection, Sujato and Brahmali are surely right to conclude that '[w]hile the sceptical assertion is true, it is trivially so' (2015: 144).

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[75] Wynne (2007: 102*ff*), 2018a, 2018b.

More important is the big picture, which has been sketched through inductive reasoning: textual specifics have been carefully drawn together to build up a general thesis which accounts 'for the entire range of what is known about the period' (Sujato & Brahmali, 2015: 143). Theories formed in this way can be tested in the light of new particulars drawn from the early texts, and then either modified or rejected. As Sujato and Brahmali have pointed out, examples of inductive theories

> include the theories of evolution and global warming. One of the characteristics of such theories is that they are probabilistic, and hence much better at establishing generalities than specifics. This problem is well known in the case of global warming: the theory cannot predict whether any specific day will be hot or cold, but it can say with a high degree of probability that there will be more and more hot days in coming years. (2015: 143)

The same applies to the picture of the Buddha and his teaching sketched here; the theory cannot confirm that every single textual point about the Buddha is authentic. Nevertheless, the general thesis allows particular details to be checked against it, and in this way the inductive approach allows knowledge to grow: ideas can be modified, improved or rejected, depending on the available evidence.

This inductive approach is not merely a sensible means of dealing with canonical Buddhist texts; it is the only means. In reading an early Buddhist text, the inductive principle is immediately forced upon the enquirer: one cannot avoid asking questions about the meaning and provenance of any particular text, and what it tells us about its composers and their world. Thus the inductive process begins, as one struggles to see the bigger picture; this process is inevitable and unavoidable. Extreme scepticism instead follows a twisted and destructive method, of starting from a premise and then attempting to prove its truth. As Sujato and Brahmali have pointed out (2015: 145-46), the arguments of sceptics

> are reminiscent of arguments by denialists of various types, such as those relating to the harmful effects of tobacco, creationism, or the reality of man-made climate change. Just as sceptics characterise the search for authenticity as "Protestant Buddhism", it seems appropriate to describe this form of scepticism as "Denialist Buddhism". The unifying characteristic of the various forms of denialism is their insistence on extreme, unreasonable scepticism regarding any truth claims they oppose.

All these points can be seen in Drewes' attempt to deny the existence of the Buddha. Instead building up a general thesis based on the textual evidence, Drewes' study is instead based on openly stated prejudices. Thus he claims that the Buddha is a 'generic, omniscient, supra-divine figure characterized primarily in terms of supernatural qualities' (2017: 17), and that a 'supernatural Buddha' is 'the *only* sort of Buddha known to even the earliest texts' (2017: 10). His view of those who study early Buddhism is just as prejudiced. We learn that there is 'an *industry* devoted to the production of *sensational* claims about the Buddha' (p.19); that Rhys Davids and Oldenberg used Pali texts 'to *work up* exciting depictions of the Buddha's life and teaching' (10), and that Buddhist scholars '*never* … made *any* significant argument in support of their views' (15). Such prejudice renders Drewes' final call (2017: 19) to uphold 'the standards of scientific, empirical inquiry' quite laughable. Work which is so openly biased should not be taken seriously; anybody, indeed, who denies the proof of something, without saying what the 'proof' could be, obviously does not want there to be any proof. Instead, the sceptical claim that there is no 'proof' turns out to be nothing more than a self-fulfilling prophecy:

> If one presupposes that Agamemnon was historical, one can spend one's life sifting through the legends for potential evidence about him; if one does not, the effort is meaningless. (2017: 12)

In other words, a bias towards scepticism results in not even studying the object of one's prejudice. But this just begs the question: why take any of it seriously? Sceptical arguments fail the most basic standards of text-critical history; sceptics such as Schopen, Silk, Faure, Lopez Jr., Wedemeyer and Drewes give every impression of not really knowing anything about the primary sources. Dismissing the effort to 'sift through the legends for potential evidence' about the Buddha as meaningless, these scholars have failed to cultivate any expertise in the study of early Buddhism. There could be no clearer warning of the slippery slope from ignorance and prejudice to indolence and nihilism. An emblematic example is Schopen's view of the Pali canon. Dating a corpus of texts to the period when the commentaries on it were redacted, without considering its contents, is an abject failure of text-critical history.

Lacking all academic merit, extreme scepticism should perhaps be viewed as the puerile urge to kill one's ancestors. In recent times, this impulse has been abetted by Edward Said's critique of Orientalism. But the wish to defame the likes of T. W. Rhys Davids is short-sighted, and follows a self-destructive tendency noticed by

Edmund Burke: 'People will not look forward to posterity, who never look backward to their ancestors'.[76] Like everyone distracted by the transient noise of the modern age, sceptics have lost sight of the bigger picture. Motivated by short-term gains, and fearful of that which they loath, Buddhist scholars have indulged in ephemera. Their attention focused on passing fads, it has been forgotten that academic progress is a long process of cumulative gain. The inheritance bequeathed by the Orientalists has been squandered; Buddhist Studies stands disgraced. But there remains hope that, in time, the stigma attached to the study of early Buddhism will fade. Sound empirical standards might eventually prevail. And perhaps the Buddha might then be welcomed back into the study of ideas and culture which depend on him.

Abbreviations

The numbering of individual Pāli Suttas (e.g. AN 8.86) follows the method of Sutta Cental (https://suttacentral.net/). Citations or indications of the volume and page of individual Pali texts (e.g AN IV.344) refer to the volume and page number of PTS (Ee) editions.

AN	Aṅguttara Nikāya
DN	Dīgha Nikāya
DPPN	*Dictionary of Pali Proper Names;* Malalasekera, G. P. 1997: Oxford: Pali Text Society.
Ja	Jātaka
Khp	Khuddaka-pāṭha
Mbh	Mahābharata
Mil	Milindapañha
MN	Majjhima Nikāya
PTS	Pali Text Society
SB	Sujato and Brahmali (2015)
SN	Saṃyutta Nikāya
Ud	Udāna
Sn	Sutta Nipāta
Vin	Vinaya

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[76] Burke (1951: 31).

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