

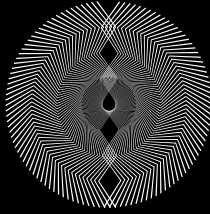
THE BROKEN GONG



A PORTRAIT OF THE BUDDHA
DRAWN FROM HIS DISCOURSES
HAROLD BEAVER



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DHAMMA MOON

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WHEN, MUFFLED AS A BROKEN GONG,
YOU DON'T REVERBERATE,
YOU'VE REACHED NIBBĀNA:
RECRIMINATION'S TURMOIL FINALLY STILLED IN YOU.

Dhammapada 134

FOR AJAHN SUCITTO
AND THE SANGHA
OF
WAT PAH CITTAVIVEKA
(CHITHURST BUDDHIST MONASTERY)

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EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

BY AJAHN SUCITTO

HOW THIS BOOK CAME TO BE

The figure seated in the chair at the back of the Shrine Room was instantly recognizable, even though I hadn't seen him for thirty years. Tall, lanky, straight-backed as the chair; angular face capped by a mat of grey hair, and composed as attentively as if musing on some turn of phrase in a Henry James novel: Harold Beaver, my personal tutor and teacher of English and American Literature at the University of Warwick. That would have been 1968-71. Now it was 2001, Cittaviveka Buddhist Monastery, West Sussex; I was the abbot and he was the guest. A swapping of roles, but the immediacy of contact and informal warmth were much the same. The reminiscences were minimal; he was more interested in the present: he was in the midst of writing a book, something to do with the Buddha. He had enjoyed Warwick, but during his time at his next post, the University of Amsterdam, saw signs that the free-thinking attitudes of the sixties and

seventies were coming to an end, at least in academic circles. In his opinion, universities, on account of their need for corporate sponsorship, were now directing intelligence to the needs of the market rather than freely exploring and broadening the scope of the human mind. Hence Buddhism, and more specifically the Buddha, the epitome of the awakened mind, had caught his attention.

Following up on that, he had moved to northern Thailand and spent several weeks as a guest at Wat Pah Pong – the monastery founded by Ajahn Chah from which some 300 branches had subsequently sprung, Cittaviveka being one. This monastery had been my base on and off since 1979; and I had also contributed to a collection of talks and articles published in a book called *Seeing the Way* – which also included the biographies and photos of the contributors. Hence the link: Harold had seen the book, glanced through the biographies and, noting that I was credited as studying English and American Literature during his time at Warwick, made the connections.

And now here he was, fluent and purposeful as ever, and bearing a manuscript; it was a book that he was bringing to its concluding draft, and it was on the Buddha's use of language. Or the Buddha seen through the eyes of Harold Beaver: as a recluse who was also a master of language. Well, the Buddha as a figure takes on many forms, often dependent on who portrays him and why, but this was a new angle. Harold wondered if I would like to take a look at the manuscript and

offer any comments. How sweet: to comment on and correct the essay of my teacher! But of course.

The sense of personal gratitude was immediate: at this formative time in my life, Harold had been an inspiration. My earlier schooling had proceeded from the premise that the purpose of education was to get a good job. But his insistence as a teacher was that education was for the development of the mind; and that literature contained truths and models that we would do well to understand – not just in the halls of universities, but in the reality of human life. He was ready and available to dialogue at any time, and one never left the conversation stranded in some theoretical dead-end, or unaffected by his enthusiasm. This man could read a text like no one I had ever known: tease subtleties and characterisation out of lines of Homer, probe beneath the text of *Moby Dick* into its homosexual undertones, and delight in the movement of thought in Wallace Stevens' lyrics. All that was behind me now, but to read what Harold had made out of the 2,500-year-old texts of the Buddhist Pali Canon – which for the most part came across as rather dry and repetitive and enlivened only by bizarre cosmological touches from a long-gone world-view – that would surely be an eye-opener.

This is the book, *The Broken Gong*. Or more accurately, it is the book that resulted after Harold had digested my comments and editorial tweaking. I had found it an easy and even compelling read; I quickly added some notes and excised a few sentences, and passed it

back to him. He left a day or two later and wrote to me from Utrecht. In terms of age, he was just passing year seventy, but was itinerant and looking to settle down. I offered to look out for properties near the monastery; we exchanged a few letters.

The next spring I was teaching in the USA, but returned to Cittaviveka at the end of April. It was early in June that I got the phone call: it was from Harold's son, Jake. Harold had suddenly died of a heart attack in a hotel near King's Cross station in London. Could we arrange a memorial of some kind? Of course; we'd scatter Harold's ashes around a memorial stupa in the monastery's grounds. Then when Jake came for a visit, *The Broken Gong*, dedicated to the monastery and myself, came with him – in a cardboard box that also contained a rejection sheet from the Oxford University Press. OUP had also thoughtfully attached a list of errors and quibbles, and Harold had noted these and included corrections in the current manuscript. Among these pencilled notes were a few marked 'ASK SUCITTO'; but the occasion hadn't occurred. Anyway, Jake handed me the manuscript and *The Broken Gong* was now in my hands. I made a copy and passed it around and discovered that among the monastics at least, the work was well-received, and considered worthy of publishing.

Twelve years passed, during which time I was engrossed in being abbot and teacher and (too) busy; but that came to an end in 2014 when I resigned and took a year's sabbatical for a personal retreat. I

returned to sort through various boxes of papers, and thus unearthed *The Broken Gong*. It was very evidently under my wing. And now I had time to tidy up the manuscript and render it publishable.

If you've retired, you probably know the number of things that can present themselves as being long overdue for attention. Proofreading is probably not one of them. However, the book and I were both fortunate that one of my students, Dongshil Kim, offered her services. She groomed the text into a format that another volunteer, Lisa Gorecki, could check; another supporter, Nicholas Halliday, offered typesetting and design. I corrected small details – such as the spelling, the Pali and the endnotes – and added a footnote where points or translations seemed to need it. Otherwise, despite occasionally sighing over the Greek and the Latin – ‘Harold, people aren’t familiar with these languages these days!’ – I’ve let the text stand as Harold left it. I think its vigour will carry you along and offer inspiration – as well as an encouragement to closely examine what the Buddha meant to convey through what he said, how he said it, and what he left unsaid.

THE AUTHOR

But first, having read the obituaries – I knew him only through those three years at Warwick – I’ll introduce the author more formally.

Harold Beaver was born Helmut Lothar Bibergeil at Dessau in Germany on June 27, 1929. Being of Jewish extraction, the family fled to Britain in 1938, where he acquired an Anglicised name and an English education that culminated in his reading Classics at St John's College, Oxford. He subsequently worked for the Oxford University Press for seven years, wrote a couple of novels and taught in Kenya at a Quaker school. He returned to England in 1965, and in 1968 began teaching English and American Literature at Warwick, where he stayed until 1982. During that period, he produced editions of works by Edgar Allan Poe and Herman Melville, before moving on to the chair of American Literature at the University of Amsterdam. His academic career subsequently drew to an end at the University of Denver – after which his interest in Buddhism took him to Thailand.

His obituary in *The Times* describes him as an 'academic rebel who challenged conventional thinking with unorthodox theories' and refers to how 'the sheer breadth of his intellectual interests made him appear to many a charismatic figure. To others, this chameleon quality suggested a lack of concentration.' The obituary concludes: 'Certainly he could not be called a systematic thinker, but he was a remarkably acute reader and a learned commentator who did much to promote the study of American literature in Britain.'

Although Harold did ask for my opinions on his manuscript, we didn't discuss its overview; and at the time of his death, I hadn't received the questions that

he intended to put to me. Despite the absence of a fuller conversation with him, I shall add a few notes to give the reader some perspective on aspects of the text, as well as to indicate how I understand the scope and intentions of *The Broken Gong*.

THE APPROACH OF THE BROKEN GONG

It's notable that the academic Harold Beaver travelled to northeast Thailand, home of the earthy Forest monastic tradition, perhaps to get Buddhism under his skin. This gives us a hint of what occasioned *The Broken Gong*. It issues from a scholar's mind, but one that seeks to draw daily life in all its colours from the hallowed texts. Consequently, the book risks a loss in literal accuracy for the sake of an emphatically live presentation of the Buddha and his teachings within the culture of his age. By means of a focus on the minutiae that occupy the backdrop of the discourses, it probes beneath the texts to offer a vivid portrayal of the people, mores and landscape of ancient India. Particularly of the people. Beaver sketches characters through attending to their use of words, their social standing, and the way they handled dialogue (especially tricky exchanges such as those between a prince or king and a revered sage). Overall, Beaver's intent is to depict characters who appear as mouthpieces in the texts as three-dimensional flesh-and-blood humans.

Towards this end, Beaver translates the Pali texts into a contemporary English that is vernacular and colloquial. Yet he also widens his focus to place the Buddha in the context of world culture: most specifically the Classical and Western literary traditions that were Harold's purview. And with that comes a qualifier: Beaver doesn't allude to classical Indian sacred literature such as the Upanishads or the Vedas. This would be a serious flaw if *The Broken Gong* were meant to offer a contextual elucidation of the Buddha's teachings. However, it doesn't attempt that. Instead, the book focuses on irony, imagery, verbal play and debating prowess; this is because the very handling of words, as well as the words themselves, are in Beaver's opinion crucial to the Buddha's way of expressing the teachings. In fact, the underlying theme of *The Broken Gong* is the Buddha's use of language, since 'the implicit nature of language ... is prone to mislead.' According to Beaver, 'the ultimate paradox of Buddhism, then, is its need to employ language to counter language.' This point is argued in Chapter 1, and runs through the book and into the Epilogue, a revision of a previously-written essay that he used to form *The Broken Gong's* conclusion.

THE FIGURE OF THE BUDDHA

Understanding that *any* portrayal of a human being is a fiction, and given the slippery nature of words, Beaver prefaces his book with the comment that 'The Buddha

of the suttas, like King Ajātasattu or Prince Pāyāsi, must ultimately be read as a character in fiction.’ His attempt is then ‘Not so much a life of the Buddha, but a character sketch’ by means of ‘a rather secular, humanist effort to discover the voice and personality of Gotama in his own dialogues and discourses.’ Beaver’s verbal portrait of the Buddha then conforms to Picasso’s dictum: ‘Art is a lie that tells the truth.’ And religious art is the most tricky of all lies, because it configures divine or ideal truths. So, just as the Renaissance depictions of Mary and Jesus – their Semitic skin bleached white, and clothed in Classical drapes – are a product of Catholic Europe, so the portrayals of the Buddha resonate with the projections of their age: there are the almost expressionless statues that present an imperturbable transcendence, the disembodied presence of the Mahayana sutras that incline to the realm of the Ideal, or the socially-attuned Victorian sage of *The Light of Asia*. *The Broken Gong* offers a fiction to place beside all these, but it is of a dynamic and expressive man, skilled in leadership, diplomacy and the mysteries of language.

Does it work? We may be pleasantly surprised by Beaver’s reference to the Buddha’s ‘light-hearted, humorous quality’, yet acknowledge how it not only brings the Teacher as a man into our minds, but also causes us to review the teachings. To notice in fact that they’re not just flat, prosaic statements; there’s a lot of poetry and wit in the texts. Elsewhere Beaver assesses the Buddha as ‘observant, wily, unpredictable, now humorous, now caustic ...’ To me, that figures him as a

Thai Forest master, or a Zen roshi: someone with whom one has to stay alert and hold all assumptions lightly. Surely that's on the mark.

On occasion, however, the character sketch veers precariously close to depicting its creator. In Chapter 1, when Ānanda ('the fall-guy') blithely comments that he understands the teaching on Dependent Co-Arising, Beaver's Buddha

'in exasperation, shook his head. He was simply not grasping the complexity of the doctrine, not penetrating it sufficiently. His mind was as muddled, the Buddha sighed, as "a snarled skein of yarn or a mildewed old bird's nest."'

The text (*Mahanidana Sutta*, D 15:1) merely has the Buddha refuting Ānanda with 'Don't say that, Ānanda, don't say that!' and adding that it is through not understanding this teaching that 'this generation [i.e. not just Ānanda] has become like a tangled ball of string, covered as with a blight ...' More on that simile later. But despite this direct interjection by the Buddha, would we necessarily conclude that he was 'exasperated'? Would he have shaken his head and sighed? Certainly some flesh and blood has been added to the words of the Buddha – but it looks to me like the Awakened One has here taken on the persona of a university lecturer dealing with one of his obtuse students.

Nevertheless, you can't go far in *The Broken Gong* before sensing Harold Beaver's great esteem for the Buddha and his teaching. In a letter to me, Harold writes:

‘it was of prime importance to me that the book should present an accurate and balanced account of the *Dhamma* while its portrait of the Buddha-as-teacher should nowhere detract from profound respect.’

And through offering us perspectives on the Buddha’s depth of thought and skill, *The Broken Gong* demonstrates these points time and time again. Since we’re never going to get an absolutely accurate portrait of the Buddha, Beaver has at least helped us to acknowledge the sheer strength of character of someone who not only survived 50 years of living on alms on the road in ancient India; who not only perfected meditation and insight in conditions that most of us would barely endure; who not only forged an Order out of a rag-tag fellowship of wanderers and at the same time parleyed with kings; but who also made teachings on liberation available to queens and matriarchs, farmers, thieves, and lepers, in a way that we can still make use of.

THE TRANSLATION

When we come to review Beaver’s translation of the suttas or *Vinaya*, particularly in the light of his aims to explore their lived-in background, it’s helpful to bear in mind that the texts themselves are not the exact words that the Buddha used. They are a standard rendition agreed upon by bhikkhus after the Buddha’s decease; their aim was to use consistently uniform phrases and formulas to encrypt the Dhamma for the sake of memorisation. So it was necessary for these texts to

sacrifice the *expression* in order to preserve an accurate oral transmission of the *meaning*. Their language, Pali, was concocted as a *lingua franca* out of the vernacular dialects of the age. It's as close as we're going to get to what the Buddha meant; Pali is concocted out of the dialects that he actually used. But as to *how he spoke* ... although he employed stock references (such as the Four Establishments of Mindfulness), it's unlikely that the Buddha gave lectures or formulaic sermons. As with the Forest masters, any teaching best reaches the listener through a spontaneous weave around the standard themes. It's difficult to believe that someone who used imagery and allegory in such an extensive way would have described each *jhāna* with the same set of words in each instance, or appended identical instructions on understanding the senses to each of the six senses, in effect saying the same thing six times over. When recited, this is useful; it drives the point into the memory. But what the listener's ear picks up, the reader's eye glosses over after the second iteration.

This is a problem that most translators skirt by replacing the repetitions with ellipses. Beaver, on the other hand, goes so far as to dismiss these renditions as 'too literal, or clumsy, or unrhythmical, or poetic, or archaic, or repetitive (a marked feature of the Pali original), or awkwardly syncopated; almost nothing reads with the assured clarity and intensity and fluidity which are their most marked, original features.'

His approach is to take his cue from the images the Buddha used, absorb their tone, context and wit, take

into account who he was addressing, then adjust the rest of the language, and the Buddha himself, to fit. Risky indeed, but invigorating.

There are pros and cons to doing this. It seems to me that Beaver sometimes goes too far, although in a stimulating way, when he builds characters out of his translations of the texts. But, on the other hand, his translations do bring the texts closer to the reader's experience. He keeps to the meaning of the words, but plays with them, or uses alternatives when he deems it necessary to give them pungency. As with that 'mildewed old bird's nest' above: Beaver has rescued 'gulāguṇhika-jāta' from Maurice Walshe's translation of 'covered as with a blight' – which Walshe himself acknowledges in the endnote can be rendered by the more graphic 'matted like a bird's nest'.

As another example, take the book's epigraph, verse 134 of the *Dhammapada*. A good standard translation – by Acharya Buddharakkhita (Buddhist Publication Society) – renders this as:

'If, like a broken gong, you silence yourself, you have approached Nibbāna, for vindictiveness is no more in you.'

The Broken Gong has:

'When, muffled as a broken gong,/ you don't reverberate,/ you've reached Nibbāna:/ recrimination's turmoil finally stilled in you.'

Whereas Buddharakkhita's 'silence yourself' can carry nuances of suppression and censorship, Beaver's 'don't reverberate' captures the awareness of the contemplative mind: we sense a mind that is receptive,

but doesn't react or proliferate into a monologue of discursive thoughts. Beaver's reading of the text places the image more directly in our sensed reality.

His rendition of *Saṃyutta Nikāya* I, 1:20 as:

'Those who live by names and concepts,/ Confident in names and concepts/ Discerning not the naming process,/ Are subject to the realm of Death.'

strikes me as more direct than Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi's:

'Beings who perceive what can be expressed/ Become established in what can be expressed./ Not fully understanding what can be expressed,/ They come under the yoke of Death.'

At another point in *The Broken Gong*, in the sutta translation in Chapter 10, there is a reference to the power of clairaudience. Walshe's translation has:

'Just as a man going on a long journey might hear the sound of a big drum, a small drum, a conch, cymbals or kettle-drum ...'

whereas with Beaver we actually *hear* those instruments:

'Your Majesty, it's just as if a traveller on a highway were to catch the boom of a kettledrum, or the throb of a tabor, or the wail of a conch-shell, or the rat-a-tat of a snare drum, or the clashing of cymbals.'

(D 2:90)

Another, even freer, rendition is in Chapter 3, where a passage from the *Brahmajāla Sutta* describing the quarrelling of the various 'ascetics and Brahmins' is cited (D 1:1.18). Walshe's translation is:

‘You said last what you should have said first, and you said first what you should have said last!’ ‘What you took so long to think up has been refuted!’ ‘Go on, save your doctrine – get out of that if you can!’

Beaver, surely bearing scenes of student debate in mind, has this as:

‘Your ideas are all screwed up. For all your homework – admit it! – I’ve got you scared. I’ve got you on the run. I’ve exposed your rotten arguments and refuted them till you’re utterly routed. Try wriggling out of that if you can.’

More colourful, less literal: what does this do for you? If you’re interested in experiencing the effects of language, I’d recommend placing *The Broken Gong* beside translations which offer a more standardized rendition of the texts; I think you will find the exercise illuminating and inspirational.

AUTHOR'S PREFACE

There have been numerous attempts at compiling a 'Life' of the Buddha.¹ Its tripart division was legendary: 1. the princely upbringing and marriage from which he absconded (at the age of twenty-nine); 2. six years of ascetic wandering until his Enlightenment (at the age of thirty-five); 3. followed by forty-five years spent establishing a monastic order from the Ganges to the foothills of the Himalayas until his death (at the age of eighty).² But this hardly helps trace his step-by-step spiritual development before Enlightenment or the multiplication and refinement of his insights during the long course of his career. Even the best of his biographers, Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli, had to superimpose an apparatus of idiosyncratic 'voices' and 'narrators', since the Pali Canon of suttas resolutely ignores chronology.

'Thus have I heard', their stock preliminary refrain, is invariably confirmed by locations in space – not time – while only rarely indicating what might (under other circumstances) be regarded as an independently verifiable event.³ Their canonic line-up, too, is wholly

dependent on mnemonic criteria of subject matter (*Saṃyutta Nikāya*), or of length (*Majjhima Nikāya*, *Dīgha Nikāya*), or of haphazard arithmetic (*Āṅguttara Nikāya*), while a numerology based on a steadily incremental sequence of dates – essential to our very notion of ‘biography’ – is absent.

If a ‘Life of the Buddha’, then, must seem an implausible enterprise, what of a character sketch? What of a literary portrait of the Buddha as teacher? What of a dramatic probe into the whole culture through which he moved and taught: his attitude to princes and peasants, nature and landscape, poetry and rhetoric, rival sectarians and fellow ascetics? It is just such an enquiry that this study attempts. Literary, because the Buddha remains unique among the great founders of the world’s religions in his sensitivity to the very stuff of the language by means of which moral and spiritual insights are inevitably taught.

This is not, therefore, a celebration of the Buddha’s teachings, nor intended as a layman’s guide to their fundamental practise. Something of their systematic procedures and metaphysical concerns will doubtless emerge, but its aim is neither homiletic nor exegetic. Nor was it conceived as a contribution to philosophical, or historical, or philological research (to which I am indebted), but rather to extend the scope of literary scholarship and humanist debate. To read these 2,500-year-old Buddhist documents as a task of literary interpretation and textual analysis seems never before to have been attempted.

Commentaries, translations, and pseudo-biographies of the Buddha abound, but nothing remotely akin to *The Art of Buddhist Narrative*, or *A Literary Guide to the Suttas*, or *The Suttas as Literature* (to adapt three titles by Robert Alter, Frank Kermode and Northrop Frye).⁴ Partly, of course, this is due to the dearth of story-telling, in any relevant sense at all. But there may well be ‘codes’; there may well be ‘art’; there are certainly similes and parables galore. The suttas may prove as far from naïve as Plato’s (near contemporary) adaptation of the Socratic dialogue.

Attention is chiefly focused on the following themes: the circumstances of their composition; their linguistic and grammatical self-awareness; their aesthetic and rhetorical strategies; their dialectical origins in philosophical debate; their concern with the function of art and the imagination; their literary tropes, especially of simile and allegory; their extensive mirroring of everyday life; their debt to other itinerant traditions (specifically those of actors and rhapsodes); their reliance on folk tales, above all those of animal lore; their irony and oral humour; their larger symbolic structure, incorporating the whole panorama of social existence; and the inscrutable problem of their transmission.

Put another way, this is not an enquiry into Buddhism relating to questions of meditation, or of mysticism, or of the cognitive sciences, or of consciousness, or of neurobiology, or of ethics, or of anthropology, or of the nature of reality (from Thales to Kant), or of physics

(from Einstein to Heisenberg and Max Planck), or of its influence on the West (from Schopenhauer to Emerson, Thoreau and T. S. Eliot). It is an entirely literary investigation, with all the attendant pitfalls that this implies. Yet as Kafka blithely concluded about a problematic reading of one of his own darkest parables: ‘Commentators say: “The correct interpretation of a certain subject and misunderstanding of the same subject do not wholly exclude each other.”’⁵

Quite other anxieties, though, may be stirred. ‘Either/Or’, some will maintain. ‘Stick *either* to literature *or* to religion.’ But don’t all propositions, all debates, all stories raise explanatory choices? It is not faith so much as the formulas used to inspire faith that call for interpretation. This whole enquiry pivots on Chapter 6, with its ever-widening focus on daily life in the Buddha’s India: the first five chapters exploring the more abstruse questions of language and art, including figures of speech; the final six chapters, the banter of dialect jokes, folklore and oral culture. In conclusion, two suttas (in unabridged translation) present the comeuppance of two Machiavellian rulers acutely conscious of the new sophistries sweeping the land, but eager to manipulate them for their own ends.

* * *

Step by relentless step, a royal usurper is exposed as rash, and fallible, and deluded even by his own worldly standards. The Dhamma itself never wavers. The Buddha always remains self-consistent. Though

naturally he adjusted his mode of address when challenged by peasants or village headmen, Jain rivals or Brahman priests. The discrepancy of tone – his chameleon-like shifts of behaviour – involved neither role-playing nor furtive manipulations of any kind. Like a good lawyer, rather, he was versatile in his approach, alert in the choice and presentation of his arguments from one debate to the next. His night-long vigil with an unscrupulous king (Chapter 10), or a disciple's patient humouring of a humourless prince (Chapter 11), pinpoints unique events. Collectively, the suttas comprise a vast repertoire of such impromptu 'turns'.

In a teasing simile the Buddha once compared a persistent questioner to a land-bird so disorientated when released at sea that it flew from horizon to horizon until, foiled, it circled back and back again over the ship's deck. As if on the featureless and ever-shifting ocean of life the Buddha were the one fixed point of salvation.⁶ That unerring swoop of the imagination typifies the man. 'Of course, in the case of the Buddha,' an abbot recently warned, 'statements about personality must be speculative; but a careful reading of the suttas, whose aim ... is to present the Dhamma, not the personality of the Master, reveals a man' of 'great wit ... a character that could be serene, warm and comforting, or ferocious. A leader, in fact ...'⁷

If the portrayal convinces, it can only be because it is *internally* self-consistent, not because it can be historically confirmed. Like Socrates, like Jesus, the

Buddha himself recorded nothing. So there's no escaping fiction. The Buddha of the suttas, like King Ajātasattu or Prince Pāyāsi, must ultimately be read as a character in fiction: observant, wily, unpredictable, now humorous, now caustic, unshakeably convinced of his own transcendent leap into some form of profound and permanent experience. Without further secondary sources, what other 'reading' could there be?

* * *

An implicit challenge is mounted here: that a literary approach to sacred texts outside the Judaeo-Christian tradition is feasible despite their overwhelming abundance, despite their wholesale repetitions, despite their complete lack of plot or narrative line. All religions are built on tropes: for Buddhists the key tropes being that of a *path*, or way, leading to the shock of *awakening*. Are Buddhist parables, then, symptomatic or emblematic of this awakening? In fact, are they parables at all? Or should they be read as allegories? Or, in Bultmann's terms, as *Bildwörter* (figurative sayings)? Or *Gleichnisse* (similes or metaphors)?⁸ One thing is certain, that it can be said of the Buddha as has been said of Jesus: 'If the parables are taken as a whole, their realism is remarkable', giving 'a more complete picture' of aristocratic, bourgeois and peasant life than we possess for any other archaic society.⁹

But, unlike Jesus, the Buddha was acutely conscious not only of the inherent drawbacks of a single dialect,

but the instability of *all* language – of communication in itself. Perhaps that's why he favoured allegories over parables, since allegories forge arbitrary connections between evanescent fragments of our experience while retaining a clear-eyed sense of their arbitrariness. By allowing for all kinds of peculiar resemblances, that is, they demonstrate that any set of singular relations may spring from a specific viewpoint.

Complementary ironies may at any time surface. It should come as no surprise, then, to learn that the Buddha was a stickler for verbal accuracy. Instability compelled close reading. Precision, in an ambivalent world, was crucial. He pulled his novices and monks up sharp for the slightest vagaries of slack phrasing in conversation or debate. The bhikkhu needed to master both the *ars intelligendi* and the *ars explicandi* (in medieval Latin terms) – both the art of understanding and the art of presentation.¹⁰ The Venerable Udena, in debate with a Brahman, put it succinctly:

'If you agree with any statement of mine, then concede it; if you think any statement arguable, contest it; and if you fail to grasp the meaning of any statement of mine, enquire further about it ... That way there can be conversation between us.'¹¹

Such cautions, it seems, were wholly formulaic; and the Buddha himself tried similar measures in a debate with a wealthy Jain.¹² But he was horrified when precautions were flouted. Every question should be analysed before being answered, he insisted; every

answer duly qualified.¹³ Similarly, every so-called ‘quotation’ from his teaching should first be tested: was it perhaps misunderstood and wrongly expressed?; or misunderstood, though correctly expressed?; or if wrongly expressed, correctly understood?; or both correctly understood and correctly expressed? For example, in the case of a solecism through misunderstanding:

‘Friend, if you mean “x”, you should express it either like this or like that. Which is more appropriate? But if you say “y”, you may mean either this or that. Which is more relevant?’¹⁴

The analytic and textual bias of this study, then, far from going against the grain of the Buddha’s teaching, turns out to be Buddhist *par excellence*. In fact, the Buddha must be numbered among the first to insist on just this kind of linguistic, logical, critical endeavour.

* * *

But the Buddha kept no appointment with time. His intense focus on language ignored (as we saw) the complexities of an accumulative, or narrative, time.¹⁵ Which automatically excluded any notion of a Messianic, or apocalyptic, fulfilment in time. Time, for the Buddha, was simply the stuff of the daily recurrent round, repeated in larger and larger cycles of lunar months and solar years, compounded at last into those perennial ages (of gold, or silver, or bronze, or iron) common to all Aryan peoples.¹⁶

The suttas, accordingly, could accommodate *both* utopian idylls – such as that Land of Cockaigne:

‘Whose menfolk live in happiness
Without possessions, without wives,
Without the need to scatter seed,
Without the need to draw a plough,
Where ripened crops themselves do reach
Into their hands to pick and eat ...’¹⁷

– outside time, *and* those fabled, mind-boggling revolutions, begun in some primordial age, under some ‘Ariyan wheel-turning monarch’,¹⁸ that systematically degenerate from poverty to theft, to murder, to lying, to slander, to adultery, to incest and homosexuality, with an ever-diminishing human lifespan: a dissolution which, in its turn, responds to an ever-present, ever-throbbing pulse – the systole and diastole, as it were, of our contracting and expanding universe.¹⁹

So what in *Genesis* is seen as a unique, inaugural event, is introduced by the *Aggañña Sutta* as merely one start among many:

‘At that time waters everywhere surged out of darkness – blinding darkness without distinction of stars or constellations, sun or moon, night or day, months or years, male or female even – until the sweet earth spread above the surge like the skin that forms and puckers on hot milk as it cools. And the colour of that skin resembled butter or fine ghee; and it tasted like pure wild honey.’²⁰

That same darkness, those same waters, of course, usher in the Torah:

‘And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep ... And God said, Let there be light ... and God divided the light from the darkness. And God called the light Day and the darkness he called Night ... And God said, Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters, and let it divide the waters from the waters ... and it was so. And God called the firmament Heaven ... And God said, Let the waters under the heaven be gathered together unto one place and let the dry land appear: and it was so. And God called the dry land Earth; and the gathering together of the waters called he Seas ...’²¹

But how differently each is dramatized! The Hebrew creation story rehearses an analytical sorting process which boldly specifies and systematizes phenomena under their common rubrics. Its creator-god is akin to a decisive surgeon, or shrewd geometer (like Blake’s ‘The Ancient of Days’), plunging down his screw-compass or dividers.²² His slicing incisions inaugurate time, wholly oblivious, as yet, of any presentiment of sin. The Buddha, on the other hand, applies a sensuous, everyday simile (‘hot milk as it cools’) – typical of his subtly mobile imagery (to be discussed in Chapter 4) – and that domestic metamorphosis quite clearly inaugurates time as a moral process:

‘Then one *deva* thought: “Hey! What can this be?” and dug in and licked a finger. The others seeing how he relished the taste, tried it too. And such a longing seized them that

they started breaking off whole chunks with their hands and stuffing them into their mouths until slowly their luminosity began to fade; and, as it faded, the sun and moon glimmered overhead. That's how, from that time on, they began distinguishing night from day, months from the year and its seasons.'

That gobbling greed (the Buddha's version of original sin) inevitably leads to sexual craving. Here it is not narrative time that inaugurates lust, but lust that reveals the wheeling processes of time. It is impetuous human choice that causes – almost conjures up – the phenomena of sun and moon, night and day. For the Buddha, it was always individual responsibility and individual action that were given absolute priority.

* * *

Despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary, though, the Buddha is still often maligned as a technically dry, flat-footed pedant. Most recently by Roberto Calasso:

'The Buddha rarely uses images – and when he does so they are very simple, to be cherished like talismans ... Often they alluded and referred back to Vedic images, to those times when everything that was said was imagery. But the allusion was not meant to be noticed ... [As] used by the Buddha; what stood out most in the image was this dryness, this draining away of every drop of sap ...'

Or again:

‘Outside the mind, he didn’t mention so much as a blade of grass. He rarely used similes, and when he did they were always the same, and almost always made do with poor materials. Sometimes he mentioned the lotus plant. Animals he mentioned were the elephant and the antelope.’²³

A list of similes running to more than 168 items, appended to a recent edition of the *Majjhima Nikāya* alone, is enough to show how exaggerated such observations are.²⁴ For a twenty-one-strong bestiary of spiritual archetypes, see Chapter 8. The whole impetus of this study is in tacit contradiction to such haphazard and sweeping aspersions.

* * *

‘What do you think about me?’

the Buddha once confronted his bhikkhus.

‘That the reclusive Gotama teaches Dhamma for the sake of his *robes*?’ **he teased**. ‘Or that he teaches Dhamma for the sake of his *alms-food*? Or that he teaches Dhamma for the sake of his *lodging*? Or that he teaches Dhamma for the sake of *merit* in expectation of higher things?’ ‘Venerable sir,’ **they answered**, ‘we think the Blessed One is compassionate; concerned for our welfare; that he teaches Dhamma out of compassion.’²⁵

It was a disarming reply. But what if we were asked the same question today? How would we reply? Unused to the sardonic tone, we might well fudge the issue. Especially since the Buddha's impact clearly stemmed as much from his personal charisma as from his physique.

Not that *The Broken Gong* is preoccupied with mere physique. Or mystique, for that matter. Yet in dealing as it does with less tangible 'marks of a Great Man' – his social versatility, his self-mocking sarcasm, his absorption in language, his burlesque allusions, his ironic detachment, the whole incalculable range of his intellectual and imaginative play – it too attempts to confront that brisk challenge: 'What do you think about me?'²⁶

Our answer will inevitably centre less on 'compassion' or 'mindfulness' than on the restoration of his Buddhahood to the whole culture from which it sprang, by tracking his dodging similes out of the shadows into sunlight, out of dreams into mirrors, out of footpaths into highways, out of orchards into villages, out of cesspits into mountain lakes – by restoring the Buddha himself to the Indian subcontinent through which he roamed, as universal teacher, more than 2,500 years ago.

1

THE LANGUAGE CONUNDRUM

‘Monks, this Dhamma so well proclaimed by me is plain, open, explicit, free of patchwork.’¹

It was the Buddha’s proudest boast that the Dhamma (conflating both our sense of ‘law’ and ‘teaching of the law’) formed a single, seamless fabric: ‘lovely in its beginning, lovely in its middle and lovely in its ending, both in spirit and in letter’.² Metaphors drawn from spinning and textile weaving were fundamental to such Buddhist terminology: a *sutta* is literally a ‘thread’ of an argument; *pāḷi* means simply a ‘text for recitation’. *Pāḷi bhāṣā*, in other words, is the ‘text language’ of all the original Buddhist scriptures, known to the commentators as Magadhan; for it was in the kingdom of Magadha that the Buddha spent most of the last twenty years of his life under the protection of King Bimbisāra. In the Theravāda tradition, Pali is solely reserved for the Buddha’s teachings; it appears in no other literature.

The woof and the warp of an argument, however, may also turn into a net. ‘Bear in mind,’ the Buddha explained to his cousin Ānanda, ‘that this exposition of the Dhamma is called *Atthajāla*, the Net of Essence, as well as *Dhammajāla*, the Net of the Dhamma, as well as *Brāhmajāla*, the Net of Perfect Wisdom, as well as *Diṭṭhijāla*, the Net of Views.’³ The mesh is exact, perfect and all-encompassing:

‘Monks, ponder this simile! When a skilled fisherman, or his apprentice, spreads out a fine net on the waters of a lake, he will infer: “Since all sizeable fish have been trapped, whether they rise or sink, they’ll do so within the net ...” In much the same way, *samaṇas* and *brāhmanas* ... despite their many conflicting views, differ in sixty-two ways, which all fall within the net of this discourse.’⁴

Likewise, Buddhist commentaries refer to ‘the Net of his Knowledge’, calling his eye ‘the Net of Great Compassion’.⁵

The Dhamma, then, is proclaimed as tenacious, consistent, all of a piece, devoid of the ragged texture of something stitched or cobbled together. Unlike the Bible, say, with its Old and New Testaments; or the Hebrew Bible with its patchwork of myths and chronicles, prophecies and psalms; unlike even the Torah (also denoting both ‘law’ and ‘instruction’) whose five books ascribed to Moses were translated into Greek as the Pentateuch.

* * *

But to insist on instruction devoid of all patchwork is to ignore the patchwork order of language itself. Therein lies the inherent paradox of Buddhism. When the Venerable Mahā Koṭṭhita once asked: ‘What is the deliverance of mind that is signless?’ the Venerable Sāriputta replied: ‘There, abstaining from all signs, a bhikkhu enters, and abides in, the signless concentration of mind’.⁶ He abides, that is, in *animitta-ceto-samādhī*, a dilution of self no longer dependent on any kind of semiotics or semantics. As the *Dhammapada* puts it: ‘Those who never accumulate ... range across the signless void of perfect freedom; their course indeed is hard to trace as that of birds through space.’⁷

For language consists of a mesh of signs as opposed to nibbāna, which is ‘signless’. Whatever symbols or shapes (*nimitta*) may appear in meditation, they neither should, nor can, be conceptualized; for nibbāna is, by definition, *animitta-cetovimutti*, a ‘signless deliverance of mind’. So ‘this Dhamma so well proclaimed’, by concepts and signs, paradoxically has as its aim a self-cancelling sign, a ‘signless’ sign, beyond the reach of signs, which must by definition be declared ‘Undeclared’.⁸

* * *

K’ung Fu-tse, the Buddha’s contemporary, faced no such problem.* Confucius, as we call him, envisaged men as essentially social creatures.

* Current scholarship suggests that K’ung Fu-tse preceded the Buddha by about a century. (Ed.)

‘If the terms are incorrect,’ he reprimanded his most impetuous student,

‘language is without an object. When language is without an object, no business can be executed. When no business can be executed, rites and music do not flourish. When rites and music do not flourish, punishments and penalties become arbitrary. When punishments and penalties become arbitrary, the people do not know where they stand. Therefore, whatever a wise man conceives, he must always be able to say; and whatever he says, he must be able to put into practice. In the matter of language, a wise man leaves nothing to chance.’⁹

But for the Buddha there was no such validating link between proper language and proper action, society and life. A fugitive correlation at best. Language, rather, was a distorting medium whose formal stability misleads us into assuming a corresponding fixity in the ever-mobile phenomena to which it refers. Such mutual mirroring, however, is delusive; the relationship, mismatched. Those formal elements of language (phonemes) and their structure (syntax) consist of a relatively stable and iterative system of signs, whereas the phenomenal world of temporal process is in unceasing flux where no passing moment – nothing – can be repeated.

As Henri Bergson, millennia later, was to reassert: the role of language is an inevitable evil because it enacts an illusory power of arrest over the temporal process by projecting a concept of fixity on to life.

* * *

It was this mismatch, this misfit, that the Buddha repeatedly probed and tested. Had not his own Awakening, his Buddhahood, been ‘well proclaimed’? Yet all verbal signs were suspect. All signs might need to be neutralized or cancelled. As for those in commonest use, those on everyone’s lips, they might even have to be multiplied into a variety of more specific designations. That is, before cancelling an inherently empty sign, such as the ‘self’, it might prove necessary, for argument’s sake, to subdivide the term into: 1. the coarse (physical) self; 2. the mind-constituted self (in meditation); and 3. the formless self (created by consciousness). Though all three cannot be conceived simultaneously. One mode, at any one time, necessarily excludes the others: the coarse debarring the mental, the mental debarring the formless.¹⁰ Not that the Buddha was in any way intent on exorcising, or revolutionizing, common usage:

‘That monk might still use words like “I”,
Perchance might say, “They call this mine.”
Aware of common worldly terms,
He’d speak conforming to such use.’¹¹

The question, rather, was how to screen the haphazard flood of impressions (visual, aural, nasal, tactile); how best to employ the adventitious resources of language that dissect or analyse the flux of phenomena. ‘Who in the rainbow can draw the line’, asked Melville, ‘where the violet tint ends and the orange tint begins? Distinctly we see the difference of the colors, but where exactly does the one first

blendingly enter into the other?’¹² The Buddha turned his discriminating eye on the dairy. At what stage, he asked, is fresh milk no longer milk but curd? Or curd no longer curd but cream? Or cream no longer cream but butter? Or butter no longer butter but clarified butter, or ghee, or cream of ghee?

‘From the cow we get fresh milk, Citta; from the milk, curds; from the curds, cream; from the cream, butter; from the butter, ghee; and from the ghee, cream of ghee. And while it is fresh milk, we don’t speak of curds, or cream, or butter, or ghee, or cream of ghee; we just call it milk. And when it has become curds, we don’t speak of milk, or cream, or butter, or ghee, or cream of ghee; we just call it curds. And when it has become cream, we don’t speak of milk, or curds, or butter, or ghee, or cream of ghee; we just call it cream. And so too with butter, and ghee, and cream of ghee. Exactly the same goes for the coarse, physical self; whenever the physical self is assertive, we don’t consider the mind-made or the formless one; whenever the mind-made self is active, we don’t consider the coarse or the formless one; whenever the formless one is all-pervasive, we don’t consider the physical or the mental one.’¹³

For everything is labile, the world as well as the language that encodes it. Three lessons are implicit here: first, the analogy from milk evokes a constant state of transformation; second, linguistic differentiation can intervene to classify this flux only at significant (sign-intensive) moments; third, these verbal designations themselves must be viewed, in Derrida’s phrase, *sous rature*, under continual erasure.

Ultimately, they must be regarded as under permanent erasure, since, overindulged, they will suggest coherent, consistent or ideal entities by an excessive reliance on language. So even linguistic classification must in the end be relinquished. Signs are either empty or should repeatedly be emptied, displaced, uprooted. In a slippery world, language itself cannot claim an innocently fixed status.

‘For, Citta,’ the Buddha concludes,

‘these are merely names, expressions, turns of speech, designations in common use in the world, which the Tathāgata uses without misapprehension; uses to conform to common prejudice without clinging to them.’

In the most complex of his expositions, the Buddha elucidated ‘the fundamental modes of all phenomena’, enumerating twenty-four concepts, beginning with ‘earth’, ‘fire’, ‘air’, and moving through the realm of *devas* to reach the realms of infinite space, of infinite consciousness, and ultimately *nibbāna*.¹⁴ The average, typically uninstructed person, he argued, can grasp the concept ‘earth’, say, by imagining ‘earth as such’ (the signified), or ‘on the earth’, or ‘in the earth’, or ‘apart from the earth’ (prepositional usages), or ‘earth as mine’ (possessive usage); but by running the *word* through various grammatical inflections, he inevitably confuses such inflections with phenomenology as if there existed a Grammar of Nature, or Natural Syntax. The Arahant, the perfected monk, to the contrary, does not ‘imagine earth as such’; he is not misled by grammatical forms; he does not reify concepts:

‘Those who live by names and concepts,
 Confident in names and concepts,
 Discerning not the naming process,
 Are subject to the realm of Death.
 Who labels not, holds no conceits,
 Has cut off lust for name-and-form.’¹⁵

* * *

To the perils of the imagination I return later. Here it is enough to indicate how the Buddha – unlike any rival religious leader of his own or later time – was ‘anxious to avoid disputes which are purely verbal in character and the confusions which arise when we transgress the limits of linguistic convention.’¹⁶

Rule One: avoid the multiplication of terms, especially of terms derived from some local or regional dialect. That is, ‘Don’t cling to vernacular usage or override convention’:¹⁷

‘And how does one cling to vernacular usage and override convention? By dogmatically maintaining, for example, that a certain object called a “dish” [*pāti*] in one part of the country, or a “bowl” [*patta*] in another, or a “vessel” [*vittha*] in another, or again a “saucer” [*serāva*], or a “pan” [*dhāropa*], or a “pot” [*poṇa*], or a “cup” [*hana*], or a “basin” [*pisīla*] in yet another, must invariably be called either a “dish”, or a “bowl”, or a “vessel”, or a “saucer”, or a “pan”, or a “pot”, or a “cup”, or a “basin” in each and every locality, insisting “This alone is the proper usage; all the rest are mistaken.” That would be an extreme case of local prejudice.’

Avoid value-laden, normative judgements, that is; only descriptive formulas are acceptable:

‘But if one varies the terminology as one travels through different regions, continually bearing in mind how these terms are variously applied to the same household object, then all partisan bias would be avoided.’

For matters of nomenclature should never be prescriptive. A dispute about whether to call a particular bowl a ‘basin’, or a ‘pan’, or a ‘dish’ is just a verbal convention, relating to various paradigms of linguistic usage, not to close observations. It is the event, not the description of an event, which must always remain paramount.

In non-Buddhist traditions, language itself was regarded as an intrinsic and infallible sign of divine dispensation as if Brāhma or Jahweh, say, had endowed each created object with its own unique awareness (*ñāṇa*), form (*rūpa*) and function (*karma*). But for the Buddha language is a human construction; and a mark of its human origin is precisely the arbitrariness of its signs, which are capable of endless temporal shifts and geographical variation. This accounts for their range, and their capacity for continual modification and eventual obsolescence. As well as their limitations and puzzling ambiguities. For it is the implicit nature of language, not merely its regional variety, which is prone to mislead.

So Rule Two: watch your language, keep it taut and clear, avoiding as far as possible ambiguities liable to

nonsensical or bogus metaphysical implications. Always bear in mind the distinction between a meaningful statement (*sappāṭihīrakataṃ bhāsitaṃ sampajjati*), which is apposite, well-reasoned and comprehensible, and a meaningless statement (*appāṭihīrakataṃ bhāsitaṃ sampajjati*), which is inapposite, ill-reasoned and incomprehensible. The following dialogue offers an amusing example:

THE BUDDHA: ‘If this fire in front of you were to blow out, Vaccha, what would you say? Would you say to yourself, “Oh, the fire’s blown out!”?’

VACCHA: ‘No doubt I would, venerable sir. Once I’d realized the fire had blown out.’

THE BUDDHA: ‘Now if someone were to ask you, “In what direction has it blown? Has the fire blown to the East, or to the West, or to the North, or to the South?” How would you reply?’

VACCHA: ‘I would reply, “That’s not an appropriate question,” good Gotama. In fact, it’s a silly question. The fire blew out, as we say, because it had burned through all the sticks and grass. I should have fed it more fuel. It was a lack of fuel that extinguished the fire.’¹⁸

While it makes sense to wonder, ‘Which way did the dog run?’ or ‘Where did the leaf blow?’ or even ‘In which direction did the fire spread?’ it is nonsensical to ask, ‘In which direction did the fire disappear?’ Such questions are easily enough put, as if soliciting an either/or reply. But it is in the nature of fire to be extinguished; and extinction differs from movement. Where categories are violated, a grammatically correct

form does not necessarily admit a correct reply. The Buddha was setting Vaccha a trap: a ‘two-horned question’ as it was known in his time, what we might call a rhetorical double-bind.¹⁹ There are dilemmas that simply cannot be answered on the verbal basis presented. They offer mutually conflicting claims. When posed such a question himself, the Buddha ducked: ‘There is no outright answer to that, Prince,’ he replied.²⁰

For answer as you will, you’re mired in nonsense, as Lewis Carroll, the master of such nonsensical traps, well knew. At the very opening of *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, when shrunk to some ten inches high, Alice introduces a conundrum on much the same lines:

‘First, however, she waited for a few minutes to see if she was going to shrink any further: she felt a little nervous about this; “for it might end, you know,” said Alice to herself, “in my going out altogether, like a candle. I wonder what I should be like then?” And she tried to fancy what the flame of a candle looks like after the candle is blown out, for she could not remember ever having seen such a thing.’²¹

This was later developed by Wittgenstein, when engaged in the self-same battle on the Buddha’s side. ‘Thus it can come about,’ he wrote, ‘that we aren’t able to rid ourselves of the implications of our symbolism, which seems to admit of a question like “Where does the flame of a candle go to when it’s blown out?” “Where does the light go to?” We have become obsessed

with our symbolism. We may say that we are led into puzzlement by an analogy which irresistibly drags us on.’²² For a meaningless question can only elicit a perverse choice of meaningless answers. Nonsense is built into the very fluidity and enticement of linguistic usage.

So avoid nonsense! But further avoid metaphysical absurdities. Long before the pronouncement of Occam’s razor, the Buddha warned against the frantic multiplication of assumed entities. Take again the case of fresh milk which changes, stage by stage, into curd, cream, butter and ghee. Each stage of this process should only be called by the name appropriate to it; conventional speech norms should never be overstepped; that is, curds should always be called ‘curds’ and not be confused with the names ‘milk’ or ‘butter’. For should such confusion flourish, it might further be assumed that each of these names signifies an entity within the changing process; that ‘milk’ or ‘butter’ is in some mysterious way present as an entity in ‘curds’, as if each term denotes a substance ‘X’ which persists without being perceived.

This is an essential step of the Buddha’s argument. For on this very milk analogy depends his discussion of the self: the so-called physical self, the mental self and the formless self (to use their ‘worldly names’). Just as there is no permanent, metaphysical substratum ‘X’ in milk or butter, the Buddha argues, so there is no permanent, metaphysical entity corresponding to the word ‘self’, or *attā*, within our person or body. The very

concept of 'Being' becomes plausible only by a violation of 'linguistic conventions'.²³ If 'Being' is identical with 'what exists', then only the specious present has 'Being', since both the past and the future do not exist at the present moment. So when we talk of the concept of 'Being' without time-coordinates, we violate norms by implying that the past as well as the future 'exist' in the sense that the present can be said to exist. The Buddha's marked preference is for the term '*bhava*', the process of becoming.

To sum up: avoid all ambiguity as far as possible. One way, throughout the *Nikayās*, of achieving this goal was to specify groups of words which were, or were not, synonymous. Vernacular synonyms abounded, as already observed, for such everyday articles as cups and bowls. But the problem went deeper. When asked, 'Do different words necessarily have different meanings, or may they share the same meanings despite their verbal differences?' Sāriputta replied: 'There is a way in which the meanings are different as well as the words and a way in which the meanings are the same, the words alone being different.'²⁴ That is, in some cases substitutions can be made; in others, they cannot. They can be made, possibly, when two terms share a common root. For it was a contemporary truism that similar meanings derived from a shared, or similar, etymology; dissimilar meanings from a disparate, or dissimilar, etymology.²⁵ That is perhaps why the Buddha brazenly distorted the etymology of widespread terms when he wished to reinvent them in some new way, explicating

brāhmaṇa, or Brahman, for example, as derived from *bāhitapāpo ti brāhmaṇo* ('because he has cast out evil'), and *rūpa*, 'form' or 'body', from *ruppatī ti tasmā rūpan ti vuccati, kena ruppati? sītena, uñhena* ('that by which one is afflicted; afflicted with what? With heat, cold, etc.').²⁶ All of which now seems a wholly implausible exercise. What the Buddha nowhere discussed, however, was a third group of words: similar-sounding but with dissimilar meanings, to which he himself was partial. This could be because he felt that homonyms, or puns, stand at a potential crossroads of meaning and so, far from vague or evasive, prompt and sharpen our awareness of divergence, their sudden metamorphoses teasing us into a puzzled reminder of the flux of language. To Buddhist fun with puns I shall return later.

* * *

The Buddha had a relentlessly analytical cast of mind. Yet nowhere did he attempt to control, or suppress, what we might call the 'play' of signifiers. He acknowledged that play, rather, while alerting his various interlocutors to the pitfalls of semiological slippage and indeterminacy. For forty-five years he continued to proclaim the Dhamma as plainly as he could by verbal means; in self-imposed exile from an order empty of determinate meaning, without need of interpretation, forever mocking man's limited efforts at signification. As Chuang-tzu, his Chinese close contemporary, exclaimed:

‘The purpose of words is to convey ideas;
 When the ideas are grasped, the words are forgotten.
 Where can I find a man who has forgotten words?
 He is the man I would like to talk to.’²⁷

It is a lesson that Ralph Waldo Emerson marvellously translated to a New England context. ‘For all symbols are fluxional,’ he taught; ‘all language is vehicular and transitive, and is good, as ferries and horses are, for conveyance, not as farms and houses are, for homestead.’²⁸ All life is a lesson in *paṭinissagga*, or letting go. That means our most intimate relations and possessions and attainments, including language. Even the Dhamma itself in the end. ‘I shall show you, monks,’ the Buddha began in what is perhaps his most powerful parable, ‘how the Dhamma resembles a raft – designed for a particular, practical purpose, not for retention as an unwieldy keepsake.’²⁹ Build a raft by all means and use it to cross, or descend, a river. But once that aim is achieved, your journey accomplished, dump it. Dump the raft, or the ferry, or the horse; dump language, dump the Dhamma. Don’t go carting them around on your back forever. Don’t make a homestead, or a museum, or an encyclopedia of your life – all ‘impractical keepsakes’ that will only hold you back, tie you down and finally paralyse you.

* * *

Such comparisons came readily to the Buddha. For all his analytical drive, he thought in images; or perhaps

he merely taught in them. They occurred constantly and instinctively to his mind. 'Just as the great ocean has only one taste,' he proclaimed, 'the taste of salt, so has this teaching only one taste, the taste of freedom.'³⁰ Not only did the Dhamma form a single seamless fabric but (to switch metaphors) it was permeated by a single pervading savour. His repertoire of oceans and streams, bees and flowers, ox-carts and chariots, was drawn from the vivid, communal, everyday world of Indian experience. Mainly he sought natural or social analogies for his spiritual insights, but as deftly he could transform a worldly scene by a spiritual interpretation. The traffic was in a constant two-way motion: from spiritual to natural, or social to spiritual, as in his answer to Ānanda's request for a description of a 'divine chariot' according to the Dhamma.

The occasion was this: a Brahman arrayed from top to toe in white, wearing white sandals and 'even being fanned with a white fan', had just driven a white chariot, drawn by four white mares in white harnesses, out of the gates of Sāvattthī. 'How simply divine!' onlookers exclaimed. 'What a simply divine chariot!' At which point Ānanda turned to his cousin, the Buddha, and asked: 'Can such a "divine chariot" be found anywhere in the Dhamma?' The words 'divine chariot' suggest that he may have been thinking of a temple-car, or *rath*, such as the famous juggernaut of the Jaggannath temple at Puri in Orissa. Most Hindu temples still have their wooden *raths*, and their image in sculptured stone is one of the earliest surviving motifs

of Indian architecture. What Ānanda naïvely asked, in effect, was: at what *rath* can a Buddhist point to match a Hindu juggernaut? ‘He can, Ānanda,’ the Buddha replied, ‘he can. The “divine chariot” is a name for the Noble Eightfold Path; also called “car” of the Dhamma for achieving “peerless victory in battle”.’³¹

Just such a ‘peerless victory’ was the culmination of his own Enlightenment. In his very first utterance as a Buddha, he metamorphosed himself into a house complete with rafters and ridge-beam:

‘Builder, you’ve been seen! You shall never build a house again!

All your rafters are broken! The ridge-pole shattered!

My mind is gone to nibbāna. This is the end of craving.’³²

In that startling cry, the exposure of the builder-carpenter (*taṇhā*, or craving) literally guts his physical and conceptual privacy. It is the deconstruction of that roofed dwelling which is the Buddha’s first triumphant proclamation. Enlightenment, in other words, is metaphoric demolition. Whatever is constructed in imagery and language must simultaneously be deconstructed: an interminable two-way traffic without semantic resolution.

Such construction and deconstruction, he repeatedly warned, was no simple matter. On a different occasion Ānanda (who was of the warrior caste) told the Buddha (another Khattiya) how amazed he had been by a certain archer’s feats; and again worldly enthusiasm was immediately diverted to spiritual use. Shooting

an arrow, the Buddha warned, that pierces a hair already ‘split seven times’ was as nothing compared to understanding and penetrating the *ariyasacca* (Four Noble Truths). In other words, if hitting a bull’s-eye on this scale of microscopic precision was inconceivable, it was still less taxing than the attainment of wisdom (*paññā*). And a *verbal* bull’s-eye, on that scale, must be out of the question. Whatever the text of the Dhamma’s proclamation, language in its rough equivocations and approximations must ultimately falter and prove inadequate.

* * *

Clear-eyed and rigorously analytical himself, the Buddha constantly goaded his disciples into a like rigour; and as often as not, Ānanda played the role of fall-guy. One day when he announced in his cheerful way that the doctrine of *Paṭicca-Samuppāda* (usually translated as ‘Conditioned Genesis’ or ‘Dependent Origination’), though profound, struck him as ‘perfectly clear’ – and with what ease he had fathomed it – the Buddha, in exasperation, shook his head. Ānanda was simply not grasping the complexity of the doctrine, not *penetrating* it sufficiently. His mind was as muddled, the Buddha sighed, as ‘a snarled skein of yarn’ or a mildewed old bird’s nest.³³ Not just Ānanda’s, of course; such knotted, blighted tangles proliferated everywhere! The Buddha’s task must be understood as

one of disentangling this matted mess, deftly picking out thread from thread, unravelling, then rewinding, unbraiding and rebraiding logical patterns through the eighteen distinct stages, for example, which condition death, grief, pain and despair.

He made huge demands. Above all, the Buddha required a lucid mind controlled with logical, high-speed precision. In meditation, it was not enough merely to reflect upon the body; it had to be examined bit by bit: head-hairs, body-hairs, nails, teeth, skin, flesh, sinews, bones, marrow, kidneys, heart ... through a long list of thirty-two items: 'Just as if, bhikkhus, there were a bag with a hole at each end, full of various kinds of grain such as hill-paddy, red paddy, beans, cow-peas, millet and white husked rice ...'³⁴ What would a farmer or merchant with sound eyes do with such a bag? Carefully open it, of course; examine it; reflect on the content, sorting hill-paddy from red paddy, husked rice from millet, etc.

It was this sorting process, this parcelling by analytical division and subdivision, on which the Buddha always insisted; and physical accountancy, by vivisection, was only one means. There was also the more abstract operation of deconstructing the body into its fields of solid extension (or earthly element), of fluid cohesion (or watery element), of thermal energy (or fiery element), and of mobile impetus (or airy element). Under this very different mode of scrutiny, the body itself would vanish. For it would no longer be

the body that was in question, only the four primary elements (*dhātu*) which composed it. No matter where placed. No matter in what position. No matter what bits were mutilated or missing, only these four *dhātu* were now of concern; and in this kind of analysis, the Buddha asserted, the act of intellectual surgery, as it were, ultimately displaced the original: 'Just as if, bhikkhus, a skilful butcher, or his apprentice, having slaughtered a cow and hacked it into pieces, should squat at a major crossroads,' with only the various joints on display, no longer the carcass as a whole; 'so the bhikkhu examines and reflects on his own body'.³⁵

Such displacement was at once practical and linguistic, as R. G. Collingwood implied with an identical simile:

'A grammarian is not a kind of scientist studying the actual structure of language; he is a kind of butcher, converting it from organic tissue into marketable and edible joints. Language as it lives and grows no more consists of verbs, nouns, and so forth than animals as they live and grow consist of forehands, gammons, rump-steaks, and other joints.'³⁶

For the Buddha, too, this constituted not only a point of grammar, but that of any analysis conducting piecemeal dissection.

* * *

Language was the central crux. *Nāmaṃ sabbam addhabhavi*: ‘Name has soiled everything,’ declared the Buddha.^{37*} We must simply persevere in the effort of employing formulas to unmask the inherent instability of all formulas. Even the ‘body’, or ‘coarse (physical) self’, needs a constant, beady-eyed scrutiny; which even then is not transparently manifest, but only to be grasped by parables of trick bags punctured at either end or butchers at the crossroads. It is our job to use language as concisely and unpretentiously as possible. But a Dhamma wholly ‘free of patchwork’ – and paradoxically ‘signless’ – may be encountered only in the awareness and the self-scrutiny of meditation. Such means, the Buddha insisted, lie ever ready to hand. They lie mysteriously dormant, like lotus-seeds under mud, within ourselves: ‘Friends, I do proclaim that in this very fathom-long body, with its perceptions and consciousness, lies the world: the world’s arising, the world’s cessation and the path leading to the world’s cessation.’³⁸

Whatever ambush of corporal suffering and death may await us, in this ‘fathom-long body’ too lurks the ‘intuitive wisdom’ enacted in the Parable of the Watersnake for silently mastering the Dhamma and testing it:³⁹

* Here, the more accurate translation by Bhikkhu Bodhi has ‘weighed down’ rather than ‘soiled’. (Ed.)

‘Only to that extent, Ānanda, may one be born, or grow old, or die, or pass from one state to another to be reborn, as any pathway survives for verbal expression; any pathway for terminology; any pathway for designations, and spheres of knowledge, and denotations for the conditions of existence.’⁴⁰

The verbal nihilism is unflinching. *Radix malorum est loquacitas*. Conceptualizing and naming, with their attendant grammatical structures, must by whatever conceivable tactic be uncoupled and destabilized:

‘What is it that soils everything?
What is it that nought else excels?
What is that single thing to which
Everything else diverts its course?
It’s *name* that has soiled everything;
Nought else exists that excels *name*;
Name – simply *name* – is that one thing
Towards whose sway all else inclines.’⁴¹

Even *viññāṇa* – that is, the worldly consciousness ineradicably linked to *nāma-rūpa*^{*} – is illusion and must make way for the unsullied and unqualified (*anidassana*): the ecstatic, radiant wisdom of the Arahant.⁴² The collapse is mutual, as of a lean-to or stook of sheaves:

‘Just as if, friend, two bundles of reeds were stacked to support each other, even so worldly consciousness is

* *Nāma-rūpa*, meaning literally ‘name and form’, represents both the immediate presence of an object, *rūpa*, in one of the six sense-fields, and the way that that object is perceived, or conceptually designated. (Ed.)

dependent on name-and-form, and name-and-form is dependent on worldly consciousness ... But, friend, if one of those two bundles of reeds were to be pulled away, the other would fall down; or if the latter were pulled away, the former would fall down. Even so, friend, with the cessation of name-and-form, worldly consciousness ceases; with the cessation of worldly consciousness, name-and-form ceases; with the cessation of name-and-form, the six sense spheres cease ... Thus comes about the cessation of this entire mass of suffering.⁴³

For the crux of language, in the last resort, is solely a linguistic crunch. The ‘attempt to dislodge concepts at the purely intellectual level’ must inevitably lead ‘to infinite regress in thought.’⁴⁴ The Buddha, unlike Jacques Derrida, is not intent on leading us from aporia to aporia, or from cul-de-sac to cul-de-sac. Such indecipherable, circular mazes, he insists, are dictated by our own inexorable, egotistical cravings.

* * *

POSTSCRIPT: Some nine centuries later Buddhaghosa, in his commentary on the suttas, quoted this verse:⁴⁵

‘Two truths the Buddha (best of all who speak) declared:
Conventional and ultimate; no third can be.
Conventional signs are validated by their use.
Language of ultimate significance is true.
In terms of *dharmas*; thus the Lord, a Teacher who
Is skilled in this world’s speech, can use it and not lie.’⁴⁶

The source is unknown; but clearly Buddhaghosa approved the distinction, traditional by his time, between conventional speech acts and the Buddha's own infallible speech. Yes, conventional speech, as the Buddha had taught, was capable of nonsensical statements in reply to nonsensical questions and of relatively – at times grossly – misleading statements. But the Buddha himself, it was agreed, transcended such worldly speech; and the whole later exposition of his teaching was in terms of his absolute truths such as those of impersonality and impermanence (*anattā* and *anicca*).⁴⁷

But what is it that validates such an 'absolute' or 'ultimate' language? Can it be anything other than linguistic convention? The Buddha nowhere claimed a special status for a specialist vocabulary by experts; and, in any case, such a specialist vocabulary would still be validated by the usage of such experts. Transcendence (*lokuttara*) beyond worldly conditions must also logically be beyond worldly signs, only to be negatively denoted as 'unborn', 'unmade', 'uncompounded', etc. For the Buddha there neither was, nor could be, an absolute language; such a self-validating system of meaning in fact goes slap against the grain of the suttas. All views (*diṭṭhi*), all concepts (*papañca*), all imaginings (*maññanā*), all idioms must ultimately self-destruct. That is surely why *mona* (silence) is pervasively and punningly associated with the *muni* (emancipated sage). 'The *muni*', it has been well said, 'is silent not only when he does not speak; he is silent even when he does speak.'⁴⁸ For nothing is grasped or rejected by

him; he has shaken off every philosophical concept, every idiom, every term. Which may also help explain the Buddha's own ironic poise: 'Monks, I do not dispute with the world; it is the world that disputes with me.'⁴⁹

The ultimate paradox of Buddhism, then, is its need to employ language to counter language, to marshal ideas to deny the validity of ideas, to exercise thought to deconstruct thought (whose end-point is the abrupt and riddling kōan of Rinzai Zen). All views (*diṭṭhi*), even the Right View (*sammā-diṭṭhi*) of the Eightfold Path to liberation, are conceptual traps and must ultimately be discarded. 'Where consciousness is signless (*anidassanam*) ... there 'name-and-form' is wholly destroyed.'⁵⁰ That is the message of the Parable of the Relays as well as of the Parable of the Raft: whatever is useful at one stage, be prepared to jettison at the next. Impermanence prevails in the end even over the formulations of the Dhamma.⁵¹

2

A DIALECTICAL FREE-FOR-ALL

Buddhism has always been hospitable to the fine arts. The Buddha himself had marked poetic talent and out of his selected sayings, which form the *Dhammapada*, a vivid picture emerges of northern India some 2,500 years ago: of forests and streams, great boulders and lakes, with maybe a cowherd in the foreground by a poorly thatched cottage whose water-jars flank the door. In the forest, creepers are twining; monkeys bounding. In mid-stream, a ferryman leans against the current. Through the villages ox-carts trundle on their spoked wheels. Inside a hovel, someone is stirring bean-soup or lentils with a spoon. In the distant city, a silversmith is hammering; a chariot is being gilded; while the court is watching painted puppets dance on jointed limbs. Everywhere, as in a tapestry, bees are buzzing about sandalwood and rosebay, lotus and jasmine. That was the Buddha's world. Like Jesus in his parables, he reflected it in all he said.

This imaginative density, with its ceaseless production of analogies from everyday life, was only one, possibly even a minor, aspect of the Buddha's mind whose most salient characteristic was a logical, analytic, rigorously systematic mode of thought with a penchant for mathematical groupings, listings, taxonomies and generic accountancies of all kinds. The Buddha was known as the *Vibhajjavādi*, 'one whose way is analysis'; and the honorific *Bhagavā*, usually translated as 'Exalted One', may well derive from the root *bhaj*, meaning 'to analyse or elaborate'. The title would then refer to the fact that during the forty-five years of his teaching, he undertook selflessly to analyse and elaborate the Dhamma. As he solemnly reiterated to a young Brahman student: 'I am one who answers after analysing. I do not answer one-sidedly.'¹

Certainly he was a master of analytical exposition, compression and persuasion; a Sherlock Holmes of cause and effect; a psychological pioneer dissecting the constituencies of the mind: in short, more of a pragmatic Aristotelean than a Platonic thinker. Yet, without the myth-making propensities of Plato, there is a Platonic poetic side. Nor was he alone in using imaginative devices. His disciples (Khemaka, for example, or Sāriputta) too could deploy parables in testing situations. Though as we now read them, with their set repetitions and verbal recycling, they may well be marred by the formulaic nature of much of the expository text. To the Buddha as poet I shall return. Here, rather, I shall focus on the Buddha's

Socratic affinities: his teasing, quasi-forensic skill at cross-questioning in philosophical debate. Take this interrogation, from his sermon in the Deer Park at Isipatāna (Sārnath), near Vārāṇasī (Benares), of the original group of five ascetics:

‘How do you conceive this, bhikkhus, is material form permanent or impermanent?’

‘Impermanent, Lord.’

‘Now what is impermanent, is that pleasant or unpleasant?’

‘Unpleasant, Lord.’

‘But is it fitting to regard what is impermanent, unpleasant and subject to change as: “This is mine, this is what I am, this is my self”?’

‘No, certainly not, Lord.’ Etc.²

Or take this more impromptu exchange with a distraught picnic party in a wood somewhere between Vārāṇasī and Gayā. The Buddha was resting at the foot of a tree, when young men burst in on him:

‘Lord, have you seen a woman about?’

‘What’s all this about a woman, young men?’

‘Thirty of us, Lord, came out here with our wives. But one chap being unmarried, a prostitute was brought along; and she’s run off with all our stuff while we were having a game ...’

‘Which do you think is better, young men: to track down a woman? Or to track down yourselves?’

One can imagine the double take, the astonished pause:

‘Come to that, to track down ourselves, Lord, to explore ourselves.’

‘Well then, young men, sit down and I will teach you Dhamma ...’³

He was always adept at turning his immediate environment into a vast symbolic playground: as at Vesālī, when he took up a little dust on the tip of his fingernail and asked the monks, ‘Bhikkhus, which is greater, this speck of dust or this mighty earth?’;⁴ or at Kosambi, ‘gathering up a handful’ of fallen leaves;⁵ or at Rājagaha, after the seven-year-old Rāhula had washed his feet.⁶ The simplest household gesture evoked a spiritual dimension. His questions, like those of Socrates, often seem naïvely – even childishly – transparent, as if they were a simpleton’s notions to be humoured by some patently obvious response.

* * *

It was a learned age, much given to sophistry and unscrupulous sabotage in debate among all classes of men: warriors, Brahmans, householders, monks. They were clever and knew each other’s theories as a hair-splitting marksman knows archery. Once it got around that the monk Gotama was about to visit such and such a town or village, they’d conspire on a common questionnaire in advance: ‘If he is asked like this, he will answer like that, and so we shall refute his theory; but if he is asked like that, he will answer

like this, and again we shall refute his theory.’⁷ Or his rivals might plan to pose a ‘two-horned question’, even feeding a princely stooge some subtle formula to trap the Buddha. One such question, proposed by Nigaṇṭha Nātaputta, ran: ‘Venerable sir, would a Tathāgata utter such a speech as would be unwelcome and disagreeable to others?’ ‘When the monk Gotama is posed this two-horned question by you, Prince,’ gloated the Jain, ‘he won’t be able to gulp it down or throw it up. It will stick, like an iron-spiked pod, in his throat.’⁸

But the Buddha, as often as not, turned the tables, using the standard dialectical ploy of sidestepping an awkward query by first posing a counter-query of his own. Again, when Jains, for example, deliberately contrived to trip him up by asking: ‘Which of the venerable ones is more a dweller in happiness, King Seniya Bimbisāra of Magadha or the Venerable Gotama?’ the Buddha, promptly bypassing the issue like a chess-player making a blocking move, replied: ‘Well, then, reverend Jains, I shall ask you a counter-question on that very subject; you may reply to it as you please ...’⁹ On another occasion, when asked whether he had worked out his debating points (‘If I’m asked like this, I shall answer like that’) as part of a deliberately planned strategy in advance, the answer was ‘No.’ The Buddha was an expert in *Dhammadhātu* (the elements of the Dhamma) as his questioner no doubt was an expert in the construction of a chariot. There was no need for elaborate homework: ‘the answer would occur to me immediately.’¹⁰

It was all a matter of training. To an expert, answers were instinctive. But that ‘instinct’ was dependent on an arduous and skilful apprenticeship. Princes, especially, seemed to find such sustained mental discipline hard to grasp. So when asked by that incredulous prince, ‘Does the answer really occur to the Tathāgata on the spot?’ the Buddha – much as Socrates was to do – tackled him on his own terms:

‘Well then, Prince, I shall ask you a question in return. You may answer as you please. Tell me, are you skilled in the various parts of a chariot?’

‘Yes, Lord.’

‘If asked, “What is the name of this particular part?” would you have to reflect “If asked this, I shall answer that,” or would the answer occur to you on the spot?’

‘Since I’m a famous charioteer, Lord, and fully acquainted with every part of a chariot, the answer would occur to me on the spot.’

‘Even so, Prince, with the elements of the Dhamma. Since every element of the Dhamma is fully penetrated by the Tathāgata, the answer occurs to the Tathāgata on the spot.’

Similarly, when asked by Prince Bodhi how long it took to reach enlightenment (a popular question to this day), the Buddha at once adapted his approach to aristocratic pursuits: ‘As to that, Prince, I shall ask you a question in return ... Are you skilled in the art of wielding a goad while riding an elephant?’¹¹



A favourite set of questions put to peripatetic gurus was the *Dasa Avyākatā vatthū*, a catechism of ten ‘indeterminate’, or ‘undeclared’, points: Is the world eternal? Or not eternal? Is the world finite? Or infinite? Is the life-principle (*jīva*) identical with the body? Or different from the body? Does a Tathāgata exist? Or not exist? Or both exist and not exist? Or neither exist nor not exist after death? These ten *avyākatānī*, arranged in dilemmas and quadrilemmas, seem ‘to have been popularly regarded as a valid ready-reckoner for evaluating’ any religious teacher; for, again and again, the Buddha had to evade being trapped by this agendum, sometimes refusing to reply, at other times with counterthrusts of his own.¹² But mostly he did so by a shift to practical problems and illustrations from everyday life.

A classic example occurs in the *Poṭṭhapāda Sutta*:

POTṬHAPĀDA: ‘From other teachers I have learned a whole variety of views – that the world is eternal, that it’s not eternal, that the world is finite, that it’s infinite and so on. Which one do you say is true?’

THE BUDDHA: ‘This is not what I shall teach you.’

POTṬHAPĀDA: ‘Why do you not talk about these matters?’

THE BUDDHA (preparing to begin his alms-round): ‘Because they are of no use.’¹³

At all times he avoided theoretical speculation for its own sake, the overriding rule being: remain alert. The ultimate lesson: truth is simply what works.

‘If by the past is meant what is true, what is fact, but doesn’t conduce to your good, about that the Tathāgata says nothing ... If by the present is meant what is true, what is fact, but doesn’t conduce to your good, about that the Tathāgata says nothing ... If by the future is meant what is true, what is fact, but doesn’t conduce to your good, about that the Tathāgata says nothing.’¹⁴

He would be called a pragmatist today; and the Theravāda and Zen traditions of Buddhism still insist that it makes little sense to talk about *knowing* apart from *doing*: belief is that upon which a man is prepared to act. Or as C. S. Peirce explained in 1893, Pragmatism ‘is only an application of the sole principle of logic recommended by Jesus: “By their fruits ye shall know them.”’¹⁵ All pragmatists, whether Buddhists or latter-day Americans, put the question of first and last things in parentheses, as it were, anticipating Wittgenstein’s celebrated dictum: ‘Whereof one may not [usefully] speak, thereof one should remain [decently] silent.’¹⁶ For the Buddha, the religious life was irrelevant to dogmas of infinity or of eternity. For his disciples, the range of his mind was so impenetrable that pondering it could ‘lead only to insanity and distress’.¹⁷ This was wise; for as John R. Searle has written: ‘It is inconsistent with what we ... know about the universe and our place in it to suppose that everything is knowable by us.’ There are bound to be limits to the knowledge of creatures that have evolved as we have. Dogs cannot understand quantum mechanics:

‘the dog’s brain is simply not developed to that extent. And it is easy to imagine a being that is further developed along the same evolutionary progression than we are, that stands to us roughly as we stand to dogs ... This imaginary evolutionary product would conclude that though humans can understand quantum mechanics, there is a good deal that the human brain cannot grasp.’¹⁸

So an experimental pragmatism must remain the rule. As the Dalai Lama is fond of saying (it’s a favourite quotation, though not found in the *Nikāyas*): ‘You should not accept my teaching just out of respect for me, but you should analyse it, the way a goldsmith analyses gold by rubbing, cutting and melting.’¹⁹ What alone can be assured to work are the *Aryasacca*, or Four Noble Truths; what obviously does not work is a wild goose-chase after the nature of Eternity, of Infinity, of *Nāma-rūpa* and of Immortality. In the words of the *Abhidhamma*, it’s ‘as if the Buddha stood on the edge of the shore and pointed out the ocean with his open hand.’²⁰

That is why, when staying at Kosambi in the Sisu Grove and gathering up that handful of fallen sisu leaves, the Buddha asked the assembly: ‘Which do you think are the more numerous, monks, this small handful of leaves or those in the whole grove?’ Respectfully, they replied: ‘Very few in number are the leaves you have taken up. Much greater in number are those in the whole grove.’ To which the Buddha responded:

‘Even so, monks, much greater in number are those things I have discovered but not revealed. And why, monks, have I not revealed them? Because they are not concerned with profit; they do not conduce to the holy life, nor to aversion, to detachment, to cessation, to tranquillity, to comprehension, to wisdom, to nibbāna. That is why I have not revealed them. And what is it, monks, that I have revealed? Why, that this is suffering, this the origin of suffering, this the cessation of suffering, this the path leading to the cessation of suffering. And why did I reveal this alone? Because, monks, this is concerned with profit and is the beginning of the holy life; this conduces to aversion, detachment, cessation, tranquillity, comprehension, wisdom, nibbāna. Therefore, I revealed it.’²¹

On another occasion, in response to the usual probing questions, the Buddha began:

‘Suppose, Mālunḡyāputta, someone had been wounded by an arrow thickly smeared with poison and his friends and companions, relatives and kinsfolk, called for a surgeon; but he insisted: “I won’t have this arrow extracted till I know whether my assailant was of the warrior-noble caste, or the Brahman caste, or the agricultural caste, or the menial caste ...”’

and so on and on, enquiring after the archer’s name, his clan, his height, his complexion, his town or village, the precise details of his bow, his bowstring, his arrow-shaft and feathering.

‘That man would die, Mālunḡyāputta, before discovering a single clue, a single item ... The religious life, Mālunḡyāputta, does not depend on the dogma that the world is eternal, or

that the world is infinite or that body and soul are identical ... And what, Mālun̄kyāputta, have I elucidated? Suffering, the origin of suffering, the cessation of suffering and the path leading to the cessation of suffering. And why? Because this *does* profit and is the beginning of the holy life (disenchantment, detachment, wisdom, nibbāna).²²

After attaining Enlightenment at the age of thirty-five, Siddhattha Gotama had become a wanderer, one of the many celibate, mendicant teachers and sages – some of them women – footloose about northern India. Official halls were erected for their accommodation, such as the Hall in Queen Mallikā's park at Sāvattthī, or the Gabled Pavilion put up by the Licchavi in the Great Wood on the outskirts of Vesālī, or the Wanderers' Park, called the Peacocks' Sanctuary, at Rājagaha. There the *Paribbājaka* (itinerant sages) could engage in philosophical repartee and public debate. Some wandered independently; others were leaders of a sect, or Sangha.²³

The Buddha became leader of just such a Sangha, modelled on at least two older-established Sanghas: the *Nigaṇṭhas* (literally 'Unfettered'), whom we now call Jains, and the *Āyīvaka* (literally 'Men of the Livelihood'). Both came in for much Buddhist banter. The Jains particularly were ridiculed for their absurd fatalism. A running gag:

QUESTION: 'Why did the *Nigaṇṭha* enter an empty house and receive no alms-food – just bites from a dog?'

ANSWER: 'Because it was fated that he enter the empty house, go without alms-food and be bitten by the dog.'

That's why he entered in the first place, left empty-handed and was bitten ...'²⁴

But the *Āyīvaka* were the target of rather more than jokes. They were vilified as 'their mothers' dead sons'.²⁵ The Buddha's disciples were bitterly opposed not only to their dissipated conduct, but to their self-serving calculus ('When a ball of string is thrown, it will fly as far as the length of string unravels') which allowed for neither training, nor self-determination, nor scope for deliberate self-defilement or purification.²⁶ Of their teacher, Makkhali Gosāla, the Buddha declared:

'I do not see another single person, apart from that foolish man Makkhali, who so practises for the misery and unhappiness of the multitude.'²⁷

His own saffron-clad disciples of the Middle Way were not known as 'Buddhists' at first, but by his clan-name, *Sākyaputtīya samaṇas*.²⁸ Nor was he necessarily recognized as a 'Buddha'. The King of Kosala, who had seen countless gurus come and go, put it like this:

KING PASENADI: 'Now when I asked Purāṇa Kassapa, Makkhali Gosāla, Ajita Kesakambalin, Pakudha Kaccāyana, Nigaṇṭha Nātaputta and Sañjaya Belaṭṭhiputta whether they claimed to have discovered the supreme full enlightenment, they made no such claim. So how is this? For you, Master Gotama, are both young in years and newly gone forth into homelessness.'

THE BUDDHA: 'Great king, there are four things that should not be despised because they are young. What are these four? A noble warrior, a serpent, a fire and a bhikkhu.'²⁹

The title, then, needed public apology. Usually, no doubt, he was known as 'this monk Gotama, head of an order ... teacher of a group, a renowned and famous ford-maker.'³⁰ That key endorsement, 'ford-maker', was never uniquely bestowed on the Buddha. It meant someone capable of leading others across the stream of *saṃsāra* to escape the vicious circle of birth and death; but the title was respectfully conferred on all holy men and sages, of whom the six listed by King Pasenadi were most commonly cited. Looking down from the palace of Opasādā at a stream of Brahmans making for a sacred grove where the Buddha was resting, the regent's minister called him simply the 'monk Gotama, the son of the Sakyans'.³¹

These Buddhists, as I shall continue to call them, also stayed in those official halls and public rest-houses where they could regularly cross swords with opponents – lampooned as 'Eel-wrigglers' and 'Hair-splitters', that is, equivocators and sophists in the worst sense – 'shattering by their wit the speculations of others'.³² In their travels, wanderer would call on wanderer, or maybe on a learned Brahman or celebrated hermit resident in the neighbourhood; as, for example, Dīghanakha called on the Buddha, the Buddha called

on Sakuludāyi, both Vekhanassa and Keniya called on the Buddha, and Potaliputta called on Samiddhi.³³

Other contemporary Sanghas included *Muṇḍa-Sāvaka*, or ‘Disciples of the Shaveling’; *Jaṭṭikā*, or ‘Those who wear their hair in braids’ (itinerant Brahmins); *Aviruddhakā*, or ‘The Friends’; and *Gotamakā*, or ‘Followers of Gotama’, in all likelihood the more contemplative, ascetic order founded by the Buddha’s schismatic cousin Devadatta.³⁴ But all alike were mendicants (*bhikkhus*) and unfettered wanderers. All entered into the spirit of debate, challenging and questioning each other’s basic hypotheses and ‘theories as a hair-splitting marksman knows archery’ (in the current cliché).³⁵

Rules for debate, called ‘debating on the basis of truth’, were punctilious – in principle at least, if not in observance. That’s why, for example, the Buddha insisted on an explicitly rule-governed contest when facing a Jain opponent.³⁶ These stipulations were set out clearly by the Venerable Udena under three heads:

‘If you agree with any statement of mine, then concede it.’

‘If you think any statement arguable, contest it.’

‘If you fail to grasp the meaning of any statement of mine, enquire further about it ... That way there can be conversation between us.’³⁷

These provisos were repeated word for word by his opponent, a Brahman. As in a wrestling or boxing match, such rituals were of more than formal significance. It was as if a score were being kept of points awarded,

validating propositions agreed upon, propositions suspended in dispute, and their mutual clarification.

In the cut and thrust of debate four rhetorical ploys were recognized in confronting a challenger: 1. to answer without qualifications; 2. to answer after analysing the question; 3. to reply with a counter-question; and 4. to set aside the question in silence. On one occasion, piqued by the report of a garbled exchange between a wanderer and one of his own bhikkhus, the Buddha indignantly burst out: 'I don't even know the wanderer by sight. How could there have been such a conversation? The wanderer Potaliputta's question should have been answered after due analysis, but this misguided man Samiddhi answered it without qualifications.'³⁸ The young bhikkhu had boomed; he'd let down the side; and the Buddha goes on to fume at 'the foolish, thoughtless wanderers of other sects' who won't even 'understand the Tathāgata's great exposition of *Kamma*'.

* * *

Rules, however, did not always keep tempers in check. In the rough and tumble of philosophical debate passions were easily aroused. The suttas are filled with outbursts of hurt pride, intemperate boasting and heated exchanges. As the Kālāmas of Kesaputta anxiously testified: 'Lord, some monks and Brahmins come to Kesaputta and expound only their own tenets,

while they abuse and rend and censure and rail at the tenets of others ...³⁹ One Aggivessana, a self-promoting loudmouth, boasted of his power to deconstruct *all* arguments, no matter on what or by whom: ‘There’s not a *samaṇa*, not a Brahman, nor the guru of a sect, not even an Arahant – if that’s what he claims to be – who, once grilled by me word for word, speech by speech, wouldn’t tremble, wouldn’t stagger, wouldn’t drip sweat from under his armpits. Even a dumb post, tackled by me, would tremble, shake and stagger – let alone a human being!’⁴⁰ A similar glee convulsed the Jain camp at the prospect of verbal sport with the Buddha. Upāli, for one, thought he had him cornered: ‘I shall drag the monk Gotama to and fro with arguments as a strong man seizes a shaggy ram by the hair and drags him about to and fro. I shall sieve him with arguments, I shall thump and shake him with arguments. Just as a sixty-year-old elephant frolics in the pool while washing, so I’ll have some fun, I fancy, washing the monk Gotama ...’⁴¹

Just listen to the heckling, the mutual upstaging of one monk by another, in the appropriately named Peacocks’ Sanctuary. Scene: Purāṇa Kassapa teaching Dhamma to several hundred disciples. Someone shouts out a question:

A RIVAL MONK: ‘Sir, don’t put that point to Purāṇa Kassapa. He hasn’t a clue on that score. *We* know the answer. Ask us that question. We can put you straight, sir.’

PURĀṆA KASSAPA (visibly upset, waving his arms): ‘Quiet, gentlemen, please! SHUT UP, WILL YOU? They’re asking me. I’ll take that one.’⁴²

General pandemonium while a disgruntled crowd barges out, slanging each other, the speaker, anyone in sight:

‘You don’t know the first thing about this Doctrine. Nor this whole Discipline for that matter.’

‘Of course, we know this Doctrine. *And* this Discipline. We know more about them than you’ll ever know.’

‘Rubbish! You’re practising all wrong.’

‘Wrong? It’s you who’re wrong. Our practice is OK.’

‘Your practice is all wrong, I tell you.’

‘Nonsense! You’re gibbering ...’

‘You’re not only inconsistent, you’re incoherent. Your ideas are all screwed up. For all your homework – admit it! – I’ve got you scared. I’ve got you on the run. I’ve exposed your rotten arguments and refuted them till you’re utterly routed. Try wriggling out of that if you can.’⁴³

Such gatherings, of course, could easily degenerate into a roughhouse. Not only holy men were attracted to the wandering life. The *Udāna* relates a notorious affair where wanderers murdered a wandering nun and buried her corpse in the ditch surrounding Jeta’s Grove (the park, that is, which the merchant Anāthapiṇḍika had donated to the Buddha for his Sangha). They then accused the Buddhist bhikkhus of raping and murdering her.⁴⁴

* * *

Let us return to Aggivessana (his clan-name), also known as Saccaka. In the ‘Hall with the Peaked Roof in

the Great Wood' at Vesālī, heroic boasting abounded; gossip buzzed; quarrels escalated as busybodies slipped from clamorous group to group. It was an arena of frantic competition, an ideological marketplace with rival wares noisily hawked on every side. Such sparring provided a popular spectator-sport: now rapier-sharp and swift; now warily circling one another like wrestlers. From the initial protocol confirming the terms of debate, to one man's humiliation and downfall, was public theatre.

Picking a quarrel was simple. Saccaka, a Jain, casually intercepted a Sākya⁴⁵puttīya *samaṇa* on his alms-round, elicited a sample of Buddhist teaching from him, then brazenly issued this challenge: 'If that's what the monk Gotama asserts, it is surely ill-conceived. Now what if we were to confront Master Gotama sometime or other and converse with him? Suppose we were to help extricate him from such a pernicious view?'⁴⁵ The Buddha was not rising to the bait, however, so the Jain was forced to seek him out. First, with much provocative banter, he asked five hundred Licchavis – at Vesālī on parliamentary business – to come along to watch the fun; and so tickled were they at the prospect that they began calculating the odds on the spot, arguing about who was most likely to be refuted by whom and how. After due inquiries at the Hall, the whole troop set off into the jungle where the Buddha was sitting cross-legged, meditating at the foot of a tree.

So there they found him. Around the roots of the great sāla, or banyan, soon circles within circles of onlookers

enveloped the two contestants. Saccaka decorously opened proceedings: 'I would question Master Gotama on a certain point, if Master Gotama would grant me the favour of an answer to that question.' And the Buddha graciously accepted, addressing him by his clan-name: 'Ask what you like, Aggivessana.' But it soon became apparent that Saccaka had met his match. In the very first round he was pulled up short. Confounded, he was silenced. Silenced, he was shamed. Shamed, he was knotted in self-contradiction after self-contradiction until at last the Buddha sardonically intervened: 'So, Aggivessana, when you are pressed and questioned and cross-questioned by me, you are exposed as blundering and empty-headed. Yet in Vesālī you proclaimed: "I see no one – neither monk, nor Brahman, nor head of a Sangha, nor teacher of a sect, whatever his claims to Full Enlightenment – who would not shiver and tremble and sweat under the armpits on being engaged in argument with me. Even a senseless post would shiver and tremble!" Look, here are drops of sweat on your forehead; they've even soaked through your upper robe and dripped to the ground. But there's not one drop of sweat on me!'

This cannot be gloating exactly; a Buddha can hardly be supposed to gloat over his opponent. Yet he even slipped off his robe at this climax to expose his torso, like a victorious athlete, to the crowd: 'And the Blessed One uncovered his golden-skinned body before the assembly while Saccaka sat gloomily by, his shoulders slouched and head drooping.' As well he might; these

epic encounters were still marked with a certain flash bravado. For the fans at least, a touch of vicious exuberance was clearly essential to the sport. As this summing-up from one Licchavi supporter makes clear:

‘Picture some village children paddling in their local pond, who come across a crab and pull it out on to dry land; and as soon as the crab extends a claw, watch them smash it with sticks till all its claws are snapped and it can’t stir. That’s how all Saccaka’s lies and smears have been smashed by the Blessed One to teach him to keep his distance.’

The Jain must have raised his head by this time; for he gruffly turned on the Licchavi, warning him to shut up and mind his own business. Not until after a further round of questioning and exposition did he finally concede:

‘A man might with more impunity attack a mad elephant than Master Gotama. A man might with more impunity attack a blazing fire than Master Gotama. A man might with more impunity attack a venomous snake than Master Gotama.’

Which marked the formal capitulation. But before the gathering dispersed, there was a show of reconciliation, as courtesy required, with the Jain inviting the Buddha together with all his bhikkhus to a meal the following day.

* * *

This was no isolated instance. The suttas leave a trace of many other such wanderers: the boisterous gang attending Sandaka in his cave, for example, or the free-for-all of Nīgrodha's three-thousand-strong band, more agog for gossip, it seems, than dialectical give-and-take.⁴⁶ Incoherent chatter of their kind was rhetorically standardized into a mix of twenty-seven particulars: 'talk of kings, of robbers, of ministers, of armies, of alarms, of war, of food, of drink, of clothing, of beds, of garlands, of perfumes, of relatives, of vehicles, of villages, of towns, of cities, of countries, of women, of heroes, of street-and-well gossip, of the departed, of trifles, of speculation on the origin of the world, on the origin of the sea, and whether things are or are not' – of which only the last three could conceivably be judged apposite. But it was precisely this group that was critical of the lack of open debate in the Buddha's circle:

'Now look, householder, do you know with whom the ascetic Gotama talks? With whom he holds conversation? With whom he exchanges the cut and thrust of debate to attain wise judgment? The ascetic Gotama's insight is ruined by his habit of seclusion. He's not comfortable in conducting an assembly. He's not quick in argument. He's concerned only with fringe discussions. Like a one-eyed cow walking in a circle, the ascetic Gotama pursues only the outer circumference of relevant issues. Why, if the ascetic Gotama were to visit this assembly, we could floor him with a single question. Yes, sir, we'd roll him over like an empty pot!'⁴⁷

More specifically, the Buddha was accused of nihilism, a charge to which he was vulnerable because of his simultaneously held (and paradoxical) doctrines of selflessness (*anattā*) and of rebirth.

The charge of nihilism the Buddha robustly refuted:

‘Since I am not a nihilist and do not teach annihilationism, I have been falsely accused, without a shred of justification, by some *samaṇas* and Brahmins ... I teach now what I have always taught: of suffering and the cessation of suffering.’⁴⁸

The more general charge that he was not self-assertive enough, and even avoided public debate, was in part conceded when he declared to his disciples: ‘I do not dispute with the world, bhikkhus; the world disputes with me.’ Openly challenged, as in the Saccaka incident, he inevitably held his ground. But did he ever initiate such a challenge? Did he ever deliberately go on the warpath? That was apparently not his style, nor did he publicly strive to upstage leaders of other sects. Though he certainly ran them down, laid into the most objectionable types among them, such as Makkhali Gosāla, and repeatedly categorized their various shortcomings. Others, like Nigaṇṭha Nātaputta (Mahāvīra), might claim to be ‘All-knowing’ and ‘All-seeing’,⁴⁹ but the Buddha rejected such grandiose titles, claiming only the *Tevijjā*, as he called it, or ‘Genuine Triple Knowledge’: knowledge of his own past lives, knowledge of his present liberation and knowledge of future rebirths for all mankind according to the law of *kamma*.⁵⁰ Which seems omniscient enough.

Nor is it entirely true to assert that the Buddha never raised his voice in the hubbub of competitive doctrines, which inevitably overlapped despite each aspiring to a unique integrity. Only *his* disciples, he claimed, were open-eyed; the wanderers of all other sects, he charged, were ‘blindly ignorant of health and unseeing of nibbāna’.⁵¹ What he called his Lion’s Roar (*sīhanāda*) was invariably aimed at unbelievers: ‘Bhikkhus, only here is there a monk, only here a second monk, only here a third monk, only here a fourth monk. The doctrines of others are devoid of monks: that’s how to roar an authentic Lion’s Roar.’⁵²

Such claims cannot have made for easy fellowship on the road or in the great hall at Vesālī. The one-upmanship was too intense. In mid-debate, an ebullient rival group once jammed the Buddha’s account of transcendental meditation by thumping out the refrain: ‘We won’t renounce our teacher’s claims for that! We won’t renounce our teacher’s claims for that! We won’t renounce our teacher’s claims for that!’⁵³

A more extensive roar (the *Kassapa-Sīhanāda Sutta*) was aimed, yet again it would seem, at the Jains. It was the Buddha’s fiercest counter-attack to the charge that he sequestered himself, not having the guts to face the competition. The broadside is cumulative, building up by exasperated repetition, on the principle of ‘The House That Jack Built’.

‘Kassapa, it may be that wanderers of other sects will say: “The ascetic Gotama roars his Lion’s Roar, but only in empty places, not in company.” They should be told that this is not true: “The ascetic Gotama roars his Lion’s Roar in company.” Or they may say: “The ascetic Gotama roars his Lion’s Roar in company, but without confidence.” They should be told that this is not true: “The ascetic Gotama roars his Lion’s Roar in company and confidently.” Or they may say: “The ascetic Gotama roars his Lion’s Roar in company, and confidently, but they do not question him.” They should be told that this is not true: “The ascetic Gotama roars his Lion’s roar in company, and confidently, and they do question him.” Or they may say: “The ascetic Gotama roars his Lion’s Roar in company, and confidently, and they do question him, but he doesn’t answer ... but he doesn’t win them over with his answers ... but they don’t find them pleasing ... but they’re not satisfied with what they’ve heard ... but they don’t behave as if they were satisfied ... but they’re not on the path of truth ... but they’re not satisfied with the practice.”

They should be told that this is not true: “The ascetic Gotama roars his Lion’s Roar in company, and confidently, and they do question him, and he does answer and win them over with his answers, and they find it pleasing, and they are satisfied with what they’ve heard, and behave as if they’re satisfied, and they are on the path of truth, and they are satisfied with the practice.”⁵⁴

The longest, most sustained assertion of his transcendent status as Tathāgata was prompted by a disrobed monk who had mocked his teaching before the Vesālī Assembly. This ex-monk, Sunakkhatta, had trashed him as a mere rationalist, teaching ‘a Dhamma hammered out by human thought, following his own line of enquiry as it occurred to him.’ The ‘Greater Lion’s Roar’ (*Mahāsīhanāda Sutta*) is an old man’s justification of his life’s achievements, an enumeration of his still potent powers, and an autobiographical flashback to those fakir days before his Enlightenment.⁵⁵ Though by then in his seventies, twelve times he claimed pride of place, ‘roaring his Lion’s Roar in the assemblies and setting the Divine Wheel rolling forward’. This defiant *Apologia Pro Vita Sua* concludes with unwavering faith in his own perspicacity:

‘even if you have to carry me about on a litter, still there will be no change in the lucidity of the Tathāgata.’

* * *

Greeks, no doubt, would have called him a ‘gymnosophist’, recognizing something familiar in his insistence on the Middle Way (*Majjhimaṇḍapadā*): avoiding both extremes of his luxurious life as a prince and of his self-mortification as a fakir; neither too elaborate in his practices, nor too grimly ascetic; neither too indulgent in pleasure, nor too preoccupied with pain; neither too lax, nor too uptight; neither oversuperstitious, nor over-sceptical; but steering a

path which skirted both infatuation with desire (*taṇhā*) and collapse into despair (*dukkha*) in their continuous cycles of happiness and unhappiness. Equally apt would have sounded his parable of the lute-strings.

Soṇa Kolivisa was a wealthy merchant's son, recently recruited into the Sangha and still tense with nervous energy. All day he would pace to and fro on blistered feet until his path was stained with blood, pondering how to rid himself of his family wealth. But the Buddha, reading his thoughts, asked him:

'When you were at home as a layman, Soṇa, didn't you excel at the lute?'

'Yes, Lord.'

'When your lute-strings were too taut, did it resound as it should?'

'No, Lord.'

'When your lute-strings were too slack, did it resound as it should?'

'No, Lord.'

'But when your lute-strings were neither too taut nor too slack, being evenly tuned, then the resonance was just right, wasn't it?'

'It was so, Lord.'

'Even so, Soṇa, an excess of zeal leads to self-exaltation and a lack of zeal to indolence. Therefore resolve on an evenness of energy. Master your faculties in harmony. Make that your aim.'⁵⁶

That was how we ought to live, the Buddha taught: with moderation and discretion in all things. Σωποσύνη in Greek; for that, too, was the Hellenic ideal. Like

Socrates, the Buddha believed that virtue was really knowledge: knowledge of what was good or beneficial for oneself; and so the ability to make the right choice in a shifting variety of circumstances.

Essentially it was a kind of prudence, like being a safe driver or following a sensible diet. The Buddha's insistence on a skilful life – akin to a goldsmith's, or a carpenter's, or a horse-trainer's skill – was matched by the Socratic fascination with craftsmen and their crafts. Both emphasized what was profitable (*kusala*) as opposed to what was unprofitable (*akusala*); and moral weakness implied going against one's training and better judgment. In theory, impossible.

This moral skill, then, was all one needed for the good life. No additional virtues of, say, courage or patience or temperance, it seems, were required. Simple wisdom that recognized the discreet choice along the right path was all-sufficient. Bad actions – that is, wrong choices – could only result from ignorance (*avijjā*). No evil-doer, even one as monstrous as Angulimāla, should be considered a voluntary agent in his crime. What neither the Buddha nor Socrates seemed willing to grant was the possibility of ἀκρασι (or ἀκράτεια), a weakness of will or want of self-control.⁵⁷

To that extent they were both Pelagians, while we are more likely to be instinctive Augustinians. Pelagius was that Irish holy innocent who argued that anyone with free will would *choose* good rather than evil; while St. Augustine, following Aristotle, acknowledged, from his own youth, that the mind could harbour contradictory

impulses simultaneously. Which was the dilemma Ovid's Medea, long ago, had painfully recognized:

'Video meliora, proboque;
Deteriora sequor.'^{58*}

As her Freudian heirs, we even claim to have uncovered both these conscious drives and unconscious or semi-conscious fixations. There is such a thing as a vicious streak of cruelty. One *may* take sadistic pleasure in inflicting harassment or pain on others as well as on oneself.⁵⁹ There *are* phenomena, for which we now have names and clinical descriptions, which Socrates, if not the Buddha, steadfastly ignored. There are also pathological obsessions and compulsions, pulling one against all one's better judgments and resolutions to a rendez-vous with sex, or drugs, or alcohol. Edgar Allan Poe's 'The Imp of the Perverse' was an early classic of such neurotic instability.⁶⁰

The Buddha's very title signified the Enlightened One, the 'one who was awake'. But Socrates made no such claim for all-competent knowledge, for supreme wisdom. He was confident only in the logic of his argument, being totally committed to cross-questioning and debate (the Socratic 'ε'λεγχος) between seriously engaged interlocutors.⁶¹ But what was meant by 'beneficial for oneself'? Was it being virtuous for virtuousness' sake? Courageous for the sake of courage? Or wise for wisdom's sake? There was

* 'I see the better course and approve of it, but take the worse.' (Ed.)

always, surely, some further end already anticipated by desire. An end called ‘happiness’. Supreme wisdom, then, was a calculus of desire based on the happiness-principle. It was a skill or craft, like carpentry or cobbling, whose final product, or final good, was perfect bliss. Virtue was the art of making oneself happy. Wrongdoers, of course, wanted happiness too; only they were mistaken about the means, calculated foolishly and were ultimately ignorant, or misguided, rather than vicious. They needed help. They needed patient correction, not retribution or punishment.⁶²

The Buddha reduced this correction to five basic precepts: never to kill, never to steal, never to lie, never to indulge in mind-intoxicating substances, never to engage in sex against another’s will.⁶³ All exemplifications (as Jains had long recognized) of the principle of non-violence, or *avihiṃsā*, which entailed never inflicting harm on others or oneself. As the Buddha exhorted his seven-year-old son Rahula, pointing to a mirror:

‘What’s a mirror for, do you think, Rahula?’

‘For the sake of its reflection, sir.’⁶⁴

‘So remember, Rahula, only after continual reflection, should an act be performed; only after continual reflection should an assertion be made; only after continual reflection, should a decision be reached. Now whatever physical, or verbal, or mental action you wish to perform, first reflect: “Is what I wish to do (or am doing, or have done) conducive to my own harm, or to the harm of others, or to that of both? If so, it is an unskilful act since it will entail suffering and be productive of pain.”’

So ran the Buddha's calculus. It, too, was based on an ultimate happiness-principle, called in this case the supreme bliss of *nibbāna*.

* * *

But what do we mean by 'virtue'? Do we mean, broadly speaking, an instrumental skill? Is that what the Buddha usually meant? Or Socrates? The evidence hardly suggests so. The Buddha, in his statistical way, compiled a list of precisely ten perfections (*pāramī*). These are: *nekkāma*, 'renunciation'; *sīla*, 'restraint' or 'self-control'; *dāna*, 'generosity'; *upekkhā*, 'equanimity'; *addhiṭṭhāna*, 'determination'; *paññā*, 'wisdom'; *virīya*, 'effort'; *sacca*, 'honesty' or 'truthfulness'; *khanti*, 'tolerance' or 'patience'; and *mettā*, 'loving-kindness'. Of this list, 'self-control', 'wisdom', 'truthfulness' and possibly 'renunciation' could all be viewed as conducive to innocence, in its root sense of 'innocuous', or non-harmful. But 'equanimity', 'determination', 'effort', 'tolerance', and above all 'generosity' and 'loving-kindness', seem more typical of virtues pure and simple. Indeed, they are key elements of what Buddhists know as the Four Holy States (*Brahmavihāra*) forming the incontrovertible base of the ideal life: *mettā*, affectionate kindness to all; *karuṇā*, compassion for the sufferings of all; *muditā*, joy in the good of all; and *upekkhā*, without resentment, forgiving the faults of all.⁶⁵ Centuries later, in the Mahayāna tradition, they

contributed to the formation of the Bodhisattva as a Suffering Servant, far removed from any utilitarian calculus.

As to Socrates, what he ultimately thought is even less clear because of Plato's progressive revisionism. His testimony on accepting the death sentence from his fellow-citizens, at any rate, sounds unambiguous: 'No evil can befall a good man either in life or in death.'⁶⁶ By which he cannot simply have meant a 'wise man'; he must have meant what we mean by a 'virtuous man'. At the very least, wisdom and virtue had become inseparable in a life correctly lived.⁶⁷

So the problem of virtue remained, in some sense, unresolved. Plato, in his ideal state of *The Republic*, appended a vast annex to Socratic teaching by an elaborate programme for the education or training of desire. The Buddha's programme had been founded on the discipline of meditation, as his social education had been centred on the community of bhikkhus. The Sangha, it could be argued, was his ideal republic whose constitutional guide is derived, to this day, from the five books of the *Vinaya*. Both Plato and the Buddha, too, believed in some variant of metempsychosis, though Plato's Theory of Forms (comprehended by innate faculties to which we have access by jolts of recollection) and his belief in the pre-existence of the soul were doctrinally interdependent, while the Buddha's doctrine of rebirth never served as a trigger for reconstituting the essential Eightfold Path.⁶⁸ All in all, though, it is clear that the Buddha and even the

Platonized Socrates shared much common ground; and from this point I shall adduce all aspects of Socrates, as transmitted to us, even his most Platonic characteristics.⁶⁹

The question is: was the Buddha essentially a sophist – like Protagoras, say – a teacher of virtue, asking, ‘What is the good life?’ and ‘How does one successfully lead a good life?’ Or was he something more? To what extent can we talk of a Socratic Buddha? How explicit is the range of affinities between the Buddha and Socrates?

* * *

1. Both their methodologies, as we have seen, involved a barrage of personal enquiries, intimate cross-questioning, an insistence on dialectical analysis and logical coherence. ‘Pay attention, Aggivessana, pay attention how you reply,’ warned the Buddha. ‘What you said earlier does not tally with what you said later, or what you said later with what you said earlier.’⁷⁰ For self-knowledge lay at the core of both Hindu and Greek philosophical debate: Ἦν ᾧ’ θι σεα’ ντον, as was inscribed over the gateway of the Delphic oracle. Any engagement with virtue had to begin with personal honesty. A consistent exercise in candid self-scrutiny was the necessary condition of moral insight: without truthfulness, no virtue; without virtue, no truthfulness.

The Buddha practised a wholly empirical, investigative approach, distrustful of all authority

or tradition, communal piety or dogma, hearsay or conjecture, even of evidence derived solely from deductive or inductive proof. Always the emphasis lay on direct, private experiment. Circumstantial corroboration or mere hypothetical confirmation was never to be trusted. On spotting broad hoof-tracks, for example, alongside torn branches and scraped tree-trunks, never jump to the conclusion: 'It's a bull elephant! A huge one!' They may, after all, be prints of a tall, tusked cow elephant. Only *sighting* a great bull 'at the root of a tree or in the open, walking about or standing, sitting or lying' should convince you.⁷¹ So much for deductive reasoning. But don't tumble to the other extreme. Never smugly conclude: 'This alone is true; anything else is false.' Inductive arguments convince only up to a point: with the mental proviso that they amount to no foolproof 'discovery of the truth'. Like Sir Karl Popper, that is, the Buddha allows for a perpetual possibility of falsification of any inductively inferred truth. The evidence must always remain inconclusive. A proposition, however well argued, may still be 'hollow, empty and false'; another proposition, 'though badly argued, may still be factually correct'.⁷²

The *locus classicus* is his address to the people of Kesaputta, who had long been pestered by a variety of abusive sects. 'You may be puzzled, Kālāmas,' he began,

'you may well be uncertain when it comes to religion. Doubt is rightly roused by such dubious matters. Come, Kālāmas, don't be satisfied with something simply because you've practised it from ancient times; or simply

because you've been taught it; or simply because it appears in legends; or simply from hearsay; or simply by inference or extrapolation; or simply through guesswork; or simply through cogitation; or simply because it seems theoretically plausible; or simply out of respect for your teachers. But, Kālāmas, whenever you've confirmed for yourselves that certain ideas are unskilful and contemptible, leading to harm and suffering, then you should abandon them.'⁷³

2. Both the Buddha and Socrates enjoyed dramatizing fictional situations to probe their psychological and moral import. 'How do you conceive this ...?' was the Buddha's favourite line for buttonholing a visitor: 'Suppose a man came here brandishing a sword ... Suppose some monk came here possessed of supernormal mastery of mind ...'⁷⁴ Such predicaments were projected as hypothetical models for close-up scrutiny and verification. What was well said of Socrates applies equally to the Buddha:

'Only natural, ordinary impulses engage his mind. A peasant talks like this; a woman, like that. His mouth is filled with nothing but coachmen, joiners, cobblers and masons. His inferences and similes are drawn from the most humble, most familiar human activities; everyone can understand him. From such gross materials one might never have guessed at the inherent splendour and nobility of his ideas ...'⁷⁵

3. These graphic analogies shade naturally into the use of allegory: 'Suppose, Anuruddha, a man set out on a journey and murderers leapt out on each side ...'

Or, ‘Suppose a man seeking a hidden treasure found at once five hidden treasures ...’ Or, ‘Suppose a hunter suffocated a quail by gripping it too tightly in both hands ...’ Or, ‘Suppose he let it escape by holding on too loosely ...’⁷⁶ Each multiplication of mini-dramas posts a warning. In this case: don’t be emotionally mocked, or lulled, by sudden alarms or sudden elation, anxious overexertion or sluggish inertia. Their applications, as I shall explore in Chapters 4 and 5, are literally boundless as allegory shades indistinguishably into parable. Which is which? Take the Platonic role of the philosopher-king as a navigator versed in the art of navigation, expert on reefs and currents, stars and winds. The Buddha used a similar image, though not in the context of a free-for-all rabble steering the ship of state.

Or take Plato’s famous Parable of the Cave whose world of shadows becomes the Buddha’s world of illusion (*moha*) in the land of the blind:

‘Imagine a man blind from birth who cannot tell dark from light, let alone make out blue, yellow, red or crimson-coloured patches, distinguish rough from smooth surfaces (except by touch), or watch the moon and stars by night. He might well conclude: “There are no blue, yellow, red or crimson-coloured patches, no darker or lighter shapes, no rougher or smoother textures, no sun or moon or stars, nor anybody who can perceive them. For if I can’t see them, it follows that no one else can; and if no one’s aware of them, they can’t exist.” Would that be a sound line of inference? Would that seem a legitimate deduction?’

‘Far from it, Master Gotama. By so concluding, he would not be inferring correctly.’⁷⁷

Plato's troglodytes must be forcibly twisted around towards the sun at the risk of blinding; for the Buddha, it is only by cutting off the 'five cords of sensual desire' that the inner eye may be open to transcendental vision within the eight *jhānas* (meditative trances).

4. Both the Buddha and Socrates, however, were wary of any explicit appeal to art. To this imaginative dilemma in the Buddha's teaching I return in the next chapter. His anathema was total (the bhikkhu 'abstains from dancing, singing, music and theatrical shows', etc.⁷⁸), while Plato in *The Republic* scarcely permitted his élite more: some narrative epic (as long as it was morally uplifting), a limited scope for pastoral and martial music, and for the rest 'nothing but hymns to the gods and encomia for the good'.⁷⁹ Plato's constitutional taboo was based on a triple argument: 1. image-makers have 'no understanding of what is' (essence), 'only of what appears' (phenomenon); 2. image-making is nothing but a kind of replication or imitation (μίμησις); and 3. only those handling, or in any sense testing, a product can assess its beauty: which is to say, its propriety.⁸⁰ Simulation, whether in painting or poetry, may be charming, but is bound to be unreliable and as unilluminating in its second-hand way as moonshine. (This was a pragmatic test the Buddha also applied, though not quite on these terms.)

5. For what is beyond appearance (phenomena) must, by definition, be beyond poetry and intelligible only to the philosopher. Or 'seer', as the *Phaedrus* puts it:

‘Now of that region beyond the sky no earthly bard has ever yet sung, or ever will sing, in worthy strains. But here is a sketch; for I must risk speaking the truth since truth is my theme. Real existence – colourless, formless and intangible, visible only to the intelligence which sits at the helm of the soul and with which the faculty of true science is concerned – has its abode in this region.’⁸¹

Likewise, the Enlightened One, the ‘Kinsman of the Sun’, dissolved our corporal bodies to a mass of foam, feelings to a bubble, perceptions to a mirage, volitional acts to a banana-stem and consciousness to illusion.⁸² For the Buddhist, nibbāna lies beyond the world of signs, as the ‘Good’, in Platonic doctrine, lies beyond phenomenal existence, open only to intuition, not verification – and Buddhist meditation.

6. Both the Buddha and (the Platonic) Socrates, too, agreed that this ultimate ‘Good’ can only be realized in a cycle of repeated rebirths, or reincarnations, where a kind of law of just returns (the Buddhist *kamma*) operates. The Platonic schedule rules that if a soul ‘has seen more than others of essential Truth, it passes into the germ of a man who is to become a philosopher, or aesthete, or some votary of the Muses and of Love; if it be of *second* rank, it passes into the form of a constitutional ruler, soldier or natural leader ...’ and so to a *third* rank (politician, economist, merchant), *fourth* rank (gym coach or physician), *fifth* rank (soothsayer or mystic), *sixth* rank (poet ‘or some other imitative artist’), *seventh* rank (artisan or farmer), *eighth* rank (sophist or demagogue), to *ninth* rank (absolute

monarch).⁸³ The Buddhist Realm of Desire embraces a wider range from Hell-sprites to Hungry Ghosts, but its Mikado-like ‘let-the-punishment-fit-the-crime’ is less comically precise.

7. And what is the mark of true knowledge or wisdom? Right speech, right livelihood and above all right action are its mark: meeting injustice with justice, while preserving goodwill (*mettā*) toward all. Philosophy, in its profoundest guise, vindicates itself in the life lived, in the control of the passions by reason and in the acceptance of death with noble indifference. True philosophers make dying their profession.⁸⁴ Compare the Buddha, on the point of death, consoling his attendant Ānanda with Socrates’ cheerful composure, before drinking hemlock, with his friends. The *Apology* and the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta* form two exemplary parallel texts.

* * *

An incontrovertible gulf, however, yawns between the Buddha and Socrates. Quite apart from yogic self-discipline, they differed in their roles as teachers, in their sexual permissiveness and in their whole relationship to society.⁸⁵

Unlike the Buddha, Socrates was reluctant to claim that he had attained, or even grasped, the ultimate Truth, or Reality, or Good, to which he aspired. To the contrary, he gloried in his *ignorance*, merely proclaiming his passionate devotion to wisdom (φιλοσοφία). The

very title ‘teacher’ was disowned. Far from mastering Truth, he was nothing but a midwife (μαία), he insisted; his skills were merely obstetric (μαιευτικός), befitting his humble, ancillary role. His sole purpose, that is, was to help others to a clearer awareness of concepts already latent in their minds.

Thus the pervasive irony; the repeated insistence on his stupidity – his hopeless and culpable naïvety – was in part a decoy, a dissimulation to encourage his more pretentious interlocutors to back into awkward self-contradiction.⁸⁶ Even the great Parable of the Cave concludes with a coy gesture of self-depreciation: ‘Whether it’s actually true, God knows. That’s just how it appears to me.’ For the art of Socratic irony consists of soliciting all comers with a sympathetic and puzzled complicity. Though such foolishness, no doubt, was sometimes more than a mere pose. There remained a genuine puzzlement and humility in the face of the human predicament for which intuitions and signs supplied some kind of inner assurance – what Jesuits call a *réserve de conscience* – beyond all play of irony. The duplicity was under reserve.

For, if not enlightened exactly, Socrates was the passive recipient of warning voices and of signs – what he called in the *Apology*, ‘the prophetic sign I’m used to receiving from the divine voice’ (δαιμόνιον), a ‘divine sign from God’, my ‘accustomed sign’. ‘Know well,’ he told his five hundred Athenian jurors, ‘God has commanded me to do so ...’ Though, just as often, intuitions thwarted and obstructed him ‘in quite small

matters' should he be about to act improperly. His most constructive teaching, or mystic speculation, he adopted from an assumed voice, that of the wise Diotima, his source for the ultimate mysteries of love. *She* became his privileged seer or visionary bard. To *her* poetic myths he ascribed the heightened discourse of his most powerful revelations: as that of the charioteer of the soul (in the *Phaedrus*) or the daimon Eros, the sprite of Love (in the *Symposium*).

The Buddha, by contrast, was a self-proclaimed Tathāgata: 'in the world Arahant and Fully Enlightened, perfect in true knowledge and conduct, sublime, knower of worlds, incomparable leader of the submissible, teacher of gods and of men, awakened, blessed.'⁸⁷ As Tathāgata, he never dissimulated, never egged on his interlocutors with a duplicitous smile. He harboured neither a Socratic nor Jesuitical reserve. He may have been crushingly sarcastic; he may, at times, have seemed close to jeering. But he was never 'ironic' in quite the Socratic way.

* * *

Simultaneously hunter and enchanter – yet subtle as a sophist – Love became the guiding force of the whole Platonic programme. For the lover of wisdom begins, in adolescence, as a romantic lover. 'It is not easy,' Socrates concluded Diotima's discourse in the *Symposium*, 'to find a better assistant than Love in seeking to communicate immortality to our human

nature.’ But the Buddha condemned the very notion of such love; *taṇhā* (desire), *kāma* (physical desire), *rāga* (lust), *kāmacchanda* (longing for sexual pleasure) were the verifiable causes, in their frenetic turmoil, of all *dukkha*. For his monks, at least, there was no conceivable middle term between total chastity and unbridled lust. Licentious excess (ἀκολασία, in Greek) inevitably overwhelms the male.

The suttas proliferate nauseating images of lust as a deadening, vicious circle of dependency: in the figure of the leper, for example, scratching the scabs off his sores;⁸⁸ or in the unquenchable flames of the Fire Sermon.⁸⁹ For the sexual impulse, left unrestrained, is all-consuming: totally obsessive, debilitating, paralysing, destructive. Like a malignant cancer, sex is inevitably a killer; as in the Parable of the Māluva, a creeper invades a sound body, multiplying at its expense, only to overwhelm it.⁹⁰ The horror is contagious, the angst palpable. Chastity apart, all else is ‘vulgar lechery’.⁹¹

For the Greek, however, addiction to temporal beauty can also be coaxed to transcendent and immortal beauty, ascending from the transitory and multiple to the single, eternal, pure geometry of the Forms. For ultimately supreme beauty (τοῦ κάλλους) and the supreme good (τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ) are one; and it is the soul, quickened by desire, which attempts the upward ascent, much as the Hindu *atman* aspires, after many a cycle of rebirth, to achieve final *moksha* in the Universal Soul of Brahma. Which is precisely what the Buddha had rejected.

Only once does a disciple of the Buddha approach the Platonic paradigm and that occurs, interestingly, when addressing a nun. Sister, Ānanda tells her, imagine a monk envying another monk his enlightenment and wondering how he too could achieve ‘deliverance of mind’; later that monk ‘relying on craving, abandons craving. It was on this account I said: “This body is born of craving. Relying on craving, one should abandon craving.”’⁹² So even in the suttas sexual desire and mental aspiration *may* be linked. But for the Buddha, human longing is incapable of being transposed to an inclination for the ‘Good’.

* * *

Unlike the Buddha, who meditated on mountain-crags or in jungle-thickets far from the madding crowd, Socrates hardly once left Athens, let alone Attica. Teased by Phaedrus on this score, he replied: ‘Now trees, you know, and fields won’t teach me anything, but men in the city will.’ That spreading plane-tree (site of the *Phaedrus*) was to be the exception that proved the Socratic rule; the bo-tree (pipal, or *figus religiosa*), under which he achieved Enlightenment, became emblematic of the Buddha. Proof of the holy life was remote seclusion, since ‘no forms, sounds, odours, flavours’ teemed there for the senses to relish.⁹³ Monks would resort to ‘a tree-root, a rock, a ravine, a mountain-cave, a charnel-ground or a heap of straw.’⁹⁴ While wandering in open woodland, it was the sight of

tree-roots – ‘quiet and undisturbed by voices ... where one could lie secluded in retreat’ – that reminded King Pasenadi of the Buddha.⁹⁵

Each man’s relationship to his society, however, proved paradoxical. The Buddha, the real heretic who denied the existence of the soul and mocked the Brahmins’ sacred mantras and sacrifices, died, widely esteemed, at the ripe age of eighty; while Socrates, less than a century later, in the crisis of recrimination that followed the defeat of Athens in the Peloponnesian War, was condemned to death for heresy at the age of (roughly) seventy. The Buddha had wandered across India, from the Ganges to the Himalayas, in a rare interval of almost universal peace; Socrates, between the ages of thirty-eight and sixty-five, had lived behind the walls of Athens at a time of universal war.

The charges that Socrates taught new doctrines about life after death and preached new gods were both ludicrously inept. The central, unspoken issue was the unravelling of the whole tissue of society. It is as if Jacques Derrida today were charged with high treason for his deconstructive texts and their aporias. The Socratic dialectic seemed to threaten the permanence of everything. It bred a generation of sceptics, as Plato himself recognized, calling them young ‘puppies dragging about and pulling to pieces whatever happened to be near them.’⁹⁶ The Buddha with his monastic foundation, on the other hand, effectively undermined Sakyan society and its ability to resist encroachment from the Kingdom of Kosala. Stirrings

of disapproval had long been felt even in Magadha. ‘The monk Gotama is creating childlessness and widowhood; he is breaking up families and obliterating the clans ...’⁹⁷ must have been a familiar refrain. His own father, King Suddhodana, had grieved at the loss not only of his son, Siddhattha, but also of Siddhattha’s half-brother Nanda as well as of his grandson Rāhula (both of whom had joined the Sangha), protesting: ‘Lord, it would be good if the venerable ones did not give the going-forth to children without their parents’ consent’ – a plea directed at unorthodox religious sects to this day.⁹⁸ But the Buddha escaped, and continues to escape, all censure.

It was Plato, like the Buddha, who died at the age of eighty: in Athens, at a wedding-feast, transformed by death into a soaring swan.⁹⁹

3

THE MENACE OF ART

Plato's dialogues have long been considered a unique literary experiment. Could the suttas be considered in like aesthetic terms? Put aside for a moment their oral origin. Forget their generally impromptu context. Overlook their obvious homiletic intent. Did the Buddha delight in the quick spontaneity of his own imagination? Did he consciously value such facility for its own sake? If so, what role did traditional poetry and folklore play in his teaching? Above all, how did he conceive the function of art?

The Parable of the Drum suggests several lines of enquiry:

‘Once upon a time, bhikkhus, the Dasārahas owned a summoning-drum. As this wooden drum began to split, the Dasārahas hammered in first one wedge, and then another, and another, until in time the original drumhead had altogether disappeared and nothing but the patched inlay remained.

That, bhikkhus, is exactly what will happen one day to you. To the Tathāgata's profound, transcendental discourses on the Void future bhikkhus will neither listen when they are recited, nor pay the slightest attention; they will neither set their hearts on ultimate wisdom, nor even consider what first needs to be learnt and mastered. But to mere strings of pretty words and phrases, assembled by strangers and their disciples – to such poetic effusions they will listen when recited; they will pay them the closest attention; they will set their hearts on memorizing them; they will consider such lore alone worth learning and mastering.¹

That drum is reminiscent of a silk stocking darned entirely with worsted. How could it still be called a silk stocking now that it was cobbled all over with wool? Or take the good ship *Argo* 'of which the Argonauts gradually replaced each part' on their voyage into the Black Sea, 'so that they finally had a wholly new ship without having changed either its name or its form.' Was it the identical ship, then, that returned to Greece from the land of the Scythians? Roland Barthes, for one, had no doubts. For him, the *Argo* was 'an object whose only cause was its name; whose only identity, its form'; in short, an 'eminently structured object', as if form alone inevitably transcends its interchangeable and transient parts.²

This defence of nominal continuity, retained at the expense of every constituent element, can even be taken a step further. The Japanese Sun Goddess remains a constant numinous presence, Italo Calvino argued, despite the repeated demolition and reconstruction of

her wooden shrine at Ise, just as poems survive through the centuries despite the repeated crumbling of their successive transcriptions in legible form.³ For him, too, continuity inhered permanently in the structure; and as the structure survives, so does the spirit.

The Buddha, too, by his choice of the drum image, can be viewed as a structuralist of a kind. That is, he was aware of the structuralist argument. The Dasārāha drum, like the rebuilt Argo or the shrine of the Sun Goddess at Ise, was an ‘eminently structured object’. But against Barthes and Calvino the Buddha would argue that in all these cases nothing remains but a name, a floating ‘signifier’ whose ‘signified’, with its recurrent substitutions, was forever shifting. What the Buddha chose to emphasize was their primal cause, the potent source at their origin. To the question, ‘Can there be a permanent, inviolable identity surviving beyond the mutability of all its several parts?’ his answer was a resounding ‘no’. Acutely aware of the imperceptible and constant shifting and wearing away of all things (*anicca*), he naturally would have no truck in any form – whether disguised as ‘self’, or ‘soul’ or this equally factitious drum-continuum – with such metaphysical conundrums.⁴ The authentic, original expression – the commanding boom of that summoning-drum – will have vanished.

* * *

His prescience was equally sure: that his Dhamma, which was a seamless whole – ‘lovely in its beginning, lovely in its middle, and lovely in its ending, both in spirit and in letter’ – would bit by bit decay into a mere quilt, an ingenious and ornamental patchwork, by what the French call ‘*bricolage*’. What else could be said of the many varieties of Mahayāna with their kōans and *mandalas* and *tantras*? Or the admixture of Buddhism with Hinduism and animism so prevalent in Southeast Asia?

The Buddha’s main fear was that his teaching would fall into the hands of professional rhapsodes, particularly those who specialized in improvising on given religious themes at public gatherings (*samajjas*) to celebrate a feast-day. These rhapsodes seem to have performed ballad-like sequences with speeches and dialogue in verse. Strung loosely on a non-metrical narrative framework, such sequences were called *akkhānas*, of which a surviving example may well be the final *vagga* (the *Pārāyaṇa*) of the *Sutta Nipāta*. The Buddha himself explicated its complex verses on five occasions.

Some of the more dramatic scenes in the suttas may in fact utilize their techniques. Take that boastful Jain who had sworn to thump and shake the Buddha in debate, only to find himself speechless in the opening round. Having answered the Buddha’s initial question (on royal executive control) with far too much elaboration, recklessly expanding the political premise to oligarchic communities, he is caught off guard by the Buddha’s follow-up (on man’s executive control

over his own body). The same question is put to him a second time, and yet a third time, but the Jain just sits there frozen, dried up, unable to manage a 'yes' or 'no'. Intellectually, he's stuck, of course, desperately searching for a way out. But, because of his boisterous nature, he's trapped in a far more damaging emotional impasse. What today we would call a psychological block. The text continues: 'At the third time of asking, a thunder-wielding spirit, with an iron bolt through its head, blazed in the air above Saccaka, threatening to split his skull into seven pieces.⁵ The Blessed One saw the thunder-spirit and so did Saccaka, the Nigaṇṭha's son.'⁶

Greek epic used similar visionary interventions to dramatize a hidden crisis. At the opening of the *Iliad*, for example, Achilles flares up in anger at his public humiliation by Agamemnon. His hand grips his sword-hilt. The sword has already half slipped out of its scabbard when, for an instant, he seems to waver. For Athene has materialized to counsel and restrain him:

'The goddess standing behind Peleus' son caught him by the fair hair, appearing to him only, for no man of the others saw her. Achilles in amazement turned about, and straightway knew Pallas Athene and the terrible eyes shining.'⁷

Achilles pours out his grievances to her; she patiently answers, until he snaps his sword back into its scabbard:

'He spoke, and laid his heavy hand on the silver sword hilt and thrust the great blade back into the scabbard nor

disobeyed the word of Athene. And she went back again to Olympus to the house of Zeus of the aegis with the other divinities.'

How long does that (18-line) altercation take? Like a car-skid, it's impossible to reckon. A split second is allowed to expand (whether presided over by calmly reasoning Athene or the blazing thunderbolt-spirit) into a visionary dimension before the text returns to public events in standard narrative time. It is an epic device, derived in this case no doubt from contemporary Hindu oral tradition. The sutta continues: 'Then Saccaka was terrified, his hair stood up on end and, seeking refuge with the Buddha, he said: "Ask me, Master Gotama; I will answer.'" So the psychological spell is broken, the tension resolved, and the Jain can finally spill out his answer: 'No, Master Gotama'.

Since the suttas rarely pitch the dramatic stakes quite so high, they seldom need to call on such a complex psychological device. But Saccaka's character had been presented at such unusual length that his confrontation with the Buddha entailed this overwhelming rhetorical technique. His hubris and subsequent collapse must, in any case, have been reminiscent of similar bombastic encounters in the popular repertoire. Though chapter and verse are missing, it would be surprising if the composition of the suttas, in the form they have come down to us, had in no respect been influenced by the rhapsodic tradition.

* * *

Just as drumheads wear thin, so texts become frayed, their vigour dissipated by the needs of commentary and translation. To that extent, the Buddha's prophecy is self-evident and self-fulfilling. Instability of transmission in itself, however, has never invalidated his basic insights. Elaborations may have distorted, or disguised, or trivialized the *Dhammaniyāna*, but they could not extinguish it.⁸ *Uppādā vā bhikkhave tathāgatānaṃ, anuppādā vā tathāgatānaṃ ...*: 'Whether Buddhas arise or not, it is a natural, unchanging truth that all compounded things [*saṅkhāra*] are unenduring [*anicca*], unstable [*dukkha*], and not-self [*anattā*]. The Dhamma is not concerned with identity. Its incontrovertible laws resist the very notion of patchwork. It takes precedence over terminology, over suttas, over interpretations whose haphazard formulations, with their various tropes and propositions and analyses, are themselves conditioned and determined by it. On the unbending nature of *Truth*, the Buddha takes his stand.

As in the following parable devised for the same blustering Saccaka:

'Suppose someone in search of heartwood, Saccaka, spotting a tall, young banana shoot in the woods, decides to chop it down at the root. Having chopped it down with his axe, he proceeds to hack off the crown; having hacked off the crown, he unrolls the spirals of leaves without coming across a trace of softwood, let alone hardwood ...'⁹

For the banana-tree is no tree at all, having neither bark nor wood. A vegetable, strictly speaking, it thrusts upward in a rolled sheaf from which the leaves unfurl. The top quality heartwood of which the Buddha must have been thinking was either that of teak or the Sāla tree (*Shorea robusta*), much used in Nepal, whose straight trunk grows to thirty metres in height. Elsewhere he graded even genuine hardwood, from the unreliable and unsound to the wholly sound and reliable, in a fivefold concentric cross-section: that is, from the boughs to the outer bark, to the inner bark, to the softwood, to the ringed core at the heart. So if anyone searching for heartwood chops off only boughs or bark or softwood to cart home, he's wasting his time. His timber will not be sound; it will inevitably warp and buckle and collapse. 'So whatever it was this good man had to make with heartwood, his purpose will not be served.'¹⁰

In much the same terms, the wanderer Vacchagotta celebrates the pithiness of the Buddha's teaching: 'As a great Sāla tree is stripped, with the passing years, of its branches and foliage, its bark and sapwood, so this discourse of Master Gotama, divested of branches and foliage, bark and sapwood, consists purely of heartwood.'¹¹ Which should be read, primarily, not as a compliment to the concision of the Buddha's style, but to its unremitting concentration.

Now to return to Saccaka: the image of the Jain in that parable is the wild plantain or banana-tree, of course; the image of the Buddha, the heartwood.

Banana stems are hollow; heartwood, dependably solid. For Buddhist texts, as this woodland lore proposes, are not modernist texts to be unpetalled leaf by leaf like a banana-frond, or a lettuce, without a kernel, without a node, without a defining core or axis. Truth is that axis and Dhamma, that heartwood, bound to survive as the assurance of ‘ultimate wisdom’ is always present. ‘There is no virtue even in many thousands of stanzas,’ the Buddha insisted. ‘A single line of a stanza which contains the Truth is better.’ Then he added a single stanza:

‘Though ten times one hundred verses
Are made up of meaningless lines,
Better one line filled with meaning,
By hearing which one is at peace.’¹²

That much is sure, though these concerns are implicit and not actively at issue in the Parable of the Drum.

* * *

Less clear is what the Buddha held to be the function and limits of art. After developing the elaborate image of the summoning-drum, he at once distanced himself from poetic discourse by characterizing it as ‘mere strings of pretty words and phrases’.

Mostly he responded to individual enquiries, expressing unprompted and unassuming needs. ‘If a bhikkhu has faith,’ he once remarked, ‘but does not approach me, then Dhamma-teaching does not occur to the Tathāgata. But if a bhikkhu has faith and

approaches me, then Dhamma-teaching does occur to the Tathāgata.’ His own spontaneity, even then, depended on eight further provisos: the enquirer must personally attend on the Buddha; must question him; must listen to Dhamma with an attentive ear; must learn by heart the Dhamma he has heard; must examine the meaning of the teachings he has learned by heart; must understand the context and application of that Dhamma, by practising Dhamma according to the Dhamma; must enunciate distinctly and express himself courteously; must be one who can teach and encourage his fellow-monks by uplifting them with joy.¹³ In short, it had to be a participatory exercise, a spiritual tutorial. The Buddha either would, or could, only give such tutorials in a seriously engaged, cooperative context. The Dhamma was never for mere intellectual distraction, or curiosity, or entertainment.

The ideal was incision, precision, concision. Even when addressing large audiences, he ‘neither flattered nor berated that audience; he instructed, urged, roused and encouraged that audience with talk purely on the Dhamma’.¹⁴ He was suspicious of verbal display, of pretension, of bravura. His own voice (according to one Uttara, sent by a Brahman to spy on ‘the monk Gotama’) possessed eight qualities: it was ‘distinct, intelligible, melodious, audible, ringing, incisive, deep and sonorous’.¹⁵ In others, such deep, melodious utterance might well have provoked a certain rhetorical self-indulgence counterchecked with theatrical self-

restraint. Even the Buddha, on occasion, may have felt an actor's urge.

Elsewhere he described his own self-composure when teaching like this:

'I have had the experience of teaching the Dhamma to an assembly of many hundreds. Perhaps someone there may have fantasized: "The monk Gotama is preaching the Dhamma just for me!" That would have been a delusion. A Perfect One preaches the Dhamma to others only to impart wisdom. As soon as the talk is over, I steady my thinking within myself, quieten it down, bring it to singleness of focus, centring it on that same sign for concentration in which I constantly abide.'¹⁶

What he had to guard against, then, was being carried away by fine words, fine phrases, aesthetic pleasure of any kind as ends-in-themselves. As he recalled from his unenlightened days: 'Elation arose in me; and owing to the elation, my concentration died away, the illumination faded and so did the vision of forms ...'¹⁷ For one danger of a too fluent literary imagination is to be snared into self-conceit. This suggests why the Buddha was so resolutely opposed to a *metrical* version of his teachings, which two brothers called Yamelu and Tekula, monks from Sāvattthī, had once proposed: 'Lord, since the bhikkhus are born with various names, of various races, having "gone forth" from various clans, they corrupt the word of the Blessed One by transposing it into their own tongue. Let us render the words of the Buddha into classical metre.'¹⁸

This, on the face of it, seems sensible enough. Metre is an age-old mnemonic device and, according to the suttas, was deployed on occasion impromptu by the Buddha himself. For example, when he capped six stanzas, addressed to him by the Brahman student Vāseṭṭha, with a further fifty-seven of his own;¹⁹ or when he played variations (for another Brahman) on the set theme of whether sins could be bathed away in a supposedly holy river;²⁰ or, when vexed at dissension in the Sangha, he extemporized a soliloquized rebuke in ten interlinked stanzas.²¹ To excel in such improvised verse-debates at the time was a highly prized skill. The task of rendering the Buddha's discourses permanently into metre, the two monks must have argued, would consolidate them into a universal, authentic and authorized text.

But, instead of encouragement, they found themselves roundly rebuked:

'Misguided men, how can you say "Let us render the words of the Buddha into classical metre"? This will neither excite faith in the faithless nor increase faith in the faithful. Rather, it will perpetuate faithlessness in the faithless and endanger some of the faithful.'

After rebuking the two brothers and delivering a Dhamma talk, he turned to the Sangha thus: 'Bhikkhus, the word of the Buddha is not to be rendered into classical metre. Whoever does so commits an offence of wrongdoing. But I permit each of you to memorize the words of the Buddha in his own tongue.'

Perhaps the Buddha was alerted by the brothers' stagey 'fine voices and fine delivery'. A metrical text was bound to be a *literary* text. Once verse translation was admitted, poetic recitations were bound to follow. With poetic recitations, improvisation and all manner of exhibitionism could spontaneously flourish. Better a babel of tongues, better the Dhamma transacted in a hundred different dialects, than a Dhamma appropriated to art.

Whatever the target language, the Dhamma should never be converted into a mere literary exercise. Or some melodramatic variant of *akkhānas*. Of the four different kinds of poets distinguished in the *Aṅguttara Nikāya* – those creating imaginatively original work; secular as opposed to religious poets; improvisers on extempore topics (an art, as we have seen, at which the Buddha himself excelled); and traditional bards rehearsing and developing widely popular themes – it was clearly from the last that the Buddha had the most to fear.²² (In a ninefold classification of Buddhist literature, such prose-and-verse *mélange*, as a genre, is called *geyya*.)

* * *

This still leaves the central problem only partially resolved: how does the Buddha square his own imaginative use of language with his rejection of figurative speech by 'poets'? My conclusion on the Parable of the Drum is this: while suspicious of the

attractions of poetry and the wiles of poets, the Buddha was not averse to a literary device, or literary stratagem, as long as it remained a *supplement*, an optional extra, an imaginative excess produced by the very thrust of the argument. With Emerson he would have agreed: 'The intellect is stimulated by the statement of truth in a trope and the will by clothing the laws of life in illusions. But the unities of Truth and of Right [of the Dhamma, in other words] are not broken by the disguise.'²³ He was resolutely opposed (it follows) to any unconditional takeover of spiritual doctrine by rhapsodes and others, especially at the hands of 'outsiders' intent on emending and refabricating his own texts. The pretence of aesthetic autonomy would have been dismissed as delusion.

The Buddha's position becomes clearer if the contrast, implicit between his assessment of his own discourses and his conception of 'poetry', is fully spelled out. The contradistinction is fourfold:

1. The Buddha's discourses are typified as 'profound'. Poetic discourse then, in apposition, must be deliberately concerned with superficial – that is, aesthetic – manifestations, 'mere strings of pretty words and phrases', calling attention to their own techniques and modes of utterance.

2. The Buddha's discourses are typified as 'transcendental'. Poetic discourse then, in apposition, must delight in its response to empirical phenomena and demands of the senses, fashioning out of them (by a semblance of closure) a stay against confusion in a haphazard and transitory world.

3. The Buddha's discourses are typified as dealing with 'the Void'. Poetic discourse then, in apposition, must be continually aspiring toward – without ever quite achieving – plenitude: the simultaneous grasp of both meaning and essence, as if the sole fulfilment of human experience lay in its expression.

4. The Buddha's discourses are typified as setting 'hearts on ultimate wisdom'. Poetic discourse then, in apposition, must be viewed as a pursuit of an ever-receding horizon, a mirage, a self-induced illusion.

Such is the implicit charge against art in its extreme predatory form, sometimes called (following Gautier) 'Art for Art's Sake'. Just as Plato condemned poetry, among other things, for blasphemy – that is, lying about the gods – and outlawed the likes of Homer, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides and Aristophanes from his ideal city, so the Buddha's rejection of the imperial imagination was absolute.

* * *

The anathema runs: 'He who imagines, bhikkhus, is bound by Māra; he who does not imagine is freed from the Evil One. If you say "I am," what you really mean is "I am imagining." If you say "I shall be," what you really mean is "I shall be imagining." If you say "I shall not be," what you really mean is "I shall not be imagining." Imagining what? That "I shall be embodied ... I shall be formless ... I shall be conscious ... I shall be unconscious ... I shall be neither conscious nor

unconscious ...” All that is imagining. The imagination, *bhikkhus*, is a disease; imagination is an abscess, a barb. That is why, *bhikkhus*, you must say: “With mind free from imaginings we shall abide.”²⁴

Yet commonplace skips of the imagination were certainly not disallowed. Take the occasion when Ānanda marvelled, in the Buddha’s presence, at how a certain sutta could be savoured again and again. ‘Wherever he tasted, a monk would enjoy a sweet, delicious, unadulterated flavour’, he declared; and the Buddha accepted the compliment, suggesting that it might in future be called the ‘Honey-Ball’, or ‘Sweetmeat’ Sutta.²⁵ Such metaphoric play was somehow *not* regarded as ‘conceptual proliferation’ (*papañca-sañña-saṅkhā*), which was the peculiar object of the sutta’s critique.²⁶ Nor was wit, nor delight in verbal proliferation, invariably regarded as imaginative ‘palpitation’ or ‘agitation’; in this instance, perhaps, because it entailed no egocentric projection or intrusion. Joy in verbal conceits alone was evidently *not* a ‘disease’ or pustulent ‘abscess’ (tropes are in themselves signs of metaphoric proliferation).

The rambling, illicit imagination was apparently one which involved an acute form of self-aggrandizement, and so metaphysical transgression. Visionary speculation, in a closeup of any kind, was always condemned as *papañca*. ‘Stick to sense experience’ was the supreme rule:

‘In the seen there will just be the seen;
 In the heard, just the heard;
 In the sensed, just the sensed;
 In the recognized, just the recognized.
 That’s how, Bāhiya, you must train yourself.’²⁷

That’s maybe the reason why empirical analogies, however discursive or far-fetched, were never dismissed out of hand. Unlike Plato, then, the Buddha did not outlaw traditional poetry and its performers so much as transcendental visions and dramatic self-sublimation.

Poetry, in this permitted sense, was both immediate and practical, like wisdom (*pañña*); its insights were thus the best guide to the deconstruction of our obsessively proliferating and formulaic schemata. The process is imaginatively evoked by an analogy from carpentry: ‘Just as a skilled joiner, or his apprentice, might knock out and extract a blunt peg by means of a sharper one ...’ – each successive peg being replaced until finally the sharpest peg of all can be slipped out.²⁸ What the Buddha recommended here was the substitution of one (distracting) sign by another (more helpful) sign as a means of quietening and concentrating the mind in meditation. We might well wonder whether a carpenter’s trick can be so neatly adapted to depth-psychology; whether unconscious ‘displacements’ in dreams (as argued by Freud) can be so readily duplicated by conscious displacements of one sign (*nimitta*) by another in meditation.²⁹

But poetic images could be said to serve this aim in precisely that way – with each more pointed analogy deftly knocking out a blunter, cruder analogy, image supplanting image, in a sustained deconceptualization of the mind.³⁰ As aids in the reflexive investigation of the mind by the mind (*vitakka-vicārā*), the play of metaphors may not be invited, but it is certainly not condemned. It may even be essential until poetic intuitions can themselves be left behind.

* * *

But play was never authorized for play's sake. The embargo on all forms of physical and intellectual and artistic recreation was absolute. No games, no gaming, no sport. No athletic prowess of any kind: neither boxing, nor wrestling, nor archery, nor bamboo-acrobatics, nor cock-fights, bullfights, elephant-fights, etc. No competitive board-games either. Nothing based on skill or chance, like pushpenny ('flipping cowries with thumb and finger'), or dice, or marbles, or chess (either 'on eight-squared or ten-squared boards'). Nor witty and fanciful exercises, including those of the most intellectually demanding kind: alphabetical riddles, mind-reading, 'playing chess on moon-shaped chessboards' or 'imaginary chess using the sky as a chessboard'. Nor aesthetic diversions like 'playing with brush and paints', attending recitations, or visiting art exhibitions. Not even the most trivial social or solitary entertainments: singing, hand-clapping, ball-

playing, drumming, whistling through folded leaves, play-acting, clowning, or make-believe games with miniature chariots and ploughs and other children's toys.³¹ Whoever has faith in a Buddha, declared the Buddha, 'becomes one who abstains from dancing, singing, music and theatrical shows.'³²

'Love of company is a thorn to a lover of seclusion. Devotion to the sign of beauty is a thorn to one devoted to contemplating the sign of loathsomeness in the body. Seeing shows is a thorn to one guarding his sense-doors. The vicinity of women is a thorn to one leading the holy life.'³³

The embargo is total since, far from underestimating art, the Buddha was fully aware of its all-pervasive and uncanny *force*.

'Have you ever seen an elaborate painting?' he asked once. 'Yes, Lord', his monks replied. 'Now that elaborate painting, bhikkhus, was devised by mind,' he warned them. 'Therefore mind is more intricate than even that elaborate painting.'³⁴ On the same analogy, of course, the mind is more intricate than even the most elaborate poem. For art makes visible, tangible, audible the incredibly devious complexity of the mind in its creative urge.³⁵ It not only replicates natural objects as signs, but multiplies signs as if they were natural objects. 'Just as a dyer or painter,' the Buddha continued,

'using turmeric or madder or indigo, can reproduce the form [*rūpa*] of a man or woman down to the smallest

detail on a piece of cloth or on a wall or wooden panel, in the same way, bhikkhus, an ordinary uncounselled layman brings body [*rūpa*] into existence ... brings feelings into existence ... brings perception into existence ... brings mental formations [*saṅkhāra*] into existence ... brings consciousness into existence.’

We are all creative artists of ourselves: that is, we devise ourselves, project ourselves, impersonate ourselves, dramatize ourselves in our own narrative fictions. Even our appearance, to a large extent, is the product of our imagination.³⁶ In Buddhist terms, we are all the individual script-writers of our *kamma*.

Gifted with such magical skill, no wonder we readily fall victims to the spell-binding charm of poets, story-tellers, visionaries. All play on the instrument of their feelings and thoughts and perceptions to fabricate an illusion, a mirage, a phantasmagoria in excess even of that continually projected on to our six sense-organs. Just as the mirage of the autobiographical ‘I’ must painstakingly be dissipated, so, correspondingly, must all art. Buddhism, at heart, is iconoclastic. Everything ‘beautiful, exciting, intoxicating, entrancing, captivating’ must be eradicated; for *all* are forms of self-infatuation and self-entrapment.³⁷

The most provocative, most shocking parable in this context is that of the lute:

‘Imagine a king, bhikkhus, or a king’s chief minister, who has never heard the sound of a lute. “What is it?” he involuntarily exclaims, on hearing it for the first time: “What can that be? How beautiful it sounds! How

exciting! How intoxicating! How entrancing! How utterly captivating!” And his attendants tell him: “It is the sound, Sire, of what is called a lute.” “Go, fetch me that lute,” he orders. So an attendant fetches it, saying: “Here is the lute, Sire, whose sound you found so beautiful, so exciting, so intoxicating, so entrancing, so utterly captivating.” “Not the lute, man,” he snaps back; “just fetch me the sound.” Respectfully, the attendant explains: “This instrument which is called a lute, Sire, is constructed out of a variety of parts, a great number of parts, Sire, that it makes a sound; that is to say, owing to the belly, the sounding-board, the arm, the head, the strings, the plectrum and the efforts of a man’s fingers it makes that sound which you found so beautiful, so exciting, so intoxicating, so entrancing, so utterly captivating.” The king, or the king’s chief minister, then smashes the lute into ten or a hundred pieces. Having smashed it, he rips it into splinters, throws them on a fire and reduces them to ashes. Having reduced the splinters to ashes, he winnows them in a strong wind or tosses them in a river to be whirled away by the current. Then he makes this pronouncement: “What you call a lute – whatever a so-called lute may be – is a poor contraption, my good man. People have been infatuated and misled by it for too long!”³⁸

The infatuation is real enough; but the sound, a mere will-o’-the-wisp. For the sound, in itself, has no independent, autonomous existence. Like the ego, it is a conditioned, intermittent phenomenon bodied forth by the lute.

This may be an extension of another musical metaphor in which the body is an instrument whose life is breath:

‘Once upon a time a trumpeter visited a frontier district with his conch-shell. On coming to a village, he took up his post at its centre, blew his conch-shell three times, set the conch-shell on the ground and sat down to one side.

‘Now that puzzled the locals. At once they asked themselves: “Where did this sound come from that’s so beautiful, so exciting, so intoxicating, so entrancing, so utterly captivating?” Gathering round the trumpeter, they asked him: “Sir, how did you make such a beautiful, such an exciting, such an intoxicating, such an entrancing, such an utterly captivating sound?” “Friends,” he replied, “it was this conch-shell that made the sound.”

‘Crying, “Speak, Sir Trumpet, speak!”, they grabbed it and flung it on its back. But no, it just went “clonk”. They laid it mouth down ... tossed it this way and that ... propped it over on one side and upside down ... thumped it with their fists ... chucked clods of earth at it ... thrashed it with sticks ... poked it with swords ... shook it sideways, downwards, upwards ... all the time crying, “Speak, Sir Trumpet, speak!” But it made no sound. No trumpet-sound.

‘What struck the trumpeter, throughout these proceedings, was: “What clowns these border folk are! What idiotic goings-on! How can they expect to hear a sound unless they tackle things right!” So, with all the villagers watching, he picked up his conch-shell, gave it three blasts and sauntered off.

‘At last it dawned on the frontiersmen. “Ah!” they sighed. “When that conch-shell was connected with a human being, and was connected with exertion, and was connected with wind, then it made a sound. But when

that conch-shell was not connected with a human being, was not connected with exertion, was not connected with wind, then that conch-shell was mute!”³⁹

These villagers, like the king, maul and mangle a magically exotic instrument. Both are under a spell of enchantment. Both are thrilled by an unexpected and artful display. Both, to us, are bound to seem impulsive and misguided. But what proved folly for the villagers, in their boorish quest for the source of that thrill, becomes wisdom in a king who aspires to disenchantment and a disembodied purity of mind. As the lute’s body (belly, board, arm, head, strings, etc.), in its complex fashioning, is the necessary intermediary between the human mind (in all *its* complexity) and the intricate enchantment of sound, so those tonal vibrations are merely the product of the mind at a double remove. Smash the instrument and you may frustrate the extravagances of the mind. Bewitching beauty, as an end in itself, is invariably suspect; and if all art aspires to the condition of music, then the emotional range and ravishment of Indian *ragas* (as sounded here) are peculiarly suspect.

* * *

Products of art, however, were never the Buddha’s main concern. It was their mode of production, rather. It was productive vitality – ‘creative’ power, as we should say – itself. It was the artisan’s role as an intensely skilful, idiosyncratic producer that the Buddha valued:

‘To give an example, it’s precisely as if a skilled potter or his apprentice were to form out of well-kneaded clay whatever shape of pot he desired ... Or as if a skilled ivory-cutter or his apprentice were to produce from a smooth-polished elephant tusk whatever species of carving he might desire ... Or as if a skilled goldsmith or his apprentice were to mould out of carefully wrought gold whatever ornament he might desire.’⁴⁰

We must all become potters, ivory-carvers, goldsmiths of ourselves: that was his lesson. We must learn to produce a miraculous presence (now visible, now invisible) capable of self-multiplication, of penetrating obstructions, of plunging in and out of the earth, of walking on water, of zooming through time and space in a lotus-position, even of touching and stroking the sun and moon. The concentration of art, in short, was for those mentally generated, supernatural attainments that won increasing prestige in later phases of Buddhism.

Psychic intensity, then, was always the goal, not such misleading, exploitative counterparts as artistic potency, artistic invisibility, artistic self-multiplication, artistic magic of any kind. Which is why the winged imagination of rhapsodes surely posed such a threat. Didn’t they too ‘being one, become many; being many, become one’? Didn’t they too surreptitiously ‘appear and vanish’? Didn’t they too ‘pass unhindered through walls, through ramparts, through mountains, as though in space’? Didn’t they too ‘dive in and out of earth as though in water or go on unbroken water as though

on earth'? Or 'seated crosslegged, travel in space like winged birds'? Or 'with their hands, touch and stroke the sun and moon'? Yet the Buddha's disciples were expressly forbidden to attempt the linguistic feats of a Virgil, Dante, Shakespeare or Milton. Put another way, the Buddha's disciples were to transcend the likes of Virgil, Dante, Shakespeare, Milton *outside language*. Not poetic but psychic genius was what the Buddha proclaimed.

Even psychic genius (with the exception of Mahā-Moggallāna and the Buddha himself) was usually suspect and quickly discounted since, in all probability, it was sham. Like those tricks of the Buddha's archrival, his cousin Devadatta, who only reached 'that degree of psychic power attainable even by those who have not entered upon the Noble Path.' Once, Sāriputta was fooled into pronouncing: 'Great is the psychic power of the son of Godhi!'⁴¹ But the Buddha's own final verdict was scornful: 'Owing to special attainments [meaning magical powers] though of trifling value, he came to a halt midway through his career ...'⁴² For 'psychic power', like its aesthetic counterpart, could too readily be misappropriated for eliciting marvels, deceptive illusions and Faustian spectacles as a means of mass manipulation to perverse ends.

The Buddha himself had the reputation, in Jain circles, of magically converting the disciples of other sects; and, in debate with a Jain on one occasion, he silyly traded on such commonly held beliefs as his attainment of magical powers in intense *samādhi*, sufficient to reduce the town of Nāḷandā (where the

debate took place) or even ‘ten, twenty, thirty, forty or fifty Nālandās ... to ashes with one mental act of hate’.⁴³ Though he sometimes employed supernatural powers (as in his conversion of Angulimāla) and frequently exercised the gift of divination (his ability to read other minds), he never compromised his own authority. Usually he was intent, rather, on minimizing his peculiar gifts. For such attainments, a sutta comments, ‘if displayed for their own sake in order to impress people, are no different from the magical arts called respectively “Gandhārī” and “Maṇikā” ...’ which was why he, the Buddha, regarded such marvels as a source of shame, humiliation and disgust.⁴⁴

THE FORCE OF IMAGERY

The Buddha's entourage seems often to have been in an uproar. Despite his insistence that noise was 'a thorn to meditation', there was clearly a good deal of distracting commotion. One day it might be the tumultuous visit of a Brahman household with its food-offerings;¹ another day a party of local worthies 'arriving in state-coaches with postilions and outriders.'² Once the Buddha grew so upset at the incursion of five hundred monks, headed by Sāriputta and Mahā-Moggallāna, 'exchanging greetings with the resident bhikkhus, preparing beds and putting away bowls and outer robes,' that he peremptorily dismissed the whole Sangha on the spot.

Imagine the hubbub rapidly subsiding. The incredulous silence. It was only an appeal from his own fellow clansmen that eventually persuaded the Buddha to relent:

‘Lord, there are new bhikkhus here, but recently recruited to this Dhamma and Discipline. If they receive no opportunity to see the Blessed One, some shift or alteration may affect their hearts. Just as when seedlings receive no water, some shift or alteration is bound to affect them, or when a young calf is denied sight of its mother, some shift or alteration could affect its heart, so too it may be with them. Lord, let the Blessed One welcome and help the Sangha as he used to in the past.’³

‘Between them’, **the sutta comments**,

‘they were able to restore the Blessed One’s confidence with the figures of the seedling and the young calf.’

‘Then the Venerable Mahā-Moggallāna instructed the bhikkhus: “Rise, friends, take your bowls and robes. The Blessed One’s confidence has been restored by the Sakyans ... with the figures of the seedling and the young calf.”’⁴

Were these cautions derived, then, from some homely local proverbs? Is that why they touched the Buddha’s heart? Was the appeal in this instance so effective since it was couched in specifically Sakyan terms? One thing alone can be deduced with certainty: if the Buddha was so susceptible to figurative language, it is no wonder that he deployed it so subtly and suggestively in his own repeated expositions, dialogues, arguments and rhetorical appeals.



Similes were not just valued for their power, however; their key role, in a transcendent universe, was to evoke the inconceivable, to ponder the incomprehensible, to express the ultimately inexpressible. Infinite time, for example. 'Can it be done, Lord, with a simile?' his monks enquire. 'It can, bhikkhus,' the Buddha replies, surveying the numberless grains of sand from the source to the mouth of the River Ganges for comparative calculation.⁵ In matters beyond possible description, possible analysis, possible computation, a leap of the imagination was needed. What could not be reckoned might still be poetically confirmed.

For that very reason, perhaps, the introduction of a simile into public argument produced a hesitant air, as if this might be construed as breaching the terms of debate. The brash Aggivessana, for example, as if needing permission to proceed, first puts out this probe: 'A simile occurs to me, Master Gotama'; to which the Buddha gives formal assent: 'Let it occur to you, Aggivessana.' After Aggivessana's crushing defeat, that exchange is echoed by an onlooker in a bid to bring proceedings imaginatively to a close: 'A simile occurs to me, Master Gotama'; and again the request is formally granted: 'Let it occur to you, Dummukkha.'⁶

For a repertoire of similes was not confined, of course, to the Buddha or his circle. It constituted a common coinage between laymen as well as monks. What distinguished the Buddha on occasion, he claimed, was his originality:

‘And there came to me spontaneously this stanza never heard before ...’⁷

‘Now three similes occurred to me spontaneously, never heard before, unknown before ...’⁸

By thus drawing attention to his instinctive faculties, he must have hoped to encourage self-reliance in others, as an anecdote from Rājagaha suggests. A novice, whose first timid effort at expounding the Dhamma had failed to convert a local prince, turned to the Buddha for advice. In the prince’s case, the Buddha determined, any exposition was bound to fail. Why? Because a dialectical argument in support of renunciation cannot hope to convince someone who has never experienced the *state* of renunciation.

To reinforce this phenomenological position, the Buddha recounted two parables. The first concerns elephants, oxen and horses: all animals capable of domestication, yet the divide between the tamed and the as-yet-untamed remains absolute. The second concerns a ‘high rock’. This rock commands a wide view of ‘beautiful parks and orchards, meadows and lakes,’ a view that has to be seen to be believed; in fact, that cannot be believed unless one has been personally taken by the arm by a friend and helped to make the laborious and breath-consuming ascent. Yahooing from the top is no good. Shouting is meaningless. Without friendly intervention and first-hand experience, anyone down below is helplessly ‘obstructed by this great rock’.

In case of a misunderstanding, the Buddha at once supplied an allegorical key:

‘So too, Aciravata, Prince Jayasena is obstructed by a still greater rock of ignorance; the rewards of renunciation can never be known to a prince daily lapped in sensuality.’

The novice must have been dazzled by the performance. But the Buddha was not yet finished. In fact, he had only just reached the punch-line: ‘Aciravata, if these two similes had occurred to you spontaneously while instructing Prince Jayasena, he might have acquired confidence in you ...’ At which the novice plucked up enough courage to ask: ‘Venerable sir, how should these two similes occur to me spontaneously, never heard before, as they occurred to the Blessed One?’⁹

As it happens we can guess at the source of the Parable of the Rock, since the Buddha had his own elevated retreat (with wide and wonderful views) above Rājagaha; it was known as Vulture Peak Rock.¹⁰ But young Aciravata surely had a right to feel perplexed. For the source of the poetic imagination is mysterious and (as we might say) springs from the unconscious. It can no more be taught than dreaming; and, in the event, his question was left dangling. The Buddha merely embellished and further expounded the simile of the tamed and untamed elephants. Even he was unable to instil *literary* originality. Unless a novice was to catch it, as it were, by stimulus or contagion.

* * *

By underlining the inventive wealth and sheer novelty of his imagination, however, the Buddha also

implied that the main run of his similes, however apt, was not necessarily unique. The pervasive power of figurative language was not in question. But there was no patent in similes, as Ānanda once found to his cost. Wishing to speak up for the Buddha, who was shrewdly holding aloof, he boldly began: 'Friend, I shall give you a simile; for with the help of a simile intelligent people come to understand the meaning of what is said.'¹¹

What he launched into, though, was the simile of a walled city with a wise gate-keeper at a single gate:

'Friend, imagine a frontier fortress, far from the royal capital, with solid ramparts and turrets and just one gateway. The gate-keeper – being an experienced, prudent fellow – keeps out all strangers, admitting only those he knows. On his patrols round the walls, he spots neither cavity nor break in the ramparts, not a slit wide enough even for a cat to slip through. Surely he has a right to conclude that whatever man-size creatures enter or leave the fort can do so only by that one gate.'

In Buddhist circles, this had clearly become a commonplace image for the 'mind'; it is repeated verbatim by Sāriputta at least three times.¹² In Ānanda's context, however, it proves woefully inept. Far from the royal stronghold representing the 'mind', alertly guarded by watchfulness (*sāti*), the encircled fortress has here been misappropriated to worldly suffering (*dukkha*) whose only outlet (or 'escape') is the Dhamma. But why, then, that sagacious gate-keeper? Why is the question of *admittance* transformed to one of outlets? The simile, as used by both Ānanda

and Sāriputta, originated in all probability with the Buddha. In conscientiously attempting to cover for his Master, Ānanda borrowed not only his figurative style but (with these gauche results) the *figura* itself.

* * *

Ānanda surely meant nothing subversive. Signs derive from a process of substitution. All signs are open to interpretation. As Nāgasena declared: 'I shall explain one exposition by another exposition, one comparison by another comparison, one characteristic by another characteristic, one quality by another quality ...'¹³ So Ānanda may genuinely have conceived the walled city this way; Sāriputta, that way. Whether verbally or physically or visually expressed, whether condensed into icons or systematized into codes, each meaning needs scrupulous teasing-out. Just as a mime, who gestures and leaps about the stage exhibiting signs, needs quick-witted monitoring. Which is how Italo Calvino imagined Marco Polo conversing with Kublai Khan:

'The Great Khan deciphered the signs, but the connection between them and the places visited remained uncertain; he never knew whether Marco wished to enact an adventure that had befallen him on his journey, an exploit of the city's founder, the prophecy of an astrologer, a rebus or a charade to indicate a name. But, obscure or obvious as it might be, everything Marco displayed had the power of

emblems, which, once seen, cannot be forgotten or confused.¹⁴

Once speech set in – once Marco Polo had mastered the Tartar tongue – ‘you would have said communication between them was less happy than in the past.’ Which is exactly as Rousseau argued in his *Essai sur l’origine des langues*: the eloquence of emblems is preferable to the poor specificity of speech. Just as for Buddhists too much speech, too much verbal explication, tends to prove an embarrassment and trial.

Take that truncated stump which is one such Buddhist emblem. Planted in the forecourt of Wat Pah Nanachat,¹⁵ it must prove impenetrable for visitors unaware of its scriptural source defining a Buddha as one who has abandoned form, ‘cut off at the root, like a palm-tree stump that can no longer regenerate and bud to fruition.’¹⁶ Only then does the palm-tree stump, in all its ugliness, stand revealed as a sublime emblem of liberation.

* * *

It was in 1885 that a Buddhist flag was ceremoniously hoisted in Tokyo. Designed by an American, Colonel Henry Steel Olcott, its logo for the first time distinguished Buddhism, as a world communion, from all other religions. But flaunting such global insignia had never been a Buddhist priority. No official missionaries. No ‘papal’ authority. No authorized scriptures. No attempt at worldwide orthodoxy. Only

an insistence on the transcendent status of its founder whose image, some six hundred years after death, displayed an odd protuberance from the cranium above its elongated earlobes.¹⁷ While the suttas were still being orally transmitted, that is, his body was simultaneously transformed into an elaborate corpus of magical signs.

Thirty-two astrological 'Marks of a Great Man'¹⁸ were said to distinguish the Buddha's body from head to toe: his tongue was so large that it could lick both ear-holes, both nostrils and cover 'the whole of his forehead';¹⁹ on the soles of his feet were incised 'wheels with a thousand spokes, complete with hubs and rims';²⁰ his fingers were webbed; without stooping, the palms of both his hands rubbed his knees and the spread of his outstretched arms equalled his height; his body-hairs grew singly, each hair in its own pore; his skin was of a golden hue; his eyes, a deep shade of blue; he had forty teeth without gaps; he had eyelashes like an ox ... Even his male member, on occasion, became the object of supernatural, private display.²¹ All of which links him to the Vedas; and later Indian fantasy pursued similar memorabilia with the emergence of Bodhisattvas in the Mahayana tradition.

This is not something the Buddha, whom we know from the suttas, could ever have encouraged. At Sanchi, founded by the great Mauryan emperor Aśoka in the third century BCE, his presence is still only attested by a tree, a footprint, a wheel and an empty throne.

* * *

The Buddha's authentic touch, rather, is to be found in those impromptu discourses and dialogues which analyse the same basic premises, again and again, in cycles ranging from elaborate aetiologies to disconcerting fables.

His was an illiterate age. His gallery of similes and allegories were intended, above all, as mnemonic aids, instinctively to be grasped for their pictorial and narrative appeal. Just as his pervasive numerical sets were to be memorized, like shopping-lists, like rosary-beads, by insistent repetition. The *Aṅguttara Nikāya* (consisting of a book of solo items, a book of dual items, a book of triple items, a book of quadruple items and so forth to its final book of elevenfold items) may seem a taxonomical oddity to us. But such compiling of data in numerical bundles was an essential feature of all preliterate oral training.

Nor were such devices so different from the '*memoria technica*' of the Renaissance,²² which allocated items, say, in rhetorical texts that needed memorizing, to various statues and pillars and pediments of a diagrammatic façade in much the same way as the Buddha assigned 'conscience' to the pole, 'mind' to the reins, 'mindfulness' to the charioteer, 'meditation' to the axle and 'energy' to the wheels of a diagrammatic, do-it-yourself 'Chariot-according-to-the-Dhamma'.²³ Sometimes a cartoon-like set of allegorical tableaux was combined into a strip. As in these elevenfold characteristics of a good herdsman: who knows the watering-places, disinfects the cattle-sheds, picks

out flies' eggs from abrasion, bandages wounds, etc.²⁴ Though spatially scattered across the landscape, such a panorama was equally capable, point by point, of spiritual recuperation by the devout bhikkhu.

* * *

If our modern concern, above all else, is with matters of definition, the Indian mind was typically engaged with questions of marks or signs. What are the distinctive marks of a Buddha? What are the significant features of chariots? What are the key characteristics of a good herdsman? Such queries were themselves marks of genuine philosophical engagement. So Nāgasena, for one, must already have anticipated the King's intervention when asked to distinguish 'the characteristic mark of reasoning' from that of 'wisdom'; and doubtless he had an epigram ready. 'Taking hold', he replied, 'is the mark of reasoning; cutting off is the mark of wisdom.' But taking hold how? Cutting off how? And can these acts of holding and cutting be performed simultaneously? The distinction seems too generalized, too abstract. So King Milinda proposed the next decisive move. 'Give me an illustration,' he said.

We may be sure that Nāgasena had an apposite image in reserve. For, half disclosing it, he countered: 'Tell me, O King, how do barley reapers reap the barley?' That is, like all good teachers, he encouraged his royal pupil to think through his own imaginative task; and the King, as it turned out, could envisage a

harvesting scene well enough: 'They grasp the barley into a bunch with the left hand and, with a sickle in the right, they cut the barley.' And there you have it. Concise and emblematic as an inn sign: left hand and right performing their *different* skills in one *composite* gesture. It only needed the Master to decode the figure: 'Just so, O King, the recluse takes hold of his mind with reasoning and cuts off the defilements with wisdom.'²⁵

* * *

Such signs rarely become events in their own right. They function more like hieroglyphs or heraldic devices – diagrams not yet quick with life, not yet eager to displace (even for their brief moment of glory) the main thrust of the debate. Pali texts are studded with such signs. Take, for example, Sāriputta's effort to identify the psychological notion of interdependence with the image of 'a black and a white ox bound together by one rope or one yoke-tie.'²⁶ Again, the frame, as in that snapshot of the reapers, is frozen. The sole aim is to evoke an empirical situation that can be tested. The sole point is the follow-up question: 'Would it be right [in Sāriputta's words] to say that the black ox is the fetter of the white ox, or the white ox of the black?' Yet even a stock image of this kind can remain enchanting, as when the beauty of the 'homeless life' is mysteriously pronounced 'as utterly pure and polished as a conch-shell.'²⁷ This may be a formula – a reflex response in a stereotyped context – but, like stock epithets in oral epic, it never becomes dulled to a mere cliché.



The Buddha was master of such single sustained images, drawn from his immediate environment, like that of rivers and streams; or that of fire in perhaps the most famous of his sermons, the Fire Sermon, preached at Gayā Scarp, near Bodh Gayā, for the spiritual confirmation of three fire-worshippers and their numerous disciples after a great flood had miraculously drenched their sacrifices.²⁸

But often a sign is not so minutely determined. It remains more diffuse, retains more waste matter for casual appropriation. Take the Buddha's sign for the Dhamma itself: 'Just as the great ocean has only one taste, the taste of salt, so has this teaching only one taste, the taste of freedom.'²⁹ Yet salt water can notoriously not be drunk; and far from salt, the Buddha's teaching (by general consent) was intoxicatingly sweet. As the Brahman Pingiyāni testified: 'Just as someone weak from hunger, coming across honeycake, will enjoy its sweet, delicious taste, so, my dear sir, anyone hearing the Venerable Gotama's Dhamma will enjoy supreme confidence in his heart.'³⁰ It is not the taste, then, that can have been the Buddha's primary concern, but salt as the inescapable, omnipresent element pervading, and absorbed by, oceans everywhere. It is the idea of *diffusion* which links the taste of freedom (or deliverance) with the taste of salt. That is the slight shock of recognition which the simile offers, even while the vast, all-embracing ocean resounds, at the very edge of perception, as an inscrutable token of the Dhamma itself.

Freedom for what, though? Above all, for meditative practice. Each step and aspect of insight meditation (*vipassanā*) was at some point assigned its appropriate emblem, not as a mystery (for unravelling), but as an aid for contemplation. For example, to concentrate the mind by a *rallentando*, or deliberate slowing of the pulse, to a more subtle, studied calm: ‘Just as a fast walker might think: “Why am I hurrying? Why not slow down?” And, on reducing his pace: “What if I stood still?” And on stopping: “Why keep standing? Why not sit down?” And on sitting down: “Why just sit here? Why not lie down?”’³¹

But even after such calming concentration, thoughts can stray: ‘As in the last month of the rains, when crops are thick, a herdsman must tap and poke his cows – now on this side, now on that – to restrain and guide them with his stick ...’³² For thoughts disperse themselves and attach themselves to any available object until their starting-point, like a banyan overrun by creepers, is completely hidden.³³ Such wild tangles need systematic cultivation, ‘just as in the autumn a farmer with a large plough slices through all the spreading rootlets as he ploughs.’³⁴ Vassakāra, chief minister of Magadha, returning from Vesālī, reported on just such an encounter with the Buddha. ‘While he was there,’ he told Ānanda, ‘Master Gotama praised meditation in many a figure.’³⁵

The function of such signs as the frantic pedestrian, the professional herdsman, the hidden banyan or the autumn ploughman is at least fourfold: first, to illustrate

(however tangentially) wholly mental phenomena; second, to differentiate (however artificially) each stage of the meditative process; third, to promote (by verbal guidance) a meditative practice that can, at best, be only approximated; and fourth, to fix the practice and its sequence by each *figura* in the minds of the uninitiated. To such aids for meditation I shall return. Here I wish to trace the gradual animation of these inset figures as a narrative impulse invades their world. That impulse, though, was never sustained beyond the needs of illustration. Whatever may look, at first glance, like an epic simile in the suttas turns out, on consideration, never to be gratuitous, or imaginatively extravagant, in Homer's way.

* * *

The Buddha himself might have considered the use of all such similes as a deliberate attempt at category confusion: that is, a translation of one category of natural law (*niyāma*) to another, by applying physical laws (*utuniyāma*) – such as those controlling winds and rainfall, for example – to psychic laws (*cittaniyāma*) that control the workings of the mind; or applying biological laws (*bījaniyāma*) that determine heredity, to the universal moral law (*kammaniyāma*) that governs all human behaviour. 'As the seed, so the fruit,' ran the proverb.³⁶ An unwholesome act, he echoed, 'is like a margosa seed, or seed of the bitter gourd, planted in moist soil. The earth and water, ingested as nutriment, are wholly modified into an acridly pungent, foul taste.'

A wholesome act, on the other hand, ‘is like a sugar-cane seed, or wheat seed or fruit seed, planted in moist soil. The earth and water, ingested as nutriment, are converted into a sweet, refreshing and wholly delicious taste.’³⁷ Though such categories could also be reversed, transforming man-made objects (like chariots, as we have seen) by means of a spiritual interpretation; or inserting industrial contrivances into a categorical ‘natural’ or psychological context. As in this awesomely accumulative portrait of Māra (the personification of evil) in the guise of a huge royal *nāga* serpent:

‘His body was as big as a boat made of a single tree trunk; his hood was as broad as a brewer’s mat; his eyes were as big as Kosalan brass plates; his tongue flickered in and out of his mouth like forked lightning in and out of a thunder cloud; the sound of his breathing was like the sound of a smith’s bellows blowing.’³⁸

Or in the very opening verses of the *Dhammapada*:

‘Our life is the creation of our mind. With an impure mind, whatever one says or does brings suffering in its wake, just as the cartwheel follows the ox’s hoof. With a pure mind, whatever one says or does brings happiness in its wake, just as the shadow follows its owner.’³⁹

This raises some curious questions. Why should not the cartwheel radiate joy as it rolls in the wake of the pure mind? Why should not the shadow (of suffering) follow the defective mind? Here the symbolic fit is no longer incontrovertible; the point-counterpoint logic of the barley-reaper, no longer applicable. Perhaps the

Buddha felt that a natural phenomenon (the flitting shadow) was more suitably bonded to mental serenity; while a lumbering man-made contraption (the wheel), however skilled the wainwright, more resonant with the rumblings of mental malformations. Whichever it may be, these signs are clearly not open to infinite semiosis. Ultimately, one aspect only is significant: the feeling of being tracked – of being constantly policed – that leads either to the paranoia of a persecution complex (the wheel) or the buoyant flexibility of self-abandonment (the shadow).

No longer static, such signs conjure up a process, a momentum in time. Nothing, however briefly glimpsed, is immobilized: whether ox-cart or shadow, ‘hot coals smothered in ashes’ or ‘freshly squeezed milk’.⁴⁰ The milk will inevitably ‘turn sour’ just as the coals, sooner or later, must lose their heat. Everything is constantly on the move with a steady but inscrutable metamorphosis:

‘Just as a carpenter’s adze shows marks of wear-and-tear from fingers and thumb, without the carpenter being able to tell precisely how much was worn yesterday or today or any other day; all he knows is that everyday usage wore it away ... Or just as a sea-going boat, beached for six months by the winter tide, will have its rigging shredded by wind and timbers warped by sun and rain ...’⁴¹

From mere thumb-marks or shreds, one can never be sure exactly how much was rubbed, or rotted, off day by day; only that change is constant and that under

sufficiently rigorous scrutiny, everything would be seen to be in motion.

Compare the statuesque reaper in the barley with another harvesting scene: two bundles of reeds stacked to support each other. Remove one sheaf and the other will fall; remove the second and the first will fall.⁴² Such a stook, far from inert, is tense with hidden sags, potential collapse and disintegration. The stability of the interlocking image is hypothetical, the slippage already foreshadowed. The poise, the equilibrium, the interdependence – all are threatened.

Or recall the leper ‘with sores and abscesses, riddled with worms, who scratches the scabs off his wounds and cauterizes his limbs with a burning ember ...’⁴³ He could merely be read as a type emblematic of a diseased constitution overwhelmed by sensuality. But the figure is far from simple: numbed, he cauterizes his open sores (mistaking pain for pleasure) and scratches at the foul-smelling scabs ‘finding relief in tickling’. However deadened by addiction, craving still feeds on indulgence, indulgence on craving, in a vicious circle that finds a ‘measure of satisfaction in dependence’. The leper, then, is not immobilized in some cautionary pose. He does not simply represent disease or lust-in-action. His nervous fuss is masochistic in origin – the very reverse of independence. His restless twitching and grooming presents a psychological study of self-abuse, self-titillation and self-destruction.

It was this intrusive, probing, moulding mode that Coleridge labelled 'esemplastic'; and the Buddha's imagination at all times probed and intruded and colluded.⁴⁴ Even in such an unexpected image as that of the reformed wrong-doer who, after accumulating bad *kamma* in the past, now creates good *kamma* to brighten 'the world like the moon appearing from behind a cloud.'⁴⁵ With one luminous touch the Buddha both vindicates human endeavour and magically co-opts the universe. Only the sudden radiance is significant: light dazzling out of darkness and the possible transience of that light; since the shifting mass of cloud as well as the moon, of course, are again in constant motion.

* * *

For everything that we can touch and see and hear is evanescent. Whatever rehearses the evasive tricks and deformities of the mind cannot be timeless. Even what is beyond change, in the holy life, can only be negatively evoked as a yellow leaf that cannot turn green again, a lopped palm tree that cannot bud again, a cracked stone that cannot be repaired, a sick man not returning to his vomit.⁴⁶ Only the imperturbable is timeless.

This esemplastic quality of the Buddha's imagination stayed with him from at least the age of thirty-five (on attaining Enlightenment) to that of eighty (on the very brink of death). Compare another passage from the *Milindapāṇha* with the Buddha's great cry at the very

point of Enlightenment. At issue is the characteristic mark of concentration (*samādhi*). In the *Milindapāṇha*, the answer offered is: ‘All good qualities acknowledge concentration as their chief. They incline towards it and lead upwards to it.’⁴⁷ Then, as a follow-up, King Milinda is given this diagrammatic view of a roof: ‘As the rafters of a house incline and lead up to the ridge-pole, which is its apex, so too all good qualities incline and lead up to concentration.’

It’s a demonstration kit, though these exposed rafters reveal nothing beyond the original statement. If anything, they undermine it. For the King might well be left wondering why a ridge-pole was thought a fitting embodiment for *samādhi* rather than, say, the foundation or platform which supports the whole structure. In fact, it was a current cliché that could be pre-empted for any outstanding quality, good or bad. Even the Buddha, on occasion, was to use it – in relation to sloppy conduct, for instance, or sloppy practice generally. ‘Just as the beams of a sloping roof all rise to a peak, meet at a peak, are joined at a peak,’ he warned his bhikkhus, ‘so too all unskilful states, whatever they be, are rooted in ignorance, meet in ignorance, are combined with ignorance.’⁴⁸

But bursting out of *samādhi*, at the triumphant climax of Enlightenment, he typically deconstructed this whole naïve architectural programme:

‘Builder, you’ve been seen! You shall never build a house again!

All your rafters are broken! The ridge-pole shattered!

My mind is gone to nibbāna. This is the end of craving.’⁴⁹

Here there is no neat, predictable fit; and the ‘ridge-pole’ is certainly not ‘concentration’. If anything, it is lofty, self-satisfied *ignorance* supported by the rafters of defilement. It’s a demolition job. And the cry (*prosopopoeia*, in rhetorical terms) is addressed to Māra in the shape of his mighty architect, Desire:

‘For countless births I wandered in *saṃsāra*,
Seeking but not finding the builder of this house.
Painful is repeated birth!’⁵⁰

From that time on, the Buddha’s mind was always to be dynamically on the move. Naturally dramatic, it continually probed, spied, arrested – thinking through images, remoulding images in terms of images.

Forty-five years after this inspired tear-down of mental fabrications, he turned to the slow and painful attrition of the human body, sustained in the end only by extreme mental detachment. Frail and decrepit, the Buddha confessed to Ānanda:

‘Just as an old worn-out cart is held together merely by cording and patching, so the body of the Tathāgata is held together merely by the force of absorption in Final Attainment [*phala samāpatti*]. Ānanda, it is only when the Tathāgata abides in the signless [*animitta*] Concentration of Mind, numbed to sensation and disregarding phenomena, that his body is at ease.’⁵¹

That destructive solvent, distilled in concentration, and this dogged effort at self-maintenance are expressed in the same homely, unsettling terms.

* * *

Not only can each image be explored by narrative thrusts from within, it can also be multiplied for comparative focus from without; and such multiplications could be extended almost indefinitely.

Freedom was the Buddha's theme: both positive freedom (for meditative practice) and negative freedom (from mental constraints).⁵² It was to a lewd and indolent Everyman, peevish with worry and uncertainty, that the Buddha addressed himself. For these constraints, or 'hindrances' (*nīvaraṇas*), were reckoned five in number: sensuality, spite, uncertainty and agitation/lethargy (that contrapuntal pair). To deliverance from their fivefold predations the Buddha devoted a string of five overlapping tales, each with a matching moral drawn from the worlds of finance, medicine, law, slavery and commerce: 'Suppose a man borrowed a loan ... Suppose a man were racked with pain ... suppose a man were imprisoned ... suppose a man became a slave ... Suppose a merchant crossed a desert ...'⁵³

Each tale was delivered as a biographical sketch; each sketch, summed up at its close with an autobiographical reflection – a moment of self-recognition, or 'epiphany' as we might call it:

'I used to speculate on borrowed capital. Now my business is flourishing. I've paid off all my old debts with profit to spare – I'm delighted to say – to provide for my wife and children.'

'I used to be racked with pain, so sick that I could hardly eat, let alone move. Now my appetite's come back, the

fever's gone – I'm delighted to say – and I've regained all my former strength.'

'I used to be locked up in prison. Now at last I've been released. I'm safe and sound – I'm delighted to say – with all my property intact.'

'I used to be a slave, subject to another's whim, unable to move about as I pleased. Now that I've been freed – I'm delighted to say – I'm my own man again, able to go when and where I please.'

'Half-starved, I took a caravan across the desert. Now that long and dangerous trek is done. I'm back on my home ground safe and sound – I'm delighted to say – with no material loss incurred.'

It was this epiphany – this moment of solitary self-awareness – that was always the crux of the matter. Something beyond a teacher's reach which could only be illustrated by such exemplary fictions.

For the subjects of these five miniature portraits were really little more than types: the discharged debtor, the recovered patient, the released prisoner, the emancipated slave, the merchant's homecoming. The multiplicity, however, unleashes a cumulative power by suggesting an overall interdependence between legal and financial, and medical and social, and commercial aspects of freedom with their attendant blessings of health, wealth, strength, security and peace of mind. (These tales, incidentally, were recounted to a renegade king.) For the ultimate lesson was one of self-control. It is *mastery* that the Buddha was always extolling – reasserting mastery over ourselves, as the Buddha warned Ānanda shortly before his death:

‘Therefore let yourself be your own firm support; and let yourself – not anyone, or anything, else – be your refuge.’⁵⁴

* * *

Human nature needed incessant monitoring and self-analysis. Unlike Emanuel Swedenborg, however, the Buddha never prided himself on decoding the mysteries of nature. There were professionals for that, experts everywhere soliciting custom to explicate natural signs: items such as peculiar patterns made by rat bites, say, or the jarring cacophony of cawing crows, as well as more commonplace jobs such as interpreting a client’s physiognomy or physique or landmarks in his fields. Part estate-agent, part marriage-broker, part Lavater, part Spurzheim, the local soothsayer was a bit of each rolled into one. For a fee, of course. Performing such services was expressly forbidden to bhikkhus by the Buddha.

For he, too, had an eye for decoding character as well as landscape. The Buddha’s concern, however, was never in foretelling the future (as in palmistry or astrology), but in eliciting the moral implications of the present. Otherwise, let it go. No posturing on mountain or sea-shore! No breathless babbling: ‘The ocean! The ocean!’ Monks are firmly reminded that it’s just ‘a great heap of water, a great extent of water.’⁵⁵ Nothing more. Rather than wax enthusiastic about the mystery of water – the very idea of water – monks were advised

consistently to turn inward to the subjective life. The whole phenomenology of sense-data for the Buddha was an ‘ocean’ in which he was painfully immersed. Or rather, the eye was the ‘ocean’ (fraught ‘with waves and whirlpools’), which it is our task to withstand.

But on one occasion the Buddha was quite prepared to discuss signs of the ocean: in conversation with a water-sprite. Pahārāda, chief of the Asuras, had hesitated eleven years before finally paying a call; and even when he did, he felt too shy to say a word. That’s why – to set him at ease – the Buddha put to him a question about his native element: ‘Now, Pahārāda, how many wonders do the Asuras, to their delight, regularly perceive in the great ocean?’ That must have reassured the Asura. For he proudly replied, ‘eight’:

1. It slopes away gradually;
2. Its capacity is stable without overflowing;
3. It cannot endure corpses;
4. Great rivers lose their identity in it;
5. Despite rainfall swelling such drainage, it never increases nor decreases;
6. It has only one taste, that of salt;
7. It is filled with valuables: pearls and shells and gems, etc.;
8. It is the abode of giants and demigods.⁵⁶

The Buddha, without demur, adopted this bizarre account – adapting it point by point as if it had proved an unsuspected key to the Dhamma – in his reply:

Training and progress in the Dhamma, too, is gradual, with
 no precipitous short cuts;
 The discipline, too, is not to be transgressed;
 The Order, too, will not tolerate rotten or hypocritical
 members;
 All four castes, too, merge their identity in it;
 In nibbāna, too, there is neither increase nor decrease;
 The Dhamma, too, has only one taste, that of liberation;
 In it, too, there are precious things: the Four Foundations
 of Mindfulness, the Noble Eightfold Path, etc.;
 It, too, is the abode of great beings: from 'Stream-entrants'
 to Arahants.

That, then, is the context of the famous 'taste'; which
 may well seem over-contrived to us. But the Buddha's
 quick wit in utilizing Pahārāda's catalogue attests not
 only to his dialectical mastery in debate, or to his skill
 in impromptu decipherment, or even to a widespread
 fascination with cryptic meanings, but to a rhetorical
 ruse: that just as the Dhamma can be vindicated by an
 appeal to the visible world (in image or story), so can
 the physical world (mediated by the spirit of the ocean)
 be vindicated by an appeal to the Dhamma.⁵⁷ The traffic
 in the Buddha's mind is in constant two-way flux. Just
 as he had granted Ānanda's request for a description
 of the 'best chariot according to the Dhamma', so here
 he corroborates Pahārāda's account of the ocean as the
 best of all possible oceans according to the Dhamma.
 For the Enlightened One, if not for the unenlightened,
 they are simply twin aspects of a single whole.

5

ALLEGORY AND PARABLE

An allegory is a simile with its comparative hinge, or link, removed. By deleting 'just as', or 'like', or 'as if', however, the simile has not merely been detached to float free; it has been transformed into something fluid and potentially dynamic. It has become an independent story.

This gain in dramatic momentum is bound to entail a disorientating loss of focus. As a story, it inevitably accumulates distracting detail; as an allegory, it is now likely to require explication, even interpretation. For allegory is a form of duplicity: a way of saying one thing in order to mean something else. But not, as in normal talk, deliberately to mislead. Allegorical double-talk may be openly acknowledged; may be clearly signposted; may even be demonstrated and correlated point-counterpoint. Though the duplicit meanings must never, on any account, be allowed to

converge or merge. Like train tracks, rather, they must systematically preserve the semiotic divide *between* their parallel lines.

Symbols, on the other hand, collapse this figural/factual divide. Self-contained, they transgress semiotic duality. Self-sufficient, they lurk, as Coleridge noted, within the very reality which they would illumine.¹ Successfully to invoke them, therefore, restores a transcendent harmony to our world, while allegory holds out no such promise. It evokes, rather, the harsh discordance of human experience, fated always to compare, and to connect, and to decipher, but never to rest in undifferentiated and unreflecting coherence.

It follows that symbols, like metaphors in their aesthetic play, require little or no interpretation; while allegories, proceeding from general or abstract notions to an aesthetic presentation framed 'almost at will', are never so readily, so instinctively grasped.² They must be decoded first. They require effort, which takes time, since image and meaning are not instantaneously fused. To the contrary, allegory insists that they are separate and must remain separate, just as our consciousness and the world are and will always remain strictly separate, so that every attempt – every symbolic attempt – to blur their separateness must be fraudulent.

For allegory, as Walter Benjamin argued, is more than just a verbal technique; it acts as both challenge and *corrective* to art. By its uncoupling of images from their meanings – by its constant and piecemeal fragmentation – it rejects the fatal illusion of symbolic

fusion; and it does so by being self-consciously 'stagey'. Since what can be deliberately staged can also be deliberately unstaged, dismantled, disintegrated. It is a versatile technique, therefore, ever aware of its origins in the theatre of the imagination. Which may help to explain why it was also the Buddha's favourite trope. For if the essential characteristic of allegory is its *discontinuity*, its unresolvable discrepancy between signification and sign, its pervasive dualism of 'meaning and reality', then the allegorical mode was the perfect complement to his vision of the world as illusion, Prospero-like, to be dissolved.³

'And, like this insubstantial pageant faded,
Leave not a rack behind.'⁴

It was precisely the 'baseless fabric' of its theatricality that suited the Buddha's larger purposes. Properly understood, then, allegory is not only an aspect of his art (treated with his usual virtuosity), but itself another lesson in insubstantiality, in *maya*, in illusion.

Of course, the Buddha too, on occasion, pandered to the symbolic imagination: as, for example, in his initial Wheeling of the Law (*Dhamma-cakkappavattana Sutta*), set in motion at Benares, in the Deer Park at Isipatāna, 'which cannot be stopped by a monk, or Brahman, or deity, or Māra, or Divinity or anyone in the world.'⁵ Or in his frequent invocation of the lotus:

'Just as a blue or red or white lotus is born in water, grows in water and stands up untouched above the water, so too I, who was born in the world and grew up in the world,

have transcended the world and live untouched by the world. Remember me as one who is enlightened.’⁶

And his disciples soon devoted themselves to further emblems.

In the early centuries after his death it was such synecdoche as the Bodhi-tree (for the crisis of his Enlightenment) and the Stupa (for his final transfiguration) and his sacred footprint, as well as such metonymic images as the Wheel and the Lotus, that constituted the Buddha’s presence, or rather represented the continuing message of his Dhamma. But, as the Buddha well knew, all such symbols are compromised; they speak a language of desire, which is another form of wish-fulfilment. Like a deconstructionist *avant la lettre*, he wanted us to understand ‘the impossibility for the language of poetry to appropriate anything, be it as consciousness, as object, or as a synthesis of both.’⁷ From the Buddha’s point of view, the symbolic promise of harmony – the Dantean quest for a cosmic unity in artistic unity – was yet another infallible mark of ignorance and delusion.

* * *

The Tathāgata was never a saviour in the Christian sense. His function was more like that of a teacher, or surgeon-physician, or alarm-clock (*buddho*, ‘one who wakes’), since he alone was an Awakened One.⁸ In the theatre of his imagination, he played many roles. The part best suited to him, perhaps, was that of journeyman.

His favourite scenario, certainly, was that of journeys in which he starred as pioneer ‘of the undiscovered way’,⁹ or guide for the perplexed, or escort, or head of a caravan traversing hostile and waterless wastes.¹⁰ Or again he might turn up as a yokel directing travellers (‘left at the next village, then straight through the market-town’) on their way to Rājagaha.¹¹

Look, here comes somebody who thinks he’s lost. ‘Don’t worry, my friend,’ he assured, ‘you’re on your way. Just carry on till the road forks. *That’s* where you need to look sharp. Don’t turn left whatever you do. Take the right-hand fork, carefully tracking the path – hemmed in though it is by creepers from all sides. Hack your way through as best you can till you emerge on soggy ground. Then test each step. Keep your eyes on your feet. A vast swamp lies ahead.’ (Gradually, the trail has become more and more sinister and surreal, faintly reminiscent of something out of H. Rider Haggard or Tolkien.) ‘Keep circling round,’ the directions continue, ‘skirting that treacherous edge, until the path climbs over a ridge with sheer drops on either side. A bit further on you’ll discover a delightful stretch of level ground.’¹²

It’s a spiritual adventure, of course, not a boy’s adventure at all. Without a moment’s pause the Buddha decodes his own text: ‘I’ve made up this allegory, Tissa, to help you understand. Its key is this: the traveller who “thinks he’s lost” is Everyman (*Puthujjana*) himself; he who “knows the way” is the Tathāgata, the Arahant, the Fully Self-Enlightened One; the “road-fork” is the state

of wavering, of uncertainty; the “left-hand path” is the false path of Wrong View and of Wrong Concentration; the “right-hand path” is the Noble Eightfold Path of Right View and of Right Concentration. The “creepers” denote ignorance; the “vast swamp” denotes lusts of the flesh; the “sheer drops”, or precipices, denote anger and despair; and the “delightful stretch of level ground” denotes nibbāna. Cheer up, Tissa, cheer up! I’m here to advise, help and teach you.’

The journey has turned into a mini-*Pilgrim’s Progress*, with its own Slough of Despond, etc. For to lose one’s way is metaphorically to lose the Magga, or Path, or Pada.

Take another scenario shuffling the same three props (of jungle, swamp and paths) into a very different configuration: ‘At the foot of a forested range, home to a herd of deer, spread a low-lying swamp. Suppose someone blocked their safe approach to the swamp and malevolently blazed a false trail, even planting a dummy roe and doe as a trap. Then suppose someone else, with their welfare at heart, reopened the safe descent, closed up the false trail and destroyed those twin decoys.’¹³

It’s the merest sketch but again, without time to draw breath, a long table of equivalences is appended:

the low-lying swamp	sensual desire
the herd of deer	human beings
the malevolent trapper	Māra, the Evil One
the false trail	the wrong Eightfold Path
the dummy decoys	ignorance, delight and lust

the benevolent volunteer	the Tathāgata, Arahant and Fully Enlightened One
the safe approach	the Noble Eightfold Path

Fiction defamiliarizes the commonplace: thus its attendant charge of excitement. Allegory, with its familiar maps and keys, merely reconfirms the human norm: thus the attendant twinge of disappointment, since its solutions invariably seem too pat. Good fiction, like life itself, remains ever open to rereading and reinterpretation, while allegory (for readers like us) too firmly controls the options. In literary terms, that is, these allegories seem too glib, levelling their own more arresting features (the swamp, the precipices or decoys) in the course of explication. They wear a too-finished look like a filled-in crossword; and like completed crosswords, they seem disposable.

The Buddha's audience, though, were not readers. They were not even literate, let alone literary. That's why his habitual response to questions of interpretation was not to fuse context with commentary, but to displace one set of signs (the story) with another disparate set; or, put another way, displace the original language of narration by a metalanguage of second-order signs. Whether stories, scenarios or similes, *all* subtexts embedded in the Buddha's texts tend to be treated allegorically as if their masked message or meaning could be exposed and fragmented word for word; as if their fictitious matter could thereby be simultaneously dissolved, dismantled and disintegrated.

For allegory, thus comprehended, posed no threat. It became, in a word, self-cancelling. That is why the Buddha thought it so good for him, and all his auditors, to think in allegorical terms: first, it restrained *papañca*, or proliferating imagination; second, it controlled interpretation; third, it traced a sustained line of thought without surplus, without some mysterious residue of meaning; fourth, it was omniscient, flooding a text, or image, with total enlightenment.

* * *

Mental states, though, by their very nature, differ from all other phenomena in our experience; and the Buddha's most elaborate schema of linked similitudes concerned the mind. Each step, or aspect, of insight meditation (*vipassanā*) was at some point assigned its own appropriate analogy for which a detailed jigsaw of correspondences hardly seemed appropriate. Such cameos necessarily became more expressionistic, as aids to meditation.

In that walled and fortified frontier post, a watchful *sāti* (mindfulness) was clearly designed as keeper of the single gate.¹⁴ Zen masters, in consequence, have called it the 'Gateless Gate', that paradoxical entry into *vipassanā* whose sole password is the breath:¹⁵

'With entire mindfulness he breathes in; and with entire mindfulness he breathes out. Breathing in a long inhalation, he is conscious of breathing in a long inhalation, or breathing out a long exhalation, he is

conscious of breathing out a long exhalation. Breathing in a short inhalation, he is conscious of breathing in a short inhalation, or breathing out a short exhalation, he is conscious of breathing out a short exhalation. He trains himself to be clearly conscious of the whole stretch of the in-coming breath at its beginning, its middle and its end. He trains himself to be clearly conscious of the whole stretch of the out-going breath at its beginning, its middle and its end ... Bhikkhus, just as a skilful turner or turner's apprentice knows a long pull [on the string turning his lathe] when a long pull is made or knows a short pull when a short pull is made ...¹⁶

It's a skill. Like an apprentice, it needs training, practice, sustained control, else a buzz of ideas – amid a steady patter of verbal debris and sensory impressions – will continue to tease and detain the would-be meditator loitering outside the walls. Once inside the Gateless Gate, however, everything grows increasingly rarified, radiant, calm:

'True, mindfulness may occasionally lapse, letting destructive flashbacks slip through, but a meditator soon learns how to neutralize and foresake such distractions in much the same way as someone sprinkling a few drops of water into a hot iron pan will soon see that water evaporate and vanish ...'¹⁷

All three of the mental conditions through which the meditator next passes – as well as the twelfth and last – will be given liquid expression: not as an alien element now to be evaporated, but as a vital, circulating fluid drenching and suffusing the inner life.¹⁸

‘Great King! It’s just as when a bath-attendant, or his assistant, strews bath-powder into a brass bowl, gradually sprinkling it with water and kneading the moist mass until it sets. The water permeating that cake of soap, while suffusing it with unguents, remains unable to seep out.’

‘Great King! It’s just as when a deep lake, without inlets from either north or south or east or west, is replenished by water from a spring below. Despite only light and irregular rains, cool water welling up from that spring will soak, drench and permeate the whole until not a patch of the lake is not suffused.’

‘Great King! It’s just as when blue or red or white lotuses grow submerged in a pond. They thrive under water – soaked, drenched and permeated from root to tip in cool water – until no part of any plant is not suffused.’

A bhikkhu elsewhere had been defined as one ‘bathed with the inner bathing’; and the secretion in which he is immersed can now be diagnosed as water soaking into soap-powder, or a cool spring gushing from the floor of a lake, or a pond in which lotuses are steeped and nourished.¹⁹ All three images conjure up scenes of delicious, tingling bliss, though this is ‘pleasure that has nothing to do with sensual desires’.²⁰ It is pleasure in renunciation, in seclusion and absorption. It is pleasure in a ritual purification of a kind. It is ‘unremitting pleasure’²¹ nevertheless, to which the Buddha remained uncompromisingly committed: ‘to be repeated and to be developed and to be cultivated; one should not be afraid of such pleasure, I say.’²²

Such is the joy of these meditative flights, soaring from trance to trance, until attaining the fourth and final *jhāna*:

‘Great King! It’s just as when a man sits wrapped from head to toe in a white sheet that leaves not a patch of flesh exposed.’

As if, all along, we had never left the baths! For if that ball of lather anticipated the delights of soaking, this sheeted – possibly towelled – figure, generating and harbouring its own heat, chastely closes the bath-house sequence.

The Venerable Khemaka, for his own purposes, transposed the setting from a bath-attendant’s stall to a dhobi-wallah’s tank:

‘Friends, it’s like a soiled cloth handed by its owner to a washerman who rubs out the stains with saltpetre, or lye, or cow-dung, and then rinses the cloth in fresh water till it’s thoroughly clean. Though a faint whiff of saltpetre, or lye, or cow-dung, may well still linger. Back at home, therefore, the owner will carefully stow it in an aromatic box until even the smell clinging to it has utterly faded.’²³

Even when the last remnant of ego-conceit is dissipated, that is, something vulgar persists. The very effort of self-cleansing and self-purification leaves its own ineradicable pong. It’s a secondary attribute – itself a mark of cleanliness – but, like bleach or detergent, it too must be given time to evaporate and vanish.

Thus finally humidified, insulated, cleansed and rested, as it were, the meditator achieves *vipassanā*:

‘Great King! It’s just as when a jeweller, placing a beryl on his outstretched palm, lifts it up to his eyes. Carefully examining it, he reflects: “Yes, it’s genuine, all right. Well-cut. Strung on a multicoloured thread, yet flawless in every respect: brilliant, transparent, eight-faceted, crystal-clear.”’

At this crisis of ‘insight’ the allegorical subtext (for all its colourful ‘threads’) becomes equally clear. For what is this beryl other than the Triple Gem whose eightfold facets reflect the Noble Eightfold Path? What can it be but the flawless gem of the Buddha/Dhamma/Sangha? The match is explicit. As explicit as the geology of that lake (with the subaqueous spring) whose flow-chart duplicated the psychic ‘flow’ cooling the surface warmth of meditative practice.

* * *

It’s at this critical juncture that six further supernatural forces arise, given more prominence in the Tibetan than Theravāda tradition. But their moral value remains mysterious.²⁴ As does their psychological role despite the bright labels attached: a stalk of grass drawn from its sheath, or sword from its scabbard, or snake from its slough (for a mentally-generated body); the artistry of potters, or ivory-carvers, or goldsmiths (for psychic power); the throb of tabors and kettledrums on a highway (for psychic hearing); the day-to-day log of a village tour (for the recollection of past lives); a 360° rooftop panorama at a crossroads (for psychic sight).²⁵

Only one illustration (for the penetration of other minds) opens up a new, strange and visionary dimension:

‘Great King! It’s just as when a girl or boy, in a fit of vanity, puts on make-up. They peer closely into a mirror, or bowl of clear water, to examine their face. “There’s a pimple,” they cry on spotting some flaw in the skin, or “Not a blackhead today!” if there’s none.’

Such intensity reaches beyond mere illustration. Such Hindu narcissism – so self-involved that it scans every pore – seems expressly designed to penetrate the façade of image and identity.

Piercing that self-reflection prepares for the twelfth and final tableau:

‘Great King! It’s just as when a keen-sighted traveller in the mountains gazes from the bank of an upland lake into water so crystal-clear that he can see the fish darting about in shoals and shells and bars of gravel and pebbles and molluscs and bits of broken pottery scattered across the floor.’

Unlike a mirror, this lake is really and truly transparent. No longer distorted or shrouded by egotistical desires, every shell, every pebble is observed exactly for what it is. The translucence is not so much outward (in the world) as inward (in a mind emptied of clutter), where all is resolved into a pellucid, all-encompassing vision of the everyday at which – like a Zen poet – one can merely point, affirming ‘fish ... pebbles ... shells ... bits of broken pottery...’

On that blunt affirmation succeeds a mood of ease and utter relaxation, as if leaving those uplands for the humid plain in the heat of the dry season, a parched and exhausted traveller, descending a flight of steps into a pool near a clump of trees, plunges in among the lotus flowers to bathe and drink his fill; then crosses over to the trees to lie full length in their shade.²⁶

Such moments of freedom are always connected with the sight of clear and limpid water. As in that lesson of the five bowls of water, bound to disturb the Narcissus image, being either discoloured (by dye), or bubbling (on the boil), or scummy (with algae), or ruffled (by wind), or cloudy (with sediment). Only crystal-clear water returns no distorting reflection. Yielding no reflection at all!²⁷

It is an absence (of self), then, that makes such presence (of molluscs and gravel) magically possible. Confirmed elsewhere by a sketch as formalized as a diagram in a physics textbook:

“Monks, imagine a pavilion with a peaked roof and a window to the east. At sunrise, when the sun’s rays strike through that window, what do they rest on?”

“On the western wall, Lord.”

“Just so, monks ...”²⁸

The void (*suññatā*) cannot be described, only evoked through the eyes, the ‘windows’ of the mind behind which the Buddha momentarily suspends this three-dimensional space. An invisible space, like an empty attic, yet as precisely determined as Nāgasena’s sign of the reaper; but this time the effect of his unexpected

question and that equally unexpected answer proves far more startling. The morning sun, whose first rays flash unimpeded from an eastern window to the opposite wall, has become a glimpse of the selfless life as an uncannily experienced, luminous, almost palpable event in its own right.

Put another way – and clearly the Buddha was at pains to express this negative insight in positive terms – it is ‘just as though a bull’s hide were freed from folds by stretching it with a hundred pegs.’²⁹ So a bhikkhu, as it were, pegs out his ‘perception of earth’, voiding it of all contingency (‘hillocks and hollows, rivers and ravines, thorny and rock-strewn waste’), neither abstracting it exactly, nor symbolizing it, but tautening and tightening it until he can mentally register its residual *gestalt*, as we might say, as an insistent presence. Continuing to rarify his perceptions in this way from infinite space to infinite consciousness, he may eventually reach ‘the signless concentration of mind’ (*Samādha-nimittā*), which is the pre-condition of total liberation.

And what is the telltale sign of this uncanny state of total self-liberation? Once, by moonlight in the Gosinga Sāla Forest, with the scent of blossoms heady in the air, Sāriputta expressed it this way:

‘Imagine a king’s, or king’s minister’s, chest so packed with gorgeous robes that morning, noon or night, he can pick out whatever he feels like wearing, at a whim, at any time. In just the same way, a monk, who has mastered his own mind, can attain any level of awareness he chooses and rest there at will at any time.’³⁰

Inner transparency, then, implies freedom to choose. Like an actor trying on a role. For like an actor's, a monk's task is one of an ever-shifting attention without attachment, without ever *becoming* anything fixed or permanent at all. Just as water, in Freud's image, can fill any vessel, without retaining the form of any. Knock! It's as if no one were there!

* * *

Such a leisured accretion of images stands in marked contrast to a ten-item sequence, evoking carnal lusts, whose bewildering transformations are enumerated as being like bare bones; a lump of flesh; a torch of straw; a pit of burning coals; a dream; borrowed goods; a fruit-bearing tree; a slaughterhouse; a palisade of swords; a snake's head. As image collapses into image, one might well ask: why this quick-fire multiplication of terms? What unites such a protean list? In what respect are dreams, or slaughterhouses, or fruit-bearing trees, *like* cravings, let alone sensual cravings? Such shock tactics seem to imply that the essential stability of *all* metaphor is at risk. At this rate of instant attrition, in an endless metabolism, what valid significance can ever be found in 'sensual cravings'?

That list occurs in the *Alagaddūpama Sutta*, yet its first seven items are a recapitulation of seven narrative vignettes, deployed in exactly the same sequence, in the *Potaliya Sutta*.³¹ The question is: which group derived from which? Or which predated which? Did

the ten linked similes constitute the original? Or the seven linked narratives? Oral transmission, I believe, was more likely to contract than to expand such disparate elements; the straw torch and mysterious tree become intelligible only as kernels, or remnants, or memos, of familiar stories.³² Far from signs in some symbolic order, the ten similes become persuasive only as impromptu markers to a well-known repertoire. Priority, then, must be given to the narrative chain.

That chain is arranged in three pairs with the seventh (the 'fruit-bearing tree') as odd man out.³³ The first pair concerns meat: a dog at the butcher's and birds of prey. The second pair concerns heat: a grass torch borne against the wind and a charcoal-burner's pit. The third pair concerns mirages: the pastoral illusions of a dream and the economic delusions of a loan. But what of the exception which, stripped of attendant fiction, proves exceptionally enigmatic?

Its setting is an orchard outside some town or village. Imagine a tree blossoming there with none of its petals yet scattered on the ground.³⁴ Add two wanderers from afar – both obsessed by flowers – only one of whom, however, is adroit enough to climb the tree. While he is busy clambering into the branches, therefore, the other pulls out an axe and starts hacking away at the roots. What do you think? Shouldn't the man in the tree scramble down as fast as he can to avoid breaking a hand, or a foot, or an arm when the tree falls?

This is clearly a cautionary tale. Going after sensual pleasures (blossoms) is always a risky, frivolous

business in which one is likely to be caught off guard and trapped in a precarious ambush. The lesson hardly needs spelling out: DO NOT RISK LIFE AND LIMB FOR SUCH FRAGILE TREASURE. The whole set echoes similar cautions:

‘Suppose a half-starved dog, haunting a slaughterhouse, were tossed a blood-smeared bone without a scrap of meat sticking to it. What do you think? Would gnawing that cast-off bone appease his hunger?’

‘Suppose a vulture, or kite, or crow, snatching a chunk of meat, were already airborne when attacked by other birds flapping up to peck and claw it. What do you think? Wouldn’t lockjaw be suicidal?’

‘Suppose someone lit a grass torch and ran with it flaring into the wind. What do you think? Wouldn’t the torch soon scorch his hand, or arm, or some other part?’

‘Suppose two ruffians were dragging their victim towards a charcoal-pit – deep as they were tall and glowing without smoke or flame. What do you think? Though his arms were pinned down, wouldn’t he desperately flail about from side to side?’

‘Suppose a dreamer in a dream saw delectable parks and groves and meadows and lakes which vanished, on waking, into thin air. What do you think?’

‘Suppose a farmer – having signed a hire-purchase agreement for a carriage and jewelled earrings – proceeded to the marketplace for the pleasure of attracting stares and overhearing: “Yes, sir, he’s stinking rich!” “Why, didn’t you know he was loaded?” “That’s how the rich indulge themselves!” But when the true owners call in their loans, what do you think?’

‘Suppose there was an orchard with a tall tree all in blossom, with none of its flowers yet fallen to the ground ... What do you think?’

Suppose! Suppose! Suppose! These are all pragmatic illustrations to plunge the listener into realistic, psychologically-testing predicaments, whether drawn from human or animal life; and the unspoken warning is a repeated, thudding: DO NOT GNAW BARE BONES! DO NOT IMITATE VULTURES! DO NOT RUN WITH A TORCH INTO THE WIND! KEEP WELL AWAY FROM FIERY PITS! DON’T DREAM! DON’T MAKE-BELIEVE! ... There’s no need for further explication. It’s only when reduced to pseudo-comparisons that the list seems to require a composite reading, as if the Buddha, like the Jesus of Mark’s Gospel, were teasing his audience into *missing* the point: ‘that seeing they may see, and not perceive; and hearing they may hear, and not understand.’³⁵ But that was never the Buddha’s way.

* * *

The Buddha taught a peculiar *gnosis* (as the Greeks would have called it) without ever being the least gnostically enigmatic. *Gnosis* implied more than simply ‘knowledge’; something closer to ‘insight’ perhaps, or ‘intuitive awareness’. In the words of one Gnostic master: ‘Abandon the search for the sources of creation and other matters of that sort ... Learn what it is within you, which makes everything its own, saying: “My mind, my thought, my soul, my body.”’³⁶

Such beliefs constituted Christian heresy as much as Buddhist teaching constituted Hindu heresy. For both taught that the ‘divine’ condition was universally immanent. Both were concerned with abandoning illusion and embracing enlightenment, guided not so much by a God, or prophet of God, as a spiritual mentor. According to the *Gospel of Thomas*:

‘Jesus said: “If you bring forth what is within you, what you bring forth will save you. If you do not bring forth what is within you, what you do not bring forth will destroy you.”’

‘Jesus said: “He who will drink from my mouth will become as I am. I myself shall be he and things that are hidden will be revealed to him.”’³⁷

These ‘things that are hidden’ (*apocrypha*), however, were limited to the ‘few’, as opposed to the ‘many’ orthodox devotees, just as Buddhists for centuries formed a minority within Vedantic Brahmanism. Even the ur-evangelist, Mark, had his Jesus privately and tendentially allegorizing a parable:³⁸

‘And he said unto them, “Unto you it is given to know the mystery of the kingdom of God: but unto them that are without, all these things are done in parables. That seeing they may see, and not perceive; and hearing they may hear, and not understand; lest at any time they should be converted, and their sins should be forgiven them.”’³⁹

The hidden key to the charade on this reading was reserved for his (singularly obtuse) disciples; ‘outsiders’ being fobbed off with parables.

Yet only two other allegorical interpretations were directly attributed to Jesus by an evangelist;⁴⁰ and this awkward attempt by the early Church to decode a handful of texts was largely – or now is generally agreed to be – a Hellenistic aberration.⁴¹ The Kingdom of Heaven, as proclaimed by Jesus, was everywhere on open offer, not mysteriously hidden from Jews or non-Jews. It was proclaimed in parables to enforce the critical commitment involved, not as esoteric vehicles for mystification.⁴²

Certainly the Buddha was not esoteric in Mark's sense, though he withheld (for bhikkhus only) certain practices and aspects of his teaching considered too advanced for laymen. Nor was his teaching divisive, therefore, in the Gnostic way. 'The Dhamma I have taught,' he made explicit, 'has no secret and public versions. There is no "teacher's closed fist" about good things here.'⁴³ The message was universal. Nor did his disciples ever think to ask why he used the art of allegory. Had they done so, one thing is certain: he would never have assured them that they, as privileged acolytes, could share the mystery of nibbāna, while the uninitiated would have to make do with picturesque ephemera, mere narrative appetizers or childish tittle-tattle. Nor is the modern fascination with 'divinatory' or 'oracular' or 'spiritual' texts in the least germane. Those who look to the suttas for fractured surfaces and enigmatic displacements look in vain. The Buddha had no secret allegories on offer. Step by step everything was elucidated; and his parables were part of this process of elucidation.



Even that sevenfold sequence (of bone, meat, torch, pit, dream, loan, tree) may, after all, be allegorically linked. Though not cryptographic exactly, with every dog or vulture – like those swamps and jungle-paths – signalling hidden meanings; yet allegory may still be implied by the concatenation as a whole. For an overriding truth emerges, clearly binding all members of the series: it's a matter of LETTING GO, just as the vulture will have to let go its chunk of meat. The whole series is keyed to the notion of *paṭinissagga* (or 'relinquishing') under threat of pain: the dog will have to abandon that bone despite his hunger; the kite, or crow, under aerial attack, will have to release its snatched morsel; the torch-carrier will have to drop the blazing grass; the kidnapped victim must discontinue writhing at the very edge of the pit; the dreamer, on awakening, will have to foresake his dream; the borrower will have to stop role-playing; the climber will have to desert his tree ... These are all moral lessons and their settings are microcosms of the Buddhist view of the world as a stage for human craving (meat), self-consuming rage (heat) and delusion (a mirage or dream).⁴⁴ It was precisely because of their cumulative effect in the first place that these parables were reducible to a mnemonic list.

But a question remains: if Jesus taught principally by means of parables rather than allegories, is the term 'parable' applicable at all to the Buddha's longer narratives? In what way are his 'parables' like the

Parable of the Talents, say, or of the Unforgiving Servant, or of the Unjust Steward, or of the Labourers in the Vineyard, or of the Wicked Husbandmen, or of the Good Samaritan, or of the Ten Virgins, or of the Prodigal Son?⁴⁵ Certainly translators have used the term:

‘Well, Prince, consider this parable, since lessons are often more readily absorbed by means of parables.’⁴⁶

‘A parable, monks, I gave to you that you may grasp the meaning of the matter.’⁴⁷

‘Parable’ derives from the Greek word *‘parabolē’*, often translated simply as ‘comparison’. Literally, it means ‘placing one thing next to another’; so in classical Greek it could also mean an ‘illustration’ or ‘analogy’. But in the Septuagint it is further used as an equivalent to the Hebrew term *‘mashal’*, meaning ‘riddle’ or ‘dark saying’, which potentially confuses the issue.⁴⁸ Skating over such opaque connotations as irrelevant here, I see no obstacle to endorsing a number of the Buddha’s stories as generic ‘parables’. Precisely what number though? And how are they to be distinguished from his allegories?

In common with most Old Testament and rabbinical parables, New Testament parables (in the words of C. H. Dodd) present ‘one single point of comparison’.⁴⁹ They differ from allegories, then, in proliferating data for their overall plausibility rather than programming each detail for its ‘independent significance’. Parables never argue, though they may suggest the character

of an argument. Jesus mainly used them, it seems, to shock and shift his listeners' attitudes. In this they were more like exemplary tales, inviting not interpretation so much as personal intervention. They spring a trap. 'Each parable,' in Dodd's words, 'entices the hearer to a judgement upon the situation depicted, and then challenges him, directly or by implication, to apply that judgment' to the crisis at hand.⁵⁰ Their summons being: 'Go, and do thou likewise.'⁵¹

In fact, Jesus was elaborating an age-old Hebrew tradition (of the Haggadah and Midrash), in the spirit of that parable from the Book of Samuel where Nathan told David the story of a poor man's ewe-lamb expropriated by a rich man. Which slyly sprung the trap. Appalled, David exclaimed: 'As the Lord liveth, the man that hath done this thing shall surely die.' And the trap snapped. Pouncing, the Prophet thundered: 'THOU ART THE MAN!'⁵²

That is why Jesus, like the Buddha before him, so often hammered out the refrain:

'What do you think? If a man has a hundred sheep ...'

'What do you think? A man had two children ...'

'Which now of these three do you think was a neighbour to the man ...?'

Or framed his parables with bantering questions:

'Do you bring in a lamp to put it under the meal-tub or under the bed?'

'When you sow a field, do you expect every seed to come up?'

‘What was the spectacle that drew you to the wilderness?
A reed-bed swept by the wind? ... A man dressed in silks
and satins?’

While ominously postponing a summing-up:

‘Which of the two did his father’s will?’

‘What did these men deserve?’

‘What then shall the owner of the vineyard do?’

For Jesus came as a missionary, not theologian. He was concerned more with the quality of life than our understanding of it. His parables neither imply nor depict a frozen Byzantine kingdom. They are never didactic but prompt a way of living, of learning, of loving, of spontaneously acting.

In this broad sense, neither riddling nor overtly allegorical, that sevenfold series (beginning with a butcher’s dog and ending with a fruit-tree) may even finally be classed as ‘parable’; for each is a cautionary tale told to initiate a decisive shift of conduct. In that large sense, the Buddha told numerous parables inviting judgment (‘Suppose!’ ‘Suppose!’) on imagined situations. Two of the finest (the Parable of the Raft and that of the Bamboo-Acrobat) I shall discuss in Chapter 9. Here I shall conclude with three: the Parable of the Sower, the Parable of the Chariot-Relay and the Parable of the Mālūva-Creeper.

* * *

Rumours must have spread that Jesus disclosed richer and subtler mysteries when (privately) teaching

his disciples than when (publicly) addressing mass audiences; and similar suspicions clearly plagued the Buddha. As this dialogue with a village headman suggests:⁵³

HEADMAN: 'Isn't the Blessed One filled with compassion for all living beings?'

THE BUDDHA: 'Indeed, Headman, the Tathāgata is filled with compassion for all living beings.'

HEADMAN: 'Well then, Lord, why does the Blessed One teach the Dhamma more fully to some than to others?'⁵⁴

A momentary pause must have ensued while the Buddha considered his options; for he could neither accept, nor not accept, the implications. Then, instead of answering head-on, he veered off into another, seemingly inconsequential, line of enquiry:

THE BUDDHA: 'I shall reply to you, Headman, with a counter-question. Answer as you see fit. Now what do you think? Suppose a farmer owned three fields: one first-class, one average, one with poor, sandy, brackish soil. Tell me, when it came to sowing, which of the three would the farmer sow first? That first-class field? Or the field that's so-so? Or the one with poor, sandy, brackish soil?'

The advantage of this ploy was that it committed an interlocutor to a prior answer. For, unobserved by the headman, the Buddha had surreptitiously shifted the terms of debate from *quality* of treatment to *priority* of treatment. The shift went unnoticed since, like Socrates (but without a hint of Socratic irony), the Buddha had led the debate on to the villager's home ground. Here was something on which every peasant considered

himself expert. The answer was self-evident. Without a moment's hesitation, the headman dived straight in:

HEADMAN: 'Lord, the farmer would sow his best field first. That done, he'd sow the middling field next. As to the one with poor, sandy, brackish soil, he mightn't sow it at all. Or, then again, he might. Just for cattle-feed.'

Now, item by item, the Buddha could explicate that reply not so much as an allegorical code, but as a *restatement* of the headman's practical proposal in terms of the Buddha's unique practical mission:

THE BUDDHA: 'Well, Headman, that first-class field is like my bhikkhus and bhikkhunis.⁵⁵ To them I teach the Dhamma which is lovely in its beginning, lovely in its middle and lovely in its ending, both in spirit and in letter; I proclaim the holy life in all its purity and perfection. Why? Because they embrace me as their island, their shelter, their stronghold, their refuge.

'The average field is like my male and female lay-followers.⁵⁶ To these, too, I teach the Dhamma which is lovely in its beginning, lovely in its middle and lovely in its ending, both in spirit and in letter; I proclaim the holy life in all its purity and perfection. Why? Because they embrace me as their island, their shelter, their stronghold, their refuge.

'The poor, sandy field, with brackish soil, is like the wandering recluses and Brahmans of other sects. To them also I teach the Dhamma which is lovely in its beginning, lovely in its middle and lovely in its ending, both in spirit and in letter; I proclaim the holy life in all its purity and perfection. Why? Since only understanding a single phrase would be to their enduring profit.'

Though conceived as allegory, the Buddha is not really speaking in allegory, but in a paradigm already expounded by – and so wholly comprehensible to – his interlocutor. There is even a residual surplus, or excess, in the headman's reply, ignored in the Buddha's reworking, that gives a semblance of truth to the whole exchange, as well as subtly differentiating the two speakers. For the Buddha is available on an equal footing, he insists, to *all* his followers and interlocutors (including this village headman, incidentally). He repeats his religious programme, in identical set terms, three times: 'To them I teach the Dhamma ... To these, too, I teach the Dhamma ... To them also I teach the Dhamma ...' He is no elitist, he emphasizes. Even when confronted by hecklers, he persists, since 'a single phrase' could be 'to their enduring profit'. If anyone's scepticism is exposed, it is that of the headman, who dismisses the third field out of hand – except (maybe) for cattle-fodder.

Is it simply a matter of precedence, then, that monks are served first, laity second, outsiders third? Everyone, after all, gets their due. The moral strikes me as far more profound: that in everyday life we may well standardize performances into alpha, beta or gamma (first-class, middling or poor); but in the holy life there can be no categorizations of that kind. Potentiality, in all its fullness, is present everywhere at all times. It was the headman, in posing the original question, who thought in terms of grades and classifications: what is full, what not so full; careful and not so careful;

thorough and not so thorough. While ever conscious of individual qualifications, the Buddha treats all people alike.

The headman's confusion, it seems, was grounded in a quandary. From an initial premise (that 'a Blessed One is filled with compassion for all living beings'), supported by a second (that 'whoever has compassion treats all living beings alike'), he had logically concluded, to his own satisfaction, that 'the Blessed One should treat all men and women alike'. This syllogism, implicit in his original interrogation, as well as his fluency in agricultural matters, make clear that he particularly prided himself on his shrewdness.

But the Buddha saw through him at a glance. What is more, he managed to turn that shrewdness to his own account, scrupulously rebutting his implied charge of elitism without high-handedness, without a hint of obvious reproof: that is, without allowing the headman to lose face. It was just the kind of resentment, he knew, that a headman, conscious of his standing before the assembled village, was most likely to harbour. Just as it had been the headman's social anxiety – this acute consciousness of his status – that had prompted his questions in the first place. Why else did he think that the Buddha would ration or classify his teaching to various *grades* of comprehension, to various *levels* of the listening public? Even if true, it was surely presumptuous for him even to consider questioning or criticising the Buddha's choice of performance.

But it is not only the psychological mastery which makes this case reminiscent of parable. It is also that surplus, that overlooked excess, which gives apparent life to the whole exchange. It is the unexpected ‘cattle-feed’ which the Buddha ignores – or, at least, seems not to pick up for his own purposes – that continues to prompt speculation. What sort of ‘excess’ is this? Is it unequivocally a fictional surplus? A dramatic redundancy? Or doesn’t the Buddha, in the end, perhaps slyly recuperate it after all, by translating the headman’s dismissive shrug into quite another equally uncertain and unreliable ‘profit’?

* * *

This Parable of the Sower is immediately duplicated, with its ‘three fields’ transformed into ‘three waterpots’. It’s as if the Buddha could promptly improvise variations by conjuring up random pots, of which one is neither cracked, nor porous, nor leaky; another is uncracked, but porous and leaky; while a third is cracked *and* porous *and* leaky.

Now the question is: which one would a householder prefer for storing water? Obviously (in order of choice) Pot One followed by Pot Two. Of Pot Three the headman judges he might – or again might not – pour in water: ‘At any rate, it would do for washing-up.’ That is, if there were any water left. Just as it was problematic whether the sandy field could grow crops at all. The commercial or practical risk, the headman considers, is hardly worth taking. But he *might* take

it as long as he can envisage a minimal gain. But the Buddha neither weighs commercial pros and cons nor practical considerations. For him, it is never a matter of investment in time and energy – of capital risk at all. He gives of himself out of abundance. ‘Why?’ he repeats, ‘If [those leaky, cracked and porous vessels] only understood a single phrase, it would be to their enduring profit.’

For the calculus of profit in the holy life is turned inside out and upside down. It neither classifies investment risks nor acts with any personal considerations of profit-taking in mind. Rather, it *distributes* profits – like seed, like water – universally, as universally available. Which is precisely what the Buddha had meant by ‘compassion’, that original bond of consensus on which his dialogue with the headman had been established.

* * *

Parable and allegory, then, run neck and neck. Similes can be plucked by the Buddha extempore out of thin air. But we should beware of squeezing cross-references too hard. Not everything need be analogously determined. If the three fields are too closely identified with the Buddha’s three audiences,

The first-class field	constituting monks and nuns
The average field	constituting male and female lay-followers
The poor, sandy field	constituting wanderers and Brahmans of other sects,

then awkward questions arise. Did monks and nuns consistently represent the most fertile soil for his Dhamma talks? Were they inevitably his most responsive and susceptible audience? Not at all. Monks could become slack and happy-go-lucky. Some disrobed, and others again spent decades of distracted effort without reaching enlightenment. While outsiders on occasion (like the leper Suppabuddha, or Bāhiya Dārucīriya, as we shall see) could reach enlightenment in a single bound. Read strictly as allegory, the Parable of the Sower, or of the Three Waterpots, becomes unpersuasive. The Buddha's preferred mode, in all such cases, was an idiosyncratically mixed idiom.

Compare Jesus's Parable of the Sower, as purveyed in the Gospel of Mark:

'Behold, there went out a sower to sow: And it came to pass, as he sowed, some fell by the wayside, and the fowls of the air came and devoured it up. And some fell on stony ground, where it had not much earth; and immediately it sprang up, because it had no depth of earth: But when the sun was up, it was scorched; and because it had no root, it withered away. And some fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up, choked it, and it yielded no fruit. And others fell on good ground, and did yield fruit that sprang and increased; and brought forth, some thirty, and some sixty, and some a hundred.'⁵⁷

Not three experimental contexts here, but four: the footpath, the scree, the patch of thistles and a stretch of fertile soil. Read as parable, there's no need to fuss over details. Only a 'single point of comparison' counts:

the initial sowing followed by an abundant harvest. That harvest (the narrative confirms) will be all the more joyful for the degree of frustration and wasted labour involved.

Read as allegory, though, every detail must be brought into play: the stray seeds pecked by birds; those, unable to take root, which scorch; yet others choked by thorns. To exhaust such play, a notably clumsy and uncharacteristic gloss was put in Jesus's mouth:⁵⁸

'The sower soweth the word. And these are they by the wayside, where the word is sown; but when they have heard, Satan cometh immediately, and taketh away the word that was sown in their hearts. And these are they likewise which are sown on stony ground; who, when they have heard the word, immediately receive it with gladness; and have no root in themselves, and so endure but for a time: afterward, when affliction or persecution ariseth for the word's sake, immediately they are offended. And these are they which are sown among thorns; such as hear the word, and the cares of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches, and the lusts of other things entering in, choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful. And these are they which are sown on good ground; such as hear the word, and receive it, and bring forth fruit, some thirtyfold, some sixty, and some a hundred.'

Once the seed becomes 'the word', each listener's inner mood (obtuse, overenthusiastic, too easily discouraged) is illuminated and probed by different aspects of the rural scenario.

The Buddha was fond, as we know, of elaborating such homilies; and allegories came readily to him. But his own Parable of the Sower was not one of them. It cannot be read either as straightforward parable or straightforward allegory. Nor can it be surgically sliced into parallel texts as Mark (followed by Matthew and Luke) managed to slice – however ineptly – Jesus’s Parable of the Sower.

* * *

The problem of plentitude or ‘excess’, circumvented here, is fully addressed elsewhere. Put in a nutshell, the answer is:

‘Bhikkhus, the Tathāgata has two ways of teaching. What two? The concise and the detailed. These are the two ways of teaching.’⁵⁹

What the Buddha was too tactful to tell the headman to his face was that, as Tathāgata, he was always critically ‘aware of the right time’ – the right occasion and right interlocutor, that is – ‘for explaining his speech’.⁶⁰ Take the strange tale of the shipwrecked Bāhiya Dārucīriya, a kind of Hindu Robinson Crusoe dressed entirely in the bark of trees, who fell down at the Buddha’s feet – in mid-alms-round, on a roadside in Sāvatti – crying: ‘Lord, let the Exalted One teach me Dhamma ... to my profit and welfare for long days to come!’ Twice he made his appeal and twice the Buddha patiently rejected him. But, at the third try, perhaps because his plea echoed the Buddha’s own terms – his very own

phraseology – the Buddha relented, delivering this impromptu and masterly exposition of the Dhamma:

‘Thus, Bāhiya, you should train yourself: in what is seen, there is only the seen; in what is heard, there is only the heard; in what is sensed, only the sensed; in what is thought, only the thought. Train yourself thus! And when in the seen nothing remains but sight, in the heard nothing but sound, in the sensed nothing but touch or smell or taste, in thinking nothing but thought, then for you, Bāhiya, there will be no “there”; when there is no “there”, Bāhiya, there will be no “here”; where there is no “here”, Bāhiya, there will be no next world; and since both extremes will have been eliminated, that indeed will be the end of *dukkha*.’⁶¹

Shortly after, Bāhiya Dārucīriya (like the leper, Suppabuddha) was charged by a young bull and killed.⁶² So the teaching, one might think, was not to his ‘long-term profit’ after all. But the Buddha, on his return round, seeing the dead body, instructed his monks to cremate it and build a *cetiya* (memorial stupa) over it. Curious, they wondered why. Because he had ‘passed to nibbāna’, the Buddha declared: ‘Foremost among my bhikkhus who are quick to learn the truth is Bāhiya Dārucīriya.’

With this minimal dose of teaching – in a Zen flash of *satori*, as it were – Bāhiya had ‘released his heart from the pollutions’. As concise as the discourse was the moment of his enlightenment; as instantaneous as his enlightenment had been the remainder of his life.

Such priority was surprising. ‘Lord’, the monks

enquired, ‘you say Bāhiya Dārucīriya had attained Arahantship. When did he attain it?’

‘Bhikkhus, it was when he heard me teach the Dhamma.’

This was even more puzzling. How could they have missed that? When they were on their alms-round? In Sāvattthī? ‘But when did you teach the Dhamma to him?’

‘On the roadside, while I was making my alms-round.’

Really startled now, they asked: ‘Lord, was not the discourse you delivered by the roadside an extremely short one? How could he develop Final Knowledge after hearing so little?’

Their Teacher replied: ‘Bhikkhus, do not measure my Dhamma as being “little” or “much”. There is no virtue even in many thousands of stanzas. A single line of a stanza, containing the truth, is better.’

He might have been thinking of the headman, Asibandhakaputta. He, too, had measured the Dhamma quantitatively, like a shopkeeper or farmer, as being ‘little’ or ‘much’, ‘full’ or ‘not so full’, ‘thorough’ or ‘not so thorough’. Both as teacher and artist, the Buddha knew that virtue never resided in sheer length. Nor in concision necessarily either. But concision is always possible; and used in the right way, at the right time, can be conclusive.

* * *

Compared to some forty New Testament parables, rabbinical parables can be numbered in the thousands. Nor was the art of parable unique to the Buddha's teaching either. As the following brain-teaser suggests:

'Suppose King Pasenadi of Kosala, while at Sāvattihī, had some urgent business to transact at Sāketa. Suppose, too, that between Sāvattihī and Sāketa six coaches stood posted at regular intervals, ready-harnessed. Then mounting a coach at his palace door in Sāvattihī, he could make for a second coach; by dismounting and remounting at point A, he could reach a third coach; by dismounting and remounting at point B, he could reach a fourth coach; by dismounting and remounting at point C, he could reach a fifth coach; by dismounting and remounting at point D, he could reach a sixth coach; by dismounting and remounting at point E, he could reach a seventh coach; and from point F, by means of the seventh coach, he would arrive at his palace door in Sāketa. If asked, "Sire, did you travel by coach all the way from Sāvattihī?" how should the King reply?'

He should reply, of course: 'Yes, I travelled by coach. But not in the same coach, no. Fresh horses were posted at each stage along the route. This is the last of a relay of seven coaches.'⁶³

That 'simile' capped a dialogue between two monks on the purpose of the holy life. What was its ultimate goal? Was it to perfect purity of conduct? Or purity of mind? Or purity of belief? Or purity of faith? Or purity of insight in all its various forms? Each time the answer was 'no'. Finally, the Venerable Sāriputta exclaimed:

‘For what then, pray, is the holy life led?’ And the Venerable Mantāniputta (called Puṇṇa) replied: ‘Brother, the holy life is led, under the Blessed One, that through detachment from things of heaven and earth, we may attain nibbāna.’

It is an essential lesson which Sāriputta, oddly enough, had not assimilated in person from the Buddha: that neither purity of conduct, nor purity of mind, nor of belief, nor of faith, nor of insight, can ever be final goals in themselves:

‘For, brother, if the Blessed One had taught that nibbāna, whose essence is detachment, consisted of purity of conduct, or purity of mind, or purity of belief, or purity of faith, or purity of insight, he might just as well have taught that the essence of nibbāna is *attachment*!’⁶⁴

On propounding this paradox, Mantāniputta introduced his Parable of the Seven Relays. Its purport, before decipherment even, was transparent: as purity of conduct leads to purity of mind, so purity of mind leads on to purity of belief, purity of belief to purity of faith, purity of faith to purity of insight ... which leads straight to the ultimate goal of detachment, or nibbāna.

Why not call it ‘allegory’, then, if relay by relay its meaning was so explicit? Because this is an ideal, an intellectual model at best, not a certified rule-book. The Buddha never taught that pure mind can be developed only by pure conduct, or pure belief only by pure mind, or pure faith only by pure belief, or pure insight only by

pure faith. A coherent life consists of *one* journey, not seven short hauls. Moral progress cannot be chopped up in that way. Yes, the relays determine a normative sequence, or accretion, of moral attributes (which can hardly be faulted) as well as illuminating a final goal. But the lessons are practical. They issue a challenge. First: in the moral life there can be no shortcuts. Second: draw up a long-term plan. Third: always be prepared. Fourth: remember that your immediate aims, however overwhelming they seem, are only a means to an end and not the end itself.

* * *

Folklore, too, could be co-opted. As in the Parable of the Māluva-Creeper. This clinging vine is known in English as the ‘killer’ creeper.⁶⁵ At first no bigger than a toenail, its tendrils creep, supporting their weight on other plants. After a year, it has climbed a third of the way up the bole of a giant teak, or tamarind, or sandalwood, its stem still no rounder than an index finger. Within two years, it’s the size of a wrist and has reached the crown. Its enveloping stems are now as thick as a thigh, finally thicker than a waist. Their winding mesh squeezes the host, voraciously biting through the soft outer bark into the heartwood. Literally, the ‘killer’ strangles the tree to death, until monsoon rains send its immense joint weight lurching and crashing to the jungle floor.

The Buddha’s context for his vernacular tale is the overwhelming, crippling effect of sexual obsession, inexorably leading, once the least twinge of lust takes

hold, to total, irretrievable breakdown.⁶⁶ It could be read as allegory, though the Buddha nowhere attempts his usual detailed, exhaustive explanation. If anything, it seems more like a practical demonstration, or proof even, that *kamma* accrues step by step with a quasi-genetic, biologically conditioned force of determination.

As in parable, too, a ‘single point of comparison’ is underscored by a single parallel phrasing: the ‘soft, tender, downy’ touch of a female embrace echoed by the ‘soft, tender, downy’ coils of the māluva-tendrils. Nothing else is elaborated.⁶⁷

‘Suppose late in the Dry Season, monks, just before the rains, the pod of a māluva-creeper burst open and a seed tumbled down to the foot of a tall Sāl tree.⁶⁸ Which immediately upset and alarmed its guardian-spirit. But friends and relatives (wood-sprites and garden-sprites, residing in neighbouring herbs and tree-tops) assembled to soothe him, saying: “Don’t be frightened, brother; there’s nothing to be frightened of. Most likely a peacock will gobble it up, or a deer will munch it, or a brush-fire consume it, or foresters find it, or white ants cart it off. Maybe it’s not even a seed at all; maybe it won’t ever germinate.”

‘But it so happened that the seed was not gobbled by a peacock, nor munched by a deer, nor consumed by a brush-fire, nor found by foresters, nor carted off by white ants. It really was a seed and really did germinate. Once clouds had gathered and the Rainy Season began, it rapidly shot up and its soft, tender, downy tendrils wound coiling round that tall Sāl tree.

‘Then the tree-spirit wondered: “What exactly did my friends and relatives envisage when they assembled here to soothe and counsel me with their talk of peacocks and deer and brush-fires and foresters and white ants? All I know is that this creeper’s vines are altogether soft and tender and downy to the touch!”

‘Then the creeper encircled and embraced that Sāl tree, wrapping it tighter and tighter on all sides, until it hung like a canopy above, exerting such force that it crushed every branch and cracked and shattered its trunk.

‘Distracted, the tree-spirit exclaimed: “So that’s what my friends and relatives envisaged! That’s what they really foresaw when they soothed me with talk of peacocks and deer and brush-fires and foresters and white ants! One proposed it mightn’t even be a seed! Or if a seed, would never germinate! But, woe is me, owing to that one small seed, piercing pains are now racking my limbs through and through.”’

It’s a nicely judged, almost tragi-comic account, with the hamadryad at first suspicious, then alarmed, then socially reassured and lulled into cosy delusions of security, only to be finally discomfited, ravaged and exposed.⁶⁹ Though for us, rather, it may be the bizarre assumptions of the underlying thesis that are exposed: as if the sexual instinct, once awakened, were in some way *parasitic* on human development; and, left unchecked, must invariably spell our moral, and/or intellectual, and/or physical doom. It is an apocalyptic threat. Just

staying alert, in this context, cannot begin to be enough. In times of (perpetual) crisis, the parable insists, there is a need to be (perpetually) poised for a pre-emptive strike.

6

FIGURES IN THE
LANDSCAPE

The tree-sprite's lament may serve as a reminder not only of the Pali vernacular in which the Buddha taught (explored in Chapter 7), but of the ubiquitous veins of folklore which he co-opted (explored in Chapter 8). His parables were rooted in a rich, popular tradition, just as his imagery derived from the vast panorama of Indian life, ranging from towering Himalayan peaks to local flood-plains, dense jungle to the sacred Ganges, distant frontier posts to village clearings. Truly it can be said that the Buddha presented an unrivalled picture of Hindu peasant and merchant and court culture over two and a half thousand years ago – comparable, in scale and multitudinous detail, only to Homer.¹

Unlike Homer, however, the Buddha cast himself as a protagonist of his own parables, adopting many guises. One such figure – invariably droll – was that of a children's nanny, whose routines he rehearsed with a typically grim and earthy realism:

‘Now, monks, suppose a baby was laid on its back; and while the nurse’s attention was distracted, it had popped a small twig or shard into its mouth. No sooner spotted, you’ll agree, but she’d remove that object; or, if she couldn’t, she’d grasp the baby’s head with her right hand, crooking her forefinger to extract it, even at the risk of drawing blood. A clumsy procedure, of course, and painful too – there’s no denying that – but in her flurry of concern she’d have no other option. She’d simply go ahead ... But once the baby was grown – once it had reached the age of reason – then the nurse could relax, knowing that the child can now look after itself, without perpetrating such blunders.’²

The rehearsal can even be re-enacted; or, vice versa, recycled from incident to parable. Nothing is fixed in this Canon. As here in Rājagaha:

‘Once, when Prince Abhaya was dandling a baby on his lap, the Blessed One asked him:

THE BUDDHA: “Prince, what do you think? Should your baby now poke a stick or pebble into his mouth without your noticing – or his nurse noticing – what’s the first thing you’d do?”

THE PRINCE: “I should quickly snatch it away, Venerable Sir. Or, if that proved too late, I’d grasp his head in my left hand and crooking the forefinger of my right, I’d prize it out, even if that meant drawing blood. Why? In a rush of anxiety for my own child.”

THE BUDDHA: “So, too, a Tathāgata, Prince, knows the critical moment for intervening, even where speech proves unwelcome and disagreeable.”³

In either case, the Buddha imaginatively sides with the nursemaid or nursing father.

Or rather, he *identifies* with the nurse. In fact, he *is* the nurse.⁴ For the Buddha has to ‘look after’ his disciples while they are still babes in judgment; and such nursing care entails tailoring his talks to an infant class still enamoured of rhymes and toys and adventure-playgrounds. His tropes, in this sense, are adapted to childish faculties in a spiritual nursery school. Thus his infantile lines of enquiry:

‘Suppose someone were to chuck a stone ball at a pile of wet clay. What do you think? Would it smash right through?’⁵

‘Suppose someone were to hurl a ball of string at a hardwood door. What do you think? Would even a panel crack?’

Or take this madcap performance, evoking all the uproar of a kindergarten:

‘Suppose someone came along, holding a basket and hoe, with just one thought in mind: “I shall strip this great Earth of earth.” So he set to digging holes here and there, scattering sand here and there, spitting and urinating in all directions, continually chanting: “Vanish earth! Vanish earth!” What do you think? Could he strip this great Earth of earth?’⁶

How silly can you get! But what an inspired mess, all goo and pee and spit! Uproar in class! The Buddha’s parables are really toddlers’ tales for those newborns in the spiritual life. ‘And why?’ he rhetorically asked.

‘Because, for the young, sense-pleasures are easily accessible.’ So too for monks, it seems. Though they have supposedly:

‘laid aside weapons ... abandoned sexual play ... given up gossip ... eat only once a day ... refrain from dancing, singing, music and theatrical shows ... abstain altogether from self-adornment with garlands, or scents, or cosmetics ... hold aloof from couches (high as well as low) ... from accepting gifts of gold or silver ... from running of errands ... from cheating with weights and measures ... from trafficking in male or female slaves ... from owning sheep, goats, poultry, pigs, elephants, cattle, stallions and mares, ploughed fields and grazing land ...’⁷

What becomes immediately apparent is that even this brief catalogue offers a keyhole glimpse of Indian life in the sixth century BCE. It can be infinitely extended. Such ‘sense-pleasures’, after all, were more than chance emanations. Gossip and garlands, pigs and poultry, couches and concubines imply a highly developed form of social and political organization, whose common denominator was the village; whose commercial nexus consisted of small market-towns and cities; at whose administrative apex stood a royal (or republican) capital with its frontier outposts.

What kind of village, though? Can its topography be charted? Its inhabitants traced and pinpointed? Is a tentative aerial survey, or reconnaissance, still possible?

First slide, please.

Villages were grouped around the communal rice-field, with cattle wandering off into the scrubby edge

of the surrounding jungle – the *Māha Vana* – which still stretched almost unbroken across the whole plain from the foot of the Himalayas (the Nepali Terai) to the Ganges.⁸ Felled and cleared in times of peace, it rapidly reswallowed towns and villages devastated in times of war.⁹ At all times it was a haunt of robbers and runaway slaves,¹⁰ even for a special force of uniformed police (among Kolyans and Mallas) notorious for extortion and brutality.¹¹

The villages in their occasional clearings – on scattered, interconnected patches of land – seem to have been autonomous for their local affairs, each with their own council and elected (or possibly hereditary) headman.¹² He was responsible for supervising the irrigation canals and public fencing round the collective field; for transacting payment of the land tax, or government tithes, with state officials; for organizing access by road as well as catering to any royal, or ministerial, progress.

Houses were grouped in narrow lanes, much as today, near a sacred grove; a stand of trees spared the clearing of the primeval forest. That was the home of *nāgas*, dryads or tree-spirits. There were no temples or shrines; and in all probability, no images either: no Shīva-lingam, no Brahmā, no Vishṇu. The later Brahmanic cults had not yet arisen: Sakka, Lord of the Thunderbolt, not Indra, ruled supreme; Brahmā was still an aspiring co-partner with Sakka; Shīva, known only in his youthful form of Isāna; and Vishṇu, or

Veṇhu, a mere newcomer.* What stirred in the wind and rustled with the leaves was a whole folk mythology of *devas* (human spirits), *yakkhas* (ogres), *nāgas* (cobras or guardian serpents), *garudas* (harpies or griffins), *gandhabbas* (heavenly musicians) and *asūras* (titans). These animated the grove, the jungle and the land.

Each householder exercised three rights: the right of cultivation, the right of pasture and the right to forage in the forest. In contrast to the grassland and woodland, which were held in common, the Great Field (usually cultivated with rice) was divided into family plots by the intersection of irrigation canals so that it looked, in a striking simile, like a bhikkhu's 'patched robe'.¹³ After the crop was reaped, cattle roamed over the field; before the harvest, a single herdsman drove all the village cattle collectively beyond the field to a common grazing-ground.¹⁴ The surrounding jungle was legally *Terra Nullius* and so *Res Publica*,** where everyone could resort for brushwood, for timber, for herbs or hunting.

* Some scholars hold Sakka (= 'capable') and Indra (= 'ruling') to be alternate names of the same deity. Their names bear similar meanings and they both wield a thunderbolt; 'Sakka' is more commonly referred to, but 'Indra' does get a mention, e.g. at D 20:4.12. Brahmā is not portrayed as a co-partner in the suttas; the name refers to any one of an ascending scale of divinities, all of whom dwell in heavens higher and more refined than that of Sakka. Veṇhu appears briefly at D 20:4.14. The Trimurti of Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Shiva arose, as Harold suggests, after the time of the Buddha. (Ed.)

** 'no-man's land' and 'public property' respectively. (Ed.)

This is how the great bulk of the Buddha's contemporaries lived and for millennia continued to live. Magadha (roughly what is Bihar today) reputedly had 80,000 villages.¹⁵ It was a wholly communal, interdependent life. At the instigation of their headman and local council, villagers were conspicuously alert, engaged in the construction and maintenance of their council-halls, their rest-houses, their reservoirs and irrigation systems, as well as of road links between their own and neighbouring villages.

* * *

So much for the composite scene. But it was at close-ups – at zooming in on and tracking details – that the Buddha excelled. Here follows a montage, initially drawn from the *Dhammapada*, vastly extended by the suttas, and with occasional support from the *Jātaka* cycle.

THE JUNGLE:¹⁶ The tangle of Birana- and Māluva-creepers, choking and toppling the tallest trees, must have deterred all but the most resolute intruders. From its shadows, leopards and cheetahs regularly marauded nearby homesteads. In its thickets, jackals and hyenas prowled. Their howling and cackling, punctuated by the hoot of owls, throbbed through the night air. By day, though, even children might follow the flash of a parrot or mynah-bird down overgrown tracks where monkeys bounded, gibbering overhead, and peacocks scuttled through the shrub.

For the traffic was two-way. Woodcutters penetrated in search of logs; thieves and runaway slaves, in search of refuge; mahouts, to check their elephant-traps; hermits, to establish their retreats.¹⁷ Such hidden abodes inspired awe; they were held to be magically endowed. As the Buddha, on achieving Buddhahood, recalled: 'Every roaming deer would startle me, even a peacock snapping a twig or the wind rustling in the leaves.'¹⁸

Near royal capitals a chase, or Deer Park, was often established (as at Isipatana, near Benares). In such reserves, cleared of undergrowth, even chariots could be used in the pursuit of boars or wild goats; but venison was especially prized.¹⁹ In princely apartments, tanned antelope skins were displayed as sporting trophies. (Restricted hunting on this scale, however, attracted poachers; Angulimāla, for one, boasted about how he could outrace, and dispatch on foot, a galloping stag.²⁰)

With so much traffic at the forest's edge, sometimes shrubs would spontaneously ignite, scattering sparks and ashes, followed by a roar of flames. To the villagers' horror-struck eyes, these fires took on demon shapes gleefully 'whirling their flickering arms as they leapt, tossing back dishevelled smoke-hair'.²¹

WATER: But mountain-torrents, or rivers, or lakes were usually close at hand. Reeds grew along the streams where reed-cutters plied their trade and mat-weavers built their huts (both reckoned among the lowest of the low).²² On the lake's edge, a fisherman might glance down at a freshly caught fish still flapping

on the shore; or a youth, like the young Devadatta, aim his bow up at a flock of wild geese.²³ In the lake perched long-legged herons – a bedraggled crowd – while swans rose skyward, ‘following the path of the sun’.²⁴

The Ganges and Jumna rivers, with their many tributaries, were alive with traffic: here a sailboat being bailed out on a sandbank or a raft being laboriously punted upstream;²⁵ there a herdsman fording his cattle in the dry season under a darting swarm of mosquitoes and flies.²⁶ But waterways, too, furnished sites for prestigious projects of engineering: for dams and reservoirs, embankments and dykes.

Up in hill country, monsoons could devastate a sleeping village, and channels, or run-offs, to control their flow had constantly to be repaired; just as embankments had to be built on the Ganges plain against a permanent threat of flooding.²⁷ Dykes, too, were built around the great reservoirs, or ‘tanks’, such as can still be seen in Sri Lanka at Polonnaruwa: ‘a square pond on a level piece of ground, surrounded by an embankment and brimming with water, so that crows can drink out of it ...’ As the Buddha advised Ānanda: ‘Just as a man may build a dyke round a great reservoir to prevent the water from overflowing, even so were the eight basic rules for bhikkhunis laid down by me ...’²⁸ But most elaborate of all were the massive dams for crop irrigation, such as that on the River Rohinī between Kapilavatthu and Koliya, the object of a heated dispute between the Sakyans and the Koliyans.²⁹

OPEN COUNTRYSIDE was regarded as a buffer-zone, or no-man's land, between village and forest. Imagine some outcrop as landmark, surrounded by clumps of *kusa*-grass. On its far side, near the rainforest's edge, bananas and plantains might be cultivated; nearer to the village, bamboo and mango (*amba*) groves would certainly be tended. Maybe a path wound up through the razor-sharp grass-blades to a cave where a tangle-haired *saddhu*, with a deerskin slung over his shoulders, squatted in the ashes.

From the cave-mouth, he could watch young swineherds and goatherds and shepherds with their flocks dotted about the landscape, plus an odd mule or two grazing among scattered palms (mostly old, lopped-off stumps). Or a hunted hare might catch his eye, running for cover under a wild fig whose top was black with crows just returned from marauding the Great Field; or an elephant desperately dragging his bulk from the edge of a swamp; or a peasant stooping to slice his sickle through grass (for thatch), which he bundled in tufted bales to a pole for the journey home.³⁰

Far off, a funeral might be taking place: a whole family in white surrounding the pyre, offering perfumes and flowers before torching the wood. At which a thin plume of smoke would rise softly into the upper air.³¹

Vultures hovered above. Below hummed bees between patches of bramble, drawn by the sweet scent of rosebay and jasmine and sandalwood. A snake, slithering to the anthill where it lived, startled a spider which at once scuttled back to its web. Observed only

by a fowler in his hide, camouflaged from all sides by branches and leaves. Even the *saddhu* could not have spotted that. A fowler, in any case, was also among the lowest of the low. His reward might consist of half a dozen song-birds caught in his net.

At dusk, single figures would emerge from the village to squat at the pits. On moonless nights, those who left it too late might splash into the village sewers, or even tumble into the cess.³²

THE GREAT FIELD, as already seen, resembled a huge patchwork quilt. Though planted mostly with rice, there would also be bright clumps of sugarcane, or mustard, or cotton, or hemp, or flax (shimmering blue).³³ Buffaloes worked in the paddies where women bent double to transplant the seedlings. Here and there, a father and son at the plough stumbled after yoked oxen: 'their backs bent, their hair dishevelled, their faces dripping with sweat, their whole bodies fouled with dirt'.³⁴ At mid-day they would return home – the father hoisting the plough on his shoulder and brandishing his ox-goad – their bare feet spattered with mud.³⁵

THE ROAD: Rough tracks connected the villages. Only a single trunk-road was level enough for official tours by the king or his minister of state. The set formula for all such visits in coaches by kings, or Brahmans, or courtesans, ran: they 'drove as far as the road was passable for carriages, then dismounted and proceeded on foot ...'³⁶ (On arrival, they would commandeer all suitable village housing.³⁷)

Through lion-infested country a coachman would press his carriage on at full tilt. Merchants, weighed down with bullion, were escorted by a small armed guard. Some queer-looking travellers lingered by the roadside. Bandits, or dacoits like Angulimāla, abounded. They were often thought to be spies. For kings, so rumour spread, despatched secret agents into the backwoods. King Pasenadi of Kosala, for one, openly admitted to deploying agents in disguise:

‘... Then men come back to report, still dressed as robbers after spying in the countryside. At first glance, I’m always taken in. Only after they’ve washed off their grime – once they’ve been thoroughly bathed and perfumed, had their beards trimmed and changed back into whites – can I recognize them at all. Then I know at once who they are.’³⁸

Elsewhere the road was crowded with migrants: itinerant horse-traders; stray idiots; wandering lepers, like Suppabuddha;³⁹ entertainers, jugglers, bamboo-acrobats; the odd Brahman with a carrying-pole from which his possessions dangled;⁴⁰ ragged beggars, scarcely to be distinguished from ‘coil-haired ascetics’, like the Buddha’s ‘Group of Five’ or the thousand fire-worshippers at Uruvelā.⁴¹ Always in pairs, somewhat aloof, strode the *Paribbājaka*, or wanderers (women as well as men). A motley crew: some with their heads shaved; others with matted or elaborately braided hair and plaited beards; others again in saffron robes, stopping to expound their tenets and abuse or censure

their opponents.⁴² (Most of these would put up at the village rest-houses.)

Equally hard to tell from mere simpletons, or imbeciles, was a whole range of fanatical holy men, or *sadhus*, including 'naked ascetics', like the Jains, and those variously clothed in hempen rags; or in the bark of trees; or in antelope hides; or in fabric spun from wood-shavings; or human 'head-hair'; or, more fantastically still, in cloaks of owl-feathers or 'owls' wings'.⁴³ Most bizarre of all, however, were those who had renounced all ritual, along with their family and caste. ('Cynics', Greeks would have called them.) Some imitated dogs, licking their food off the floor and curling up to sleep; others blundered about as if they were bullocks jostling into all and sundry.⁴⁴

At some point, of course, the road had to stop, petering out in jungle or 'waterless wilderness'. Caravans often crossed deserts at night. After sunrise, in the gathering heat, they made camp, unharnessing the waggons and drawing them round in a circle, with the oxen tethered to the wheels at its centre.⁴⁵

VILLAGE huts, or cottages, were thatched.⁴⁶ Here, too, conflagrations flared since the grass was easily caught by sparks from a stove, or careless lamp, or outside oven.⁴⁷ All inhabitants were peasant-farmers, with a scattering of small-scale artisans like potters and brewers. In the lanes, two-wheeled waggons drew up with their oxen in harness. Each ox-horn was cased in silver; or variously dyed, one vermilion perhaps, one blue. At the back there might be a barn

(such as that which once sheltered the Buddha during a thunderstorm),⁴⁸ or cattle in staked-out pens, or a pigsty maybe, or a calf tied to the leg of a cow, or a spare cartwheel.⁴⁹ Out front stood fat-bellied water-jars, screened by hibiscus in perpetual blossom.⁵⁰ That's where the toddlers played, pigeons roosted, dogs barked and cats chased mice between the mazelike roots of a towering banyan.

Interiors were cool and dark, lit only by the glow from a smouldering fire, whose soft fumes mingled with an aroma of curd and cardamon and honey. Or soup might be on the boil, with horn spoons laid ready for the returning ploughmen and herdsman. First propping their ox-goads and herding-sticks outside, they'd bend low at the door, brushing past a clutter of pestles and mortars and cookpots and store-jars and winnowing-baskets and palm-leaf fans on either side. At night, a lamp might be lit for granny to find her darning-needle.

All food and clothing were in the women's domain. Floor space was cramped by their spindles and looms from which the coarse hemp, the goat-wool and sheep-wool and tree-bark fibres were spun and woven. Cloth was left raw and undyed, as were the tough horse-hair blankets. Meals mainly consisted of thick rice porridge, rice with lentil curry (*dhal*), milk-rice (especially prized for religious offerings), bean-soup, lentil-soup, pea-soup, barley gruel, sesame, vetch or tares, curds, ghee, with an occasional treat of honeycomb, or molasses, or

palm-sap jaggery.⁵¹ Unleavened bread was baked in the oven outside.

Pretty much all village life was social. Not only communal events, such as horse-traders setting up their 'market rings';⁵² or the Royal Annual Ploughing Festival when 'a thousand oxen hung with flowers and five hundred ploughmen in their best finery' competed; or the fairground thrill of a troupe of jugglers and acrobats showing up.⁵³ All relationships were public: friends pausing to gossip at the well; men and women setting off (at separate times) to bathe in a river or pool or tank,⁵⁴ armed with loofahs and powdered soap; children shooting marbles in the dust, or turning somersaults, or playing hopscotch, or building sandcastles, or throwing mudpies;⁵⁵ or catching crabs in the village-pond to torture and tease (while gadflies, in their turn, teased and tortured the children's eyes and protruding navels).⁵⁶

Theirs was a mirror-world of play: churning up mud with miniature ploughs, or bowling palm-leaf wheels along the paths, or racing model chariots, or letting toy arrows twang from bows.⁵⁷ Girls chanted counting rhymes (with a ritual swapping of tiny baskets), while boys shrilled ear-splitting whistles through folded leaves. Adults were just as noisy, what with their ubiquitous hawking and spitting; foul smells rose from ditches and drains.⁵⁸ Stray idiots would be pelted with clods to shouts of 'Crazy fool! Crazy fool!';⁵⁹ lepers showered with dust and cursed: 'Clear off! And don't forget to take your kids!'⁶⁰ Low-caste traders

like mat-makers or fowlers – especially ‘menial black fellows’ (of aboriginal stock) – were openly jeered as ‘the scrapings from Brahmā’s feet’.⁶¹ That was normal. At the best of times, life in such a close community was testing. Ascetics might deny themselves ‘liquor, wine or fermented brew’ – mainly rice-wine and arak – but not ordinary folk.⁶² Old age came early enough with swollen hands, blotched skin, bent backs, lame legs, scabs and eruptions.

It should go without saying that such peasantry was illiterate. But the evidence wavers. A village-treasurer’s daughter, in one context, could apparently read and write, while even a common labourer, on another occasion, could make out a ‘leaf’ of scripture.⁶³

* * *

Though social gradations were more fluid than in later historical times, a man’s role depended mainly on his class or caste: literally *vaṇṇa*, ‘colour’, a term that favoured the lighter-skinned offspring of the victorious Aryan invaders over the darker Dravidians.⁶⁴

The first rank was reserved for warriors, or nobles (in Pali, *Khattiyas*; Sanskrit, *Kshatriyas*). Still of secondary rank socially – though already aspiring to their eventual, sure supremacy – was the sacrificial priesthood of *brāhmaṇas*.⁶⁵ In third place came the mass of peasantry (Pali, *Vessas*; Sanskrit, *Vaiśīyas*), from which the priests and nobles had raised themselves

and steadily detached themselves. These three orders constituted an independent and privileged society.

Below them, and supporting them, existed three other strata of unprivileged labourers and the oppressed: 1. the *suddas* (Sanskrit, *sūdras*), who composed the largely non-Aryan-hired workforce; 2. those ‘of low birth’ (*hīna-jātiyo*) devoted to ‘low trades’ (*hīna-sippāni*), such as bird-catching, cart-building and basket-making – that is, hereditary, aboriginal crafts; since ‘low trades’, however, also included potters, weavers, leather-workers, mat-makers and barbers, for instance, it seems that all handicrafts and traders in merchandise might be theoretically suspect; 3. slaves, who were mostly household servants.⁶⁶ The least systematized aspect of this sixfold division, then, is that concerning the role of trade. For where in this scheme did merchants belong?

In all probability, they were not subsumed. They did not belong. Most manual skills and vocations and professions, however low, did not yet imply any loss of caste. Even princes and nobles on occasion, as necessity arose, engaged in trade. Judged in solely economic terms, class was indeterminate.

* * *

It was the city, with its long line of bazaars, which was to become the locus of this expanding role of manufacture and trade. Whole streets were devoted to silversmiths or florists or wheelwrights, centred on

their various guilds. From such diversification of crafts and the increasing number of their artisans, a new caste was eventually to emerge.

The number of guilds in the warren of the bazaars was traditionally given as eighteen, though it is doubtful whether hunters or sailors or fishermen would have been officially so organized.⁶⁷ Such an eighteenfold roll call would seem most likely to have included:

1. Workers in wood: carpenters, cabinet-makers, cartwrights, wheelwrights, ship-builders, etc.;
2. Workers in metal: blacksmiths (forging plough shares, axes, hoes, saws, knives, needles) and goldsmiths and silversmiths;
3. Stonemasons, chiselling steps, stairs, balustrades, pilasters, bowls and caskets, etc.;
4. Leather-workers, stitching saddles and sandals as well as luxury items such as rugs of fur;
5. Weavers of cotton, muslin, linen and silk for both personal apparel and coverlets, blankets, carpets, etc.;
6. Potters;
7. Ivory-carvers;
8. Dyers;
9. Jewellers;
10. Fishermen (on the rivers only);
11. Butchers;
12. Hunters and Trappers (importing venison and game into the city as well as satisfying an insatiable demand for fur and ivory);

13. Cooks and Confectioners;
14. Barbers and Shampooers (also dealing in perfumes and dressing the elaborate turbans worn by the wealthier classes);
15. Garland-makers and Flower-sellers;
16. Sailors (on the great rivers mainly, but also on extended voyages out of sight of land);
17. Rush-workers and Basket-makers;
18. Painters (including Plasterers probably) of frescoes, such as those in the palaces of Magadha and Kosala.

As King Ajātasattu of Magadha was fond of remarking: 'There are men of various callings. And what are they? They are mahouts, cavalrymen, charioteers, archers, standardbearers, adjutants, commandos and seven other grades of military personnel, secretaries, cooks, barbers, bath attendants, confectioners, garland-makers, dhobi-men, weavers, basket-makers, potters, clerks and accountants.'⁶⁸ But his was the view from the palace which privileged certain crafts and trades 'by royal appointment', along with the army elite.

* * *

Merchants sailed up and down the great rivers as well as along both sea-coasts to trade. Cross-country-long caravans of two-wheeled bullock-carts lumbered at a snail's pace down trunk roads and occasional village tracks, covering no more than fifteen or so miles a day.⁶⁹

There were no bridges. Small streams, approached by gullies, had to be forded; deeper rivers, crossed on improvised ferries. Additional duty was extracted on reaching each state line. Dacoits, or highwaymen, were so widespread that fresh guards and local scouts had constantly to be recruited. Only luxury goods could possibly have offset these accumulated risks and expenses: silks and muslins, brocades and embroidery, cutlery and armour, perfumes and drugs, fur-rugs and ivory, jewellery and gold.

Yet fortunes were made. Anāthapindika, the Buddha's great benefactor, was not the only millionaire in centres such as Sāvattthī, Vārāṇasī, Rājagaha, Vesālī or Kosambi. Banking facilities per se had not yet been invented, but promissory notes and letters of credit were regularly exchanged and interest rates charged. Neither gold nor silver money was apparently coined. Bargains were struck in terms of a square copper coin (the *kaḥāpaṇa*), about 146 grains in weight, guaranteed by the merchants themselves (or possibly the guilds) with their own individual punch-marks.

On an east-west axis, the Ganges and its many tributaries formed the main trade highway. Further west, into present Rajasthan, or south in the Deccan, caravans crossed the desert in the cool of night, piloted by the stars. The Buddha himself most frequently used the busy north-to-southeast trade-route, travelling back and forth from Sāvattthī (capital of the kingdom of Kosala) to Kapilavattu (his Sakyan homeland), to Kusinārā (where he was to die), to Vesālī (capital of the

Licchavi confederation), to Pāṭaliputta (today's Patna, Aśoka's future capital), to Nāḷandā (later famed for its great international Buddhist university), and so home to Rājagaha (capital of the kingdom of Magadha), or even on to Gayā (near the site of his Enlightenment).

* * *

The Buddha's quick eye and ear on such journeys are everywhere apparent – in his use of folklore, local proverbs, commonplace sights and sounds. For this bustle of detail I return to another montage of images drawn mainly from the *Dhammapada* and the suttas. For the Buddha was as equally well acquainted with the cities as the countryside of northern India.

CITIES: In these ever-expanding commercial centres, artisans mingled publicly with merchants, merchants with Brahmans. The commonest type of house was of two or three storeys, with a balcony in front and a flat rooftop.⁷⁰ On these rooftops owners were often to be seen, shaded by a pavilion of some kind, eating their meals, checking through their accounts, or receiving visitors and clients. Here, too, washing could be hung, while women gazed down into the street or boys flew kites in the evening breeze. Superior homes had high-pitched roofs pierced by attic windows: 'houses with gable-ends, plastered inside and out', boasting draught-proof walls, ornate ceilings, and tall, close-fitting doors (secured by bars) and shutters.⁷¹ The entrance to a wealthy banker's or merchant's house (such as

Anāthapiṇḍika's in Sāvatthī) led through a gateway-lodge, with a treasury and grain-stores on either side, into an inner courtyard.

Separate blocks of crowded lanes were reserved for distinct professional quarters: most conspicuously for potters, jewellers, garland-makers, spinning-halls, weavers' workshops (with their shuttles and looms), dyers (with their colouring vats),⁷² barbers flourishing their razors, fletchers squatting among broken bows and arrows, silversmiths purifying their alloys, blacksmiths hammering their red-hot plugs of iron, carpenters planing ridge-poles and rafters.⁷³ All workshops were open to the street. Here a shopkeeper could be observed cautiously 'holding up a pair of scales'; there a merchant, proudly showing off his family to a new customer: 'These are my sons, sir. This is my wealth.'⁷⁴ Shrines were scattered through every quarter; but supremely honoured was the *Inda-khila*, or 'locking-post', at the Main Gate: elaborately painted and bejewelled as testimony to the city's divinely inspired foundation.⁷⁵

A model city was once described as 'resplendent, symmetrical, harmoniously subdivided; protected by external moats and ramparts, gates and towers; distinguished by extensive commons and squares and crossroads; supplied with clean, smooth-surfaced highways and well-proportioned workshops; adorned with groves and gardens and lakes and lotus-pools and wells; blessed with all manner of holy places ...'⁷⁶ where perfumed dandies, robed in white, might drive hither

and thither in their chariots, flourishing staves to goad on their mares with braided tails.⁷⁷ But this utopian vision must be flooded with the stench of sewers and an all-pervasive din: the mingled racket of hawkers' cries, of tradesmen haggling, of carters spurring on their yoked oxen, of shouting amid the wheeled traffic. The Buddha, in his precise way, reduced this cacophony to just ten sounds: the trumpeting of elephants, the neighing of horses, the rattle of carriages, the boom of kettle-drums, the rat-tat of sidedrums, the twanging of lutes, the clamour of singing, the crash of cymbals, the clang of gongs and, tenthly, the food-vendors' piercing refrain of 'Eat, drink and be merry!'⁷⁸

The streets were crowded with low-caste traders in their cotton *dhotis*, now stepping lightly aside for Brahmans, robed in white muslin,⁷⁹ holding aloft vermilion staffs (while clutching gold tableware to their sides); now jostling peasants with baskets of fresh produce from the countryside; or some noisy homecoming party perhaps;⁸⁰ or a household slave escorting a wealthy merchant ('Make way! Make way!') through the throng.⁸¹ At street corners, gamblers might crouch round a board marked with thirty-six squares, tossing dice. Occasionally, one would furtively dislodge a losing throw; or simply pop the unlucky dice into his mouth, exclaiming, 'A dice is missing!' and make off.⁸² The Buddha, of course, had spotted such tricks, at one point even comparing the commitment needed for belief in an afterlife (before a secular audience) to a 'lucky' or 'unlucky' throw.⁸³

After nightfall the hubbub would slowly die down. That's when prostitutes made their appearance on balconies or at doorways. (Some were widely renowned, such as Sirimā, the 'beautiful courtesan of Rājagaha', or Ambapālī of Vesālī.⁸⁴) Despite patrols of watchmen, divided into relays of three four-hour shifts, burglars too abounded, tossing their block and tackle to an upper window-frame or breaching the walls.⁸⁵ Once noting the rubble from his chariot, a naïve king was moved to ask: 'How comes it that the houses in this city are everywhere nothing but holes?' For 'in the entire city,' the narrator comments, 'there was not a single house left un plundered.'⁸⁶

OUTSIDE THE CITY WALLS: Beyond the South Gate the corpses of common folk were laid out (as among Parsees and Tibetan Buddhists to this day) to be stripped by jackals and vultures. No wonder the gate was believed to be haunted.⁸⁷ At night, only the most austere ascetics, including occasional bhikkhus, resorted there. At times of drought and famine, 'first the poor died and their bodies were thrown outside ...'⁸⁸ Their corpse-stench (also known as 'the snake-breath pest') might be followed by outbreaks of cholera or bubonic plague.

This, too, was the traditional site for executions. The condemned criminal, with head shaved and arms tightly roped behind his back, was conducted from street to street 'to the loud beating of a single drum,' and a lashing at every crossroad, until the procession had passed through the South Gate.⁸⁹ There he was

beheaded, his head impaled, his body hacked into four quarters and thrown to the four corners of the earth, North, South, East and West.⁹⁰

From here, too, stretched the 'burning-ground', or river ghats.⁹¹ Cremation, however, was privileged, granted solely to men outstanding for their wealth, or high birth, or public honour, such as religious teachers. Their ashes would also be scattered at the South Gate and even a memorial mound, or cairn, or *stūpa* might be erected there.⁹² Though more usually such burial mounds were constructed on private grounds; or in cases of exceptional honour, at a conspicuous crossroads. So the Buddha's instructions to Ānanda, on the building of his memorial *stūpa*, were by no means an innovation. Even by the Buddha's time, such monuments had reached a vast, impressive, domed size – landmarks, visible from afar, across the plains.

On the far side, opposite the North Gate, lay the common rest-house for travellers who arrived after nightfall. That is where King Pasenadi died, homeless as King Lear, deposed by his own son, having reached Rājagaha on horseback after the gates were locked.⁹³

EVERY ROYAL CAPITAL enclosed a vast, walled compound, whose principal structures consisted of a palace, on a commanding terrace, with a fortified treasury, swarming with accountants, adjacent.⁹⁴ ('Have you calculators enough to count the sand in the Ganges?' a bhikkhuni once asked King Pasenadi in all his glory. 'Or to reckon the water in the mighty ocean?')⁹⁵ But tax-collection was precarious; to increase domestic

revenues, there might well be a Public Gambling Hall to attract those corner-boys and injudicious punters, much as state lotteries today. Connected with this core stood the Hall of Justice, or place of litigation, where the king himself or his ministers of justice daily presided.⁹⁶ Sinuous pools (some planted with blue, some with red, some with white lotuses) linked elaborate gardens such as the Buddha could well remember from his youth; and on terraces, throughout this area, were scattered pavilions such as Suddhodana too had built for his son and heir: one as a summer residence, another as a winter retreat and a third for the monsoons.⁹⁷ Nearby, stood shrines tended by 'the house-priest of the King'.⁹⁸ The hum of Brahman chanting, mingling with the hubbub of raised voices from the Hall of Justice, would reach anyone passing along the raked paths under broad-leafed shade trees.

To one side of the palace lay the regimental barracks of the household guard (infantry as well as cavalry) with their armoury stocked with daggers and swords and axes and bows and arrows and spears. The *Dhammapada* talks of 'a warrior dazzling in his armour', just as Homer sings of the Achaeans on the war-march:⁹⁹

'from the magnificent bronze the gleam went dazzling all about through the upper air to the heaven.'¹⁰⁰

Over acres extended stabling for horses and huge army elephants (inured to arrows) tethered to rings with leather thongs, and corresponding quarters for mahouts and grooms.¹⁰¹ That's where Kesi, the

horse-trainer, would have lived¹⁰² and Channa, Prince Siddhattha's groom, who tended Kanthaka.¹⁰³ In this same complex, too, would be sheds for 'the royal painted chariot', state coaches, golden palanquins or litters.¹⁰⁴ Out of sight, further off, were tucked away service-quarters, storehouses and granaries.¹⁰⁵

Permanently on call, in a rear wing of the palace, lived members of the royal retinue and harem: troupes of mummers or mimes, minstrels with lutes and sitars, archers and wrestlers for athletic contests, puppeteers with loose-limbed jointed puppets, hunchbacks, dwarves, drummer-bands and dancing-girls in scarlet cloaks tapping 'gold-edged tambourines' while flashing pearl necklaces, toe-rings and anklets.¹⁰⁶ King Ajātasattu, when he paid his one and only call on the Buddha, posed this provocative question:

'Now what can be the point of renunciation or joining a sect like yours? Ordinary folk, by mastering ordinary crafts, get something out of them. They can make themselves comfortable in this world and maintain their families in comfort too ... Can you, sir, indicate any such clear advantage in this world for the life of a recluse?'¹⁰⁷

Exemplary crafts, in the King's order of priority, have already been listed: those of mahouts, cavalrymen, charioteers, archers, nine grades of military personnel, secretaries, cooks, barbers, bath-attendants, confectioners, garland-makers, dhobi-men, weavers, basket-makers, potters, clerks and accountants. Which evokes contemporary staffing

needs of a camp or the royal palace, but as the Buddha deviously implied, it was on the *peasant* and *tax-payer* that both court and army ultimately depended.

Such regal resources, however, could put on splendid shows: as when King Bimbisāra departed from Rājagaha in his state coach to the sound of trumpet fanfares backed by drums and tabours and cymbals.¹⁰⁸ Palace ceremonies were enthusiastically greeted by packed crowds ‘cheering “Hurrah!” and “Bravo!”’ That very visit by King Ajātasattu had begun with a moonlit procession from his then-capital at Rājagaha to a suburban mango-grove: with the King’s concubines mounted on five hundred cow-elephants and the King himself riding on his state elephant flanked by a column of torch-bearers.

REPUBLICAN CONFEDERATIONS, though proudly independent, were under constant threat of *coups d’état* (from within) or invasion (from without). Monarchs, like Ajātasattu, were on the warpath. Their massed armies dominated the plains, encroaching on their neighbours, fomenting rivalries, destabilizing loyalties, seizing on the least opportunity to impose centralized control. Coalitions of independent chieftains (*rajputs*, or warrior-princes) had become inherently fragile by the Buddha’s lifetime and were already doomed.

The Buddha himself had been just such a warrior-prince. His clan, the Sākya, were a Himalayan people who had moved south into the plains. His father Suddhodana was their *rāja*, or elected chief, at a time when the Sakyan republic was succumbing to

onslaughts from the neighbouring kingdom of Kosala. Like his father, Prince Siddhattha was clearly an instinctive democrat who praised the Vajjian republican system, recommending comparable rules for his Sangha;¹⁰⁹ he rejected Devadatta's bid to succeed him¹¹⁰ in favour of a majority rule, saying, 'What I have proclaimed as the Dhamma and the *Vinaya*, Ānanda, *that* shall be your Master when I am gone'.¹¹¹ Despite Chinese and Tibetan traditions, the *Majjhima Nikāya* explicitly states that the Buddhist Sangha was to have no official head.¹¹² 'Sangha' means 'assembly'; 'bhikkhu' means 'sharesman' (sharing, that is, common wealth or public resources). Only the Buddhist order perpetuated the old political sanghas in a new spiritual guise. Theirs was to be a spiritual republic within the new totalitarian states.

Confederate parliaments were held in pillared 'council-halls': roofed but open-walled pavilions (*santhā-gāra*) – what Thais would call *salas* today. The sessions of the Sakyan Sangha were held at its capital, Kapilavatthu; the 220-man Sangha of the Licchavi Federation at Vesālī (ringed by three huge concentric walls).¹¹³ It was to the Mallas of Kusinārā, in assembly at their council-hall, that Ānanda first broke the news of the Buddha's imminent demise.¹¹⁴

THE PALACE: The suttas, though, oddly are more revealing of the Buddha's royal patrons: the refinement of their entourage, their luxurious furnishings and apparel. From a lotus-filled moat, a broad flight of steps led up to a stone facade (inlaid with gems perhaps),

opening into 'halls decorated with long lines of geese and quail'.¹¹⁵ Private quarters, however, were tucked away out of sight in 'gabled upper rooms, plastered inside and out ... ornamented with strips of coloured cloth and swags of flowers'.¹¹⁶

It was the sheer exuberance of this plasterwork that most roused astonishment. For all exposed wood or brickwork, inside as well as out, was covered with a fine chalk plaster (*chunam*) brilliantly painted in fresco. The *Vinaya* gives elaborate instructions for the preparation of a smooth ground,¹¹⁷ even naming the four most common patterns: 'Wreath-work', 'Creeper-work', 'Five-ribbon-work' and 'Dragon's-tooth-work'.¹¹⁸ Wherever human figures predominated, the composition was called *cittāgāra*, or 'picture-gallery'.¹¹⁹ Both the kings of Magadha and Kosala possessed such frescoed apartments.

Plaster decor, in itself, was not exclusive to royalty. Wealthy merchants too, as we saw, lived in rooms 'plastered inside and out, draught-proof, with close-fitting doors'. They, too, might own furniture to match: for example, a couch 'spread with a long-fleeced black rug and a flower-embroidered quilt and a counterpane of white wool, topped by an antelope-skin', with scarlet bolsters at either end. There the master of the house might sleep, inhaling air fragrant with camphor, or aloe, or sandalwood, or jasmine, under a canopy 'attended to pleasantly by his four wives'.¹²⁰ A utopian vision, no doubt. In fact, an oral set-piece repeatedly used to invoke the Good Life. Not the items themselves,

but their lavish display, then, seems to distinguish the imperial style. Even *devas* in heaven, this glimpse suggests, cannot transcend the formula:

‘It is precisely as if in some high pavilion – plastered inside and out, sheltered from the wind, secured by bolts and shutters – stood a canopied couch, draped by white, fleecy rugs as well as blankets and sheets and a deerskin bedspread, with red pillows at either end for head and feet.’¹²¹

Nothing approaching such luxury, needless to say, was permitted to bhikkhus. As an ex-prince, though, the Buddha had lolled in just such retreats fitted with ‘gilded and upholstered couches, complete with crimson cushions at either end’.¹²² As Buddha even, he continued to be royally entertained, as when Prince Bodhi invited him to share a meal ‘in the upper apartments of the Kokanada Palace’.¹²³ So he knew at firsthand what he was talking about. No wonder observers egged him on to stockpile a king’s ransom with his wizardry of silk pillows and goats-hair blankets and fringed coverlets and quilts of cotton wool and embroidered counterpanes and brocaded cushions and long-fleeced foot-mats and dancers’ carpets (wide enough for sixteen dancing girls) and saddle-cloths for elephants and trappings for horses and woolly carriage-rugs and canopied divans – a whole inventory of Indian furnishings which ‘doubtless the worthy Gotama can conjure out of thin air without toil or trouble’.¹²⁴

COURT NOBLES wore sumptuous clothes to match; and the higher their rank, the more frequent their changes of clothes. A king's, or royal minister's, chest was 'filled with so many multicoloured robes that whatever was needed morning, noon or night, could readily be picked out'.¹²⁵ Dress codes confined court-attendants to gold and spotless white in the form of fringed tunics worn with golden slippers. The cloth might be woven of fine wool or fine linen, but mainly of bleached Benares cotton.¹²⁶ Dyed radiant shades of blue or yellow or red, it could also be worn with extravagantly decorated sandals.

Gems flashed from head to toe, especially in ears where jewelled plugs pulled and elongated the lobes (as can still be seen in traditional images of the Buddha). Whereas older men wore beards, clean-shaven younger men kept only their head-hair uncut. Tied into a long top-knot and gathered in a turban wound round and round the head, it was transfixed by a jewelled pin. To renounce his privileged life, Prince Siddhattha first unwound his turban then sliced off his top-knot with his sword.¹²⁷ To mark his *coup d'état*, Prince Viḍūḍabha displayed his father's turban and sword at Sāvattthī as proof of the king's deposition.¹²⁸

In addition to swords, men might also flourish canes, or ornamental cylinders filled with scented or medicinal herbs. Both white and stripy sunshades were in fashion (packed on journeys in special 'umbrella cases').¹²⁹ To preserve their complexion, even sandalled householders, strolling in the park, might hold a parasol.¹³⁰

To us, such peacock posturing would seem immensely alien: these exquisites hung with jewellery and bangles and garlands; or warriors, rather, constantly resorting to cosmetics (of Benares sandalwood). Hand-mirrors abounded for the fastidious application of eye-liner and blackening of eye-lashes with kohl. Both sexes regularly perfumed themselves with lotions and powders and unguents to keep their 'hair sleek with oil ... eyes painted with collyrium'.¹³¹ Even monks used make-up. Prior to approaching the Buddha (his own half-brother), Nanda 'put on freshly pressed robes' and decorously 'painted his eyes with collyrium'.¹³² For which the Buddha roundly rebuked him.

Such self-consciousness must have intensified in the dry season when courtiers, fluttering yak-tail fans, required further ventilation from slave-girls waving palmetto fans. Repeated bathing was *de rigueur*: stepping down flights of stone steps into open-air tanks; or into underground sweatbaths, followed by a plunge into the pool.¹³³ Massaging and showering became daily routines: first the cleansing with bamboo scrapers; next a triple shampoo with yellow loam; then anointment with scented oil; sponged down by a second wash with fine soap-powder; completed by the dressing of hair or beard.¹³⁴

Evidence, in the suttas, for women's toilette is very scant, as are any references to *haute cuisine*. Doubtless, courtiers consumed more game and exotic fruits from their gold and silver bowls. But the Buddha, recalling his own spoilt youth, mentions only 'rice from which

the black grain had been sifted' (served either with ghee or flavoured with honey) and assorted curries.¹³¹

THE DIVERSITY OF ENTERTAINMENTS (public and private) can, yet again, be gauged by what was specifically denied to bhikkhus: dancing, sing-songs, drum sessions, verse recitations, variety shows – in a word, stage performances of every kind.¹³⁶ Even 'hand-clapping' was singled out, which suggests audience participation must have been lively. But more intimate pursuits were clearly just as popular, since monks were expressly debarred from board games (dicing or chess) as well as parlour games such as spillikins or 'flipping cowries with finger and thumb' (a version of push-penny, perhaps). Aesthetic pastimes, of course, were strictly out of bounds. The mere perusal of large-scale fresco decorations was discouraged, let alone actively 'playing with brush and paints'.¹³⁷

If gaming was suspect, so were all competitive sports: 'playing with iron balls' (a form of *pétanque*), for example. The more vicious the sport, however, the bigger the draw: bull-fights, cock-fights, elephant-fights, stallion-fights, buffalo-fights, goat-fights, ram-fights, even quail-fights, were all taboo. As were boxing and wrestling and fighting with staves. As were official ceremonies when the state – to mark a royal visit or anniversary, perhaps – laid on military parades, or military reviews, or military tattoos, or mock-manoeuvres watched from the palace roof by the dandified court. From all such pomp and circumstance monks were explicitly excluded.

THE EVIDENCE FOR LITERACY, as already hinted, is vexed. Presumably kings and princes could write. Certainly one king on record 'scratched a memo of gifts on a palm-leaf', which his queen, in her turn, could 'read'.¹³⁸ The Royal Treasurer, in the Hamlet-like story of Ghosaka, inscribed a death-warrant; though the whole point of the story is that the youth who delivered it was illiterate (unless he naïvely refrained from breaking the seal).¹³⁹ And merchants, too, must surely have been literate as well as numerate. But one thing is beyond doubt: all major transactions, whether legal or spiritual, were preserved by oral transmission.

Among Buddhists, even the Canon Law (*Vinaya*), including the 227 monastic regulations (the *Pātimokkha*), was thus preserved: that is, by listening, pondering, memorizing and constant repetition.¹⁴⁰ Tables of contents, as we might call them, were drawn up; but such lists, or formulas, or recapitulations, were themselves memorized to assist a fluent sequence of recall. No text in the Buddhist tradition seems to have been recorded earlier than four hundred years or so after the Buddha's death; and that was in distant Sri Lanka, at a time of devastating invasions, when it was feared that the oral repertoire might perish.

Such prodigies of memorization (to which I return in Chapter 12) might suggest that Hindu culture was still almost wholly preliterate; but that is far from true. Writing (*lekha*) was in common use, but only for brief communications, such as public and private announcements, or financial memoranda, such as

promissory notes and letters of credit. So common, in fact, that there was even a guessing game for children, called *Akkharikā*, in which letters were traced in the air or on a playfellow's back; which suggests how widespread knowledge of the alphabet already was. Of course, such alphabet games were denied to bhikkhus as too frivolous a pastime; but the art of writing itself was praised in the *Vinaya* and nuns were even actively encouraged in its practice.¹⁴¹ The profession of scrivener or clerk, for a merchant or royal household, was considered an honourable source of livelihood.¹⁴² To judge from the transport, and occasional interception, of private mail, the art of reading was not only common among the elite but widespread among all classes. Otherwise there would hardly have been a point in official noticeboards with their advertisements for criminals WANTED 'written up in the king's porch'.¹⁴³ In however simple a fashion, men and women, as well as children it seems, could all spell out a short, uncomplicated text.¹⁴⁴

It was chiefly inadequate technology that confined writing to such brief memoranda; for each letter had to be painstakingly scratched, with an iron stylus, on a palm-leaf or piece of birch bark. No ink was used; even then their surface gloss cracked and splintered all too easily. Not until well after the Buddha's time was a preparation to stabilize palm-leaves, and even more brittle birch bark, discovered, as well as an ink to rub into the scratches. All in all, then, the Buddha's age must be reckoned at least potentially literate, but in

such a qualified, limited way that – practically speaking – it might still be best described as semi-literate.

For its instincts remained habitually and obstinately oral. What may seem to us an uneasy equilibrium between awkward techniques, an ingrained conservatism and the intransigent antagonism of Brahmins (insisting on their sole authority over sacred rites), was to continue for centuries longer. Socrates, in *Phaedrus*, quotes a story in which the god of writing appears to an early Pharaoh displaying his new invention, the hieroglyphic script. The Pharaoh shrugs it off, telling the god to take it away, since it would ruin his subjects' power of concentration, merely filling them with the delusion that they knew things when they did not. No author himself, the Athenian too called writing a drug, which ruined memory by offering a kind of crib or *aide-mémoire*. Rousseau concurred. So did Ferdinand de Saussure, denouncing it as a 'travesty': not a 'guise', as it were, but a 'disguise' (*pas un vêtement, mais un travestissement*). Recorded texts, Socrates argued, *don't answer back* when talked to, but, parrot-like, 'go on repeating the same thing over and over,' always needing their 'father' when they're in trouble. (It was this whole logocentric tradition which Jacques Derrida attempted to subvert in *De la Grammatologie*.)

It could be maintained that far from inert conservatism, then, it was their acutely self-conscious rhetorical and argumentative skills that led Hindus for so long to hold writing at bay. What they loved, above all, was chatter, dispute, interpretation, play.

Their multitudinous chatter was vividly reduced to just twenty-seven items: the tabulation, by rehearsal, itself becoming an oral set-piece.¹⁴⁶ To this day, it could serve to categorize stories in our own tabloids. Under ten heads:

1. 'The powers that be': an indiscriminate jumble of kings, thieves, state-officials and the militia;
2. Disasters: including physical or psychological calamities (such as panic in battle);
3. Daily life: with its recurrent problems of food, drink, clothing, bedding, corsages, perfumes, etc.;
4. Relatives: to the nth degree;
5. Womenfolk: or, vice versa, menfolk;
6. Vehicles: shop-talk on the latest carriages, coaches, chariots and palanquins;
7. Local news: desultory gossip from village streets, market-towns, waterfronts and far provinces;
8. Heroes: actual and mythical;
9. Ghost-stories: of the dead or departed;
10. Speculation on the perennial mysteries: of the origin of the land and the origin of the seas; of being and non-being.

(Only health-matters, money-matters, husbandry, sports and entertainment, from our point of view, are curiously missing.)

But it's rare to catch live sound bites on such topics from the streets. Except for stray comments on the passing traffic. Take the Brahman Jānussoni's all-white chariot – drawn by four white mares, in white

harnesses – with its white upholstery, in Sāvattthī.¹⁴⁷ He himself was wearing white sandals, and was

‘even being fanned with a white fan. When people saw this, they cried: “How simply divine! What a simply divine chariot! Wow, that’s what I call a heavenly vehicle!”

Or that rowdy bunch of youths driving carriages out of Vesālī:

‘Some were in blue, with blue make-up on, blue clothing and blue ornaments. Some were in yellow, with yellow make-up on, yellow clothing and yellow ornaments. Some were in red, with red make-up on, red clothing and red ornaments. Some were in white, with white make-up on, white clothing and white ornaments.’¹⁴⁸

That, too, must have elicited indignant, or amazed, or amused Licchavi comment. Even the Buddha exclaimed at the sight, calling to his monks: ‘Just look at that stylish crew! Take a good look and you’ll get some notion of the Thirty-Three Gods!’¹⁴⁹

Loquacity, rowdiness, noisiness went unrestrained. Occasionally, even the Buddha complained. But kings, it seems, exercised even less control. ‘I’m an annointed warrior,’ King Pasenadi grumbled:

‘I’ve sole authority to execute those deserving execution; to fine those deserving a fine; to exile those deserving exile. Yet, even when presiding at council, my councillors interrupt me. In spite of my pleading, “Gentlemen, stop this continual jabber! Just wait till I’ve finished speaking!” still they go on interrupting.’¹⁵⁰

Such frenzied unruliness, paradoxically, was tempered by play. Especially by the evolving rules of chess (played on 64- or 100-squared boards). Not just ordinary chess either, but fantastic tournaments of imaginary chess, using the sky as chessboard, or contests on moon-shaped chessboards. Mind games, too – variations of ‘Call my Bluff’ – were popular as well as those alphabetical quizzes (with disembodied signifiers) already mentioned.¹⁵¹ For in this semi-literate age, *reading* was the universal obsession: studying, spelling, identifying, decoding, interpreting all kinds and varieties of signs. Divine mysteries became concealed signatories; this world, a dark text whose marks cried out for deciphering. Five days after the Buddha’s birth, 108 Brahmins were invited by King Suddhodana ‘to examine the signs’. Eight of these Brahmins were selected to expound ‘the science of reading’. They alone were to interpret Queen Māya’s dream (of the ‘white elephant carrying a white lotus in his trunk’) on the day of his conception.¹⁵²

Yet on all this ‘the ascetic Gotama’ was to turn his back.¹⁵³ The elaborate rigmarole of Brahmin divination and Brahmin prophecy and Brahmin exorcism was denounced as a sham. In a word, the Buddha condemned that whole obsession with reading as unriddling, unriddling as calculation, calculation as prediction and prediction as personal salvation, which equated the interpretation of dreams (such as the Queen’s) with problems in accountancy, and treated ‘casting spells’ on an intellectual par with philosophizing or verse composition.

For the cultural range of this diagnosis was immense: reading the palms of the hands as well as the soles of the feet; reading the knuckles of young men and women (to settle an engagement); reading telltale marks on a torso or piece of land (set aside for building); reading both vast, evanescent designs – such as a lightning-flash, say – and the ineradicable, tiny indentations in cloth gnawed by mice; reading portents (for good or evil) in a soldier's sword; reading heavenly signs (such as comets, or meteor-showers, or eclipses of the sun and moon); reading worldly signs (such as earthquakes, drought, famine or disease); interpreting animal-calls and birdsong (especially the cawing of crows); calculating an individual's lifespan; predicting royal victories and defeats; distinguishing offerings suitable for temple oblations; reciting magical charms (with or without blood rites); casting malignant spells (to cause lockjaw or a miscarriage).

This cosmic, omnicompetent priestly lore finally converged with quasi-medical prescriptions: for curing impotence and preventing abortions; for treating rat bites or scorpion stings; for compounding herbal rinses and emetics, purgatives and expectorants; for preparing ear-drops, nose-snuff and eye-lotion (to remove cataracts); for lancing phlegm from the throat and bandaging sores. Such was the diagnostic wisdom of the Buddha's time, the higher literacy from which he consistently disengaged: 'the science of reading the signs'.

* * *

The opening of this chapter evoked a vast sweep of landscape ranging from the Himalayas to the Ganges. But even scenery, etymologically, is something 'read' or staged; it is a wholly mental phenomenon, becoming 'landscape' only when it responds, or corresponds, to human needs. When the Buddha dreamt that 'this great earth was his bedstead; the Himalaya was his pillow; his left hand rested in the Eastern Ocean, his right hand in the Western Ocean, his two feet in the Southern Ocean', he not only assimilated the 'king of mountains' to his destiny, he transfigured the whole of India by his presence.¹⁵⁴ Just as later, imagining 'a lotus-pond with cool, transparent water ... not far from a shadowed forest', he transformed a perfectly attainable setting (in India and throughout Southeast Asia) into a visionary nibbāna, an image of 'perfect happiness ... even in this present world'.¹⁵⁵

Idyllic settings form a familiar feature of early Buddhism. Their enchantment, in many, induced a dreamy, poetic mood. As that of the Venerable Sāriputta greeting five elders after nightfall: 'How delightful this Gosinga forest is by moonlight! With the Sāla trees in full blossom, it's as if some heavenly perfume were adrift!'¹⁵⁶ Or that of King Ajātasattu resting at night, with a retinue of ministers, on his palace rooftop: 'How lovely this moonlit night, my friends! How remarkable to behold the white lilies blooming by the light of the full moon!'¹⁵⁷ Or think of King Pasenadi, exercising in his park, observing root-hollows 'so quiet, so undisturbed by voices, with an air of aloofness so withdrawn ... that

they reminded him of the Buddha'.¹⁵⁸ Or the Buddha himself, shortly before death, fondly recalling his many hermitages and retreats:

'Delightful, Ānanda, is Rājagaha. Delightful, Ānanda, is the Vultures' Peak. The Banyan Park and the Robbers' Cliff and the Sattapaṇṇi Cave on the flanks of Mount Vebhāra are all delightful. So, too, is the Black Rock on the slopes of Mount Isigili and the Snakes' Pond in the Sappasoṇḍika Mountains and the Tapodā Grove Monastery and the Black Squirrels' Feeding-Ground in Veḷuvana. Jīvaka's mango-grove is delightful as is the Maddakucchi deer-park at Rājagaha. At each of these places I exclaimed: "Ānanda, how delightful this spot is!"'¹⁵⁹

These idyllic landscapes are all Buddhist variants on the *locus amoenus*. As were similar mysteriously charged romantic landscapes. For even by the Buddha's time, as already observed, there were ruined cities – former royal capitals with crumbling tanks and walls – buried deep in the jungle, on which wanderers along some ancient track might stumble; and such sites, too, could be called by the Buddha 'a delightful place'.¹⁶⁰ But not all magic settings were similarly charmed and timeless. The level waters of the holy Ganges, for example:

'At one time the Blessed One was staying near Kosambī, on the banks of the Ganges, when he spotted a large log of wood whirled along by the current.

"Bhikkhus, do you see that large log?" he asked.

"Yes, sir," they replied.

"Now if that log doesn't run aground on the near bank, or on the far bank, or sink in midstream, or catch on a

sandbank, or isn't seized by humans (or non-humans, for that matter), or sucked into a whirlpool, nor rot from soaking, then it's sure to float on eventually to reach the ocean ..."¹⁶¹

How precisely the Buddha's eye plots the erratic course of a chance log drifting downstream! Now swept by the current close in to one bank, now in to the other. Now momentarily submerged in mid-river, or snagged on a sandbank, or sent spinning in a whirlpool; or listing, more and more sodden and waterlogged, until finally dragged under ... It was not the ship traffic, nor fishermen, nor bathers – that is, the life on the Ganges – that primarily drew the Buddha, but the unpredictable flux and reflux of unseen natural forces. When a point-by-point explication was requested, an obliging interpretation was promptly offered. (Laymen's drift must be skilfully transformed to pilotage. Avoiding collisions, through self-control, is the *bhikkhu*-helmsman's task.) But the sliding tumult of such holy landscapes was deliberately left unexpressed. Emerson, in his mild way, phrased it like this: 'There are no fixtures in nature ... We live amid surfaces, and the true art of life is to skate well on them.'¹⁶²

* * *

Only the afterlife offered a means of rising to surer ground. As well as a chance of escaping the stifling heat of the Ganges plain. For landscape there, it was assumed, would be climatically zoned: from the charcoal furnace

(of hell) to the cesspit (of animal wombs) to the dappled shade (of the realm of ghosts) to the luxuriant green (of human abodes) to the upper pavilions (of the spirit world) to the luminous waters (of nibbāna).¹⁶³ For what else was nibbāna but an unexpected plunge into a forest pool? A refreshment for scorched and weary limbs? A release from emotional and mental stress? A shattering of surface tension? A delicious descent into coolness?

‘And the pool was filled with water out of sunlight,
And the lotos rose, quietly, quietly,
The surface glittered out of heart of light ...’¹⁶⁴

7

VERNACULAR HUMOUR

A young Brahman, accompanied by a friend, once presented himself to the Buddha, boasting:

‘I’m Pokkharasāti’s pupil
And he was taught by Tārukkha;
Word-perfect we, too, now are
Skilled masters of the Triple Veda.’¹

One thing still bothered him, though – a point of incessant wrangling between them: ‘Was a Brahman a Brahman solely by his pedigree (reaching back seven generations), or by his reputation for virtue and ritual acts?’ He versified this dilemma to show off his scholastic training which put a high premium on extempore poetic speech:

‘For, Gotama, between us twain
Birth is a subject of dispute.
How should one recognize divines?
Is it by breeding or repute?’

The Buddha, however, proved more than the student's match, capping his six stanzas with an impromptu rap of an additional fifty-seven.

It was not only at metrical improvisation that the Buddha excelled. He delighted in the very stuff of language, deftly playing on its resonances, its unexpected tonal riffs, its imbricated sounds and meanings, its potential – in short – for both enhancing and undermining itself by haphazard shock waves of echolalia. Punning was the Buddha's stock-in-trade far beyond what is generally acknowledged. Take this cluster of puns from the *Dhammapada*, centred on the word '*vana*':

'Of him who without *vana*
Leans to *vana*, when free in *vana*
Runs back to *vana*, men will say:
"Look! Free to bondage he returns!"²

Which sounds riddling only because '*vana*' in Pali can simultaneously mean 'forest' as well as 'passion' or 'desire'. So the fourfold repetition of '*vana*' represents an ambiguity – a crux – of which the following transliteration makes up but one of several possible interpretations: 'Whoever commits himself to the forest, having ousted desire, running free in the forest only to pursue his desire, of him men will say: "Look! Free to bondage he returns!"'

The test continually wavers since it reflects a genuine double bind in hermits' lives, for whom the

forest was both an ideal retreat from worldly passion and a place to confront their most intimate longings. An English homonym, conflating ‘wood’ with ‘would’, feebly approximates this shimmering play, since only by yoking both signifiers together can their dual signifieds turn transparent:³

‘Cut down the “would”, but not the “wood”,
 Since from that tangle fear is born.
 If you chop through the undergrowth,
 you shall be freed from all desire.’⁴
 ‘As long as “would” is uncontrolled
 So long is man in bondage bound
 To womankind – do what he would –
 Like milk-calf tethered to a cow.’
 ‘As trees, though felled, can sprout again
 From roots undamaged by the axe,
 So *dukkha* shoots and shoots again
 Where craving is not rooted out.’^{5*}

Elsewhere the pun on ‘forest’ is so casually, so surreptitiously, introduced that hardly a breath of its inner tension stirs the woodland calm:

‘Whether in town or forest deep,
 Whether in valleys or on hills,
 Wherever Arahants abide,
 There are utopias of delight.
 Even forests prove delightful
 In which others cannot delight;

* Most translations skip the pun and use ‘forest (of lust)’ or its equivalent. (Ed.)

Stripped of the burdens of desire,
 They find joys others cannot find.⁶
 ‘Taming himself in solitude –
 Sitting alone, lying alone,
 Walking alone unweariedly –
 He finds delight in the forest.’⁷

‘*Vana*’, then, functions at a magic crossroads where either element may be present, or both prevail, blending into neither ‘forest’ exactly, nor ‘desire’ exactly, but into an indiscriminate ‘forest of desire’. Similarly, an elephant, by the predicative ‘*danta*’, is transformed into something at once immensely powerful and immensely self-controlled:

‘The tusked are tame among the crowds;
 The king bestrides a tusker tamed.
 Best among men are the self-tamed
 Who tranquilly endure abuse.’⁸

For ‘*danta*’ may mean both ‘tamed’ (as past participle) and ‘tusked’ (as in ‘dental’), much as an elephant’s footprint may temporarily blur the divergent concepts of ‘features’ and ‘feet’:

‘Monks, just as all features of the feet (*padāni*) of jungle-creatures (*jaṅgalānaṃ*) are combined in the elephant’s foot, which is the chief in size, so of all the features (*padāni*) conducive to the attainment of enlightenment, the faculty of wisdom (*paññindriya*) is considered chief.’⁹

– as if an object so vast must be vastly inclusive in quality as well as quantity.

Such emblems assert devious claims for both wisdom and self-control. ‘*Dīpa*’ is another, denoting ‘island’ as well as ‘lamp’.¹⁰ A well-lit refuge, then:

‘By energetic mindfulness
And self-controlled attentiveness
The wise man makes an insular
Retreat no flood can overflow.’¹¹

‘Make an island of yourself!’ ran a familiar refrain:¹²

‘Therefore, Ānanda, you should live as islands unto yourselves, being your own refuge, with no one else as your refuge; with the Dhamma as a lamp, with the Dhamma as your refuge, with no other refuge ...’¹³

These ‘islands’, like those ‘forests’ and ‘elephants’, are situated at a random junction on unexpected vocal fault lines.

Such verbal effects almost defy translation, as in this pair of parallel tenets:

‘All those who are not free of stains,
Who proudly don the stainless robe
Without restraint or truthfulness,
Betray the cloth of dyed yellow.
But he who vomits forth his taints,
By moral precepts firmly led,
Endowed with truth and self-restraint,
Is worthy of the dyed yellow.’¹⁴

The chime here turns on *āsāva* and *kāsāva*: *āsāva* which is literally an ‘eruption’, and so ‘moral stain’; *kāsāva*, a yellow stain or dye.¹⁵ A word-for word transliteration might run:

anikkasāvo (one not free of stains) *kāsāvaṃ* (stained yellow)

yo (who) *vatthaṃ* (cloth or robe) *paridahessati* (will put on)

apeto (deprived of) *damasaccena* (having restraint-and-truth)

na (not) *so* (he/that one) *kāsāvaṃ arahati* (worthy-of-the-dyed-yellow).

In a nutshell, yellow is a stain for the stainless. Those not yet free of stains (*anikkāsavo*) are unworthy of the yellow stain (*na kāsāvaṃ arahati*): that is, donning the yellow robe (*kāsāvaṃ vatthaṃ*).

yo (who) *ca* (and) *vantaka* (vomits) *asāv'assa* (his taints)

sīlesu (in precepts) *susamāhito* (well-established)/

upeto (endowed with) *damasaccena* (having restraint-and-truth)

save (he/that one indeed) *kāsāvaṃ arahati* (worthy-of-the dyed-yellow).

Which turns the Sangha's saffron itself into a Buddhist paradox: a kind of stainless stain, a non-colour dazzling in its ideal radiance.

Or take the equally resourceful pun on *mona* (silence) and *muni* (a sage):

'Neither by *mona* a *muni*,

Nor by "silence" a "sage" – rather

A man with scales who picks only

The best, rejecting all that's bad.'¹⁶

For one who is silent is a sage; or, rather, a *muni* is someone practising *mona* (like bhikkhus on their alms-round). Not that the Buddha himself practised silence or allowed his monks altogether to abstain from speaking. The implication is more subtly teasing: the silence advocated here being an inward silence, without proliferation of thought:

‘When, muffled as a broken gong,
you don’t reverberate,
you’ve reached Nibbāna:
recrimination’s turmoil finally stilled in you.’¹⁷

That is why the Buddha is known (especially among the Japanese) as *Sakyamuni*, or ‘Sage of the Sakyans’.

* * *

But he could do more than tease. He could be deliberately perverse, distorting the root meaning of common terms for a charade of pseudo-definitions:

‘Obstructing evil’ (*brāhmaṇo*);
‘living serenely’ (*samaṇo*);
‘banishing blemishes’ (*pabbajito*: for one ‘gone forth’ homeless).¹⁸

It’s a poker-faced performance, oddly reminiscent of Humpty Dumpty in its cool bravado:

‘When I use a word,’ Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, ‘it means just what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less.’

‘The question is,’ said Alice, ‘whether you *can* make words

mean so many different things.’

‘The question is,’ said Humpty Dumpty, ‘which is to be master – that’s all.’¹⁹

In the same reckless spirit, the Buddha challenged Vedic tradition with his homespun etymologies, in which *brāhmaṇo* no longer defined the caste privileged by Brāhma; *brāhmacariyā* no longer derived from the ‘holy life’; and *brāhmamukhayā* no longer denoted ‘born from the mouth of Brahma’. No, ‘brahman’, the Buddha proposed, was really derived from *bāhitapāpo* (*bāhitapāpadhammo*, in full), ‘one who has blocked out, or barricaded, evil dhammas’. *Samaṇa* no longer described simply the religious life of a recluse (*samacariyā*), but the Buddhist counterpart of a Vedic Brahman. ‘And how is a bhikkhu a *samaṇa*?’ demanded the Buddha.²⁰ Because ‘he has quieted [*samita*] unprofitable dhammas’, reducing thought and feeling to an even level which is always the ‘same’ (its common root). *Pabbajito* no longer denoted ‘one “gone forth” into the homeless life’, but – as if contracted from *pabbājahamattano* – ‘one who banishes blemishes’.

The Buddha made these absurd linguistic forays on the principle that spoken language is harmonious, with rudimentary etymons at its core, so that all meanings can be deduced from its inherent chords – even tabulated theoretically in a concordance. He delighted in such echo-soundings and alliterations, condensing a whole lifetime’s experience, for instance, into twelve syllables:

‘jāyati ca
jīyati ca
mīyati ca’²¹

(‘There is birth; there is decay; there is dying’), as he enjoyed undermining Brahman authority, going upstream (*uddham-soto*) against the official current of their terminology, reinventing language to suit his own professional needs.²²

Which also explains why the Buddha (Humpty Dumpty-style) was so fond of riddles:

RIDDLE: ‘And why, bhikkhus, do you say *rūpa* [body]?’

SOLUTION: ‘It is *ruppati* [afflicted], bhikkhus, that’s why it’s called a *rūpa*. Afflicted by what? Afflicted by cold and heat, hunger and thirst, wind and dazzle, gnats, mosquitoes and snakes. Because it “bodes” ill, bhikkhus, that’s why it’s called a “body”. Being *ruppati*, it is called a *rūpa*.’²³

Or again, on another occasion:

THE VENERABLE RĀDHA: ‘A *satto* [being], a *satto*, we are called. Just why, sir, are we called a *satto*?’

THE BUDDHA: ‘Because of being *satto* [caught] and *visatto* [held fast] by desire, by attachment, by delight, by craving for *rūpa* ... for feeling ... for perception ... for mental activities ... for consciousness ... that’s why one is called a *satto*.’²⁴

Thus ‘being’, by a pun, is identified with entrapment and ‘body’, with poetic justice, defined by its afflictions, as if the slippery homophones of Pali invariably map out the truth.

* * *

The Buddha loved punning for much the same reasons as Shakespeare loved punning: to shake up his audiences, to make them wince or smile, to conjure up lofty or vulgar associations. Commenting on Joyce, Richard Ellmann put it like this:

‘In a pun the component parts remain distinguishable, and yet there is a constant small excitement in their being yoked together so deftly and so improperly. An equivalence is at once asserted and questioned, sounds and senses in mutual trespass are both compared and contrasted.’²⁵

No wonder the Buddha, like Joyce, remained an inveterate punster. For puns can shock. They can disturb complacency. ‘Still, they’re only jokes,’ it may be objected, ‘so long as those double-meanings don’t fuse.’ But that would be a gross misunderstanding. The whole point of a pun, the Buddha comprehended, was precisely that: their incomplete juncture. To have had them fuse would have been to abolish their very *raison d’être*, the sheer fun of their being unexpectedly brought together in the first place. For only on the condition that both parts of a pun preserved their separate identities could those identities be shown to be less insulated, or isolated, than had previously been thought.

In this, of course, they resemble the Buddha’s other all-purpose, all-time favourite. What else is allegory but an experiment in narrative conjunction without figurative fusion, and a momentary play with juncture as long as the twin narratives are kept distinct? Even

within triple, or quadruple, or quintuple junctures, all allegories and puns share this same protean role. Though the Buddha's allegories, on the whole, prove less light-hearted than his puns. Take his wordplay on 'loka' (latin 'locus'), meaning 'world', and 'paloka' (from the verb 'dissolve'). When Ānanda, acting the stooge as usual, wondered aloud: "“Loka!” they all keep repeating: “Loka!” Why, Lord, is it called “loka”?" The Buddha – without batting an eyelid – observed: 'Whatever is *paloka*, Ānanda, is naturally called “loka”.' Which is as much as to say: 'Whatever is *whirled* by nature is naturally called “world”.'²⁶

Just a sally, no doubt, a playful pounce. But if that throwaway line was conceived on a whim, its point was then rigorously hammered home by multiplying all aspects of human percipience (with its sixfold sense-organs, six sets of sense-data, six categories of consciousness, six means of sense-contact) to a maximum of twenty-four variations: 'And what is it that can be *whirled*? Our eyes are in a whirl; visible objects are in a whirl; visual consciousness is in a whirl; visual contact is in a whirl. So are our ears and sounds ... our taste buds and tastes ... our nostrils and smells ... our mind and mind-consciousness – all these are characteristically and intrinsically and perpetually in a whirl.'

* * *

A passing quip is thus revealed as much more than a mere quip. The Buddha was ever alert to the possibility of processing, or elaborating, words fortuitously launched in play. Despite his grim acknowledgment of pain, his was an essentially comic vision. Or rather *because* of that grim acknowledgement, his was a startlingly comic vision. For what he taught was the cessation of pain by detachment from the illusions of pain; and his whole teaching was offered as a guide, or blueprint, to that escape. Whether chatting with his young son or a dacoit, whether under threat or relaxed, the Buddha could always banter in the same light-hearted way.

One form it took was teasing equivocation. As in that dream-like sequence when the bandit Angulimāla, spotting a monk on the road, decided to pursue him hotfoot with a sword.²⁷ But the Buddha, with a rare surge of magic power, continued to outstrip him: that is, the faster Angulimāla sprinted, the further he dropped behind – let alone close the gap between them – though the monk was apparently walking at his normal pace. At last, in amazement, Angulimāla bounded to a halt. ‘Stop, monk! Stop, monk!’ he shouted. To which the Buddha, still sedately forging ahead, replied: ‘I have stopped, Angulimāla. Now you stop, too!’ Dumbstruck, the bandit sought to unravel this puzzle. Perhaps it suggested some kind of cautionary rhyme. For, like the young Brahman, he too turned to impromptu verse.²⁸

ANGULIMĀLA:

‘While walking, monk, you tell me you have stopped;
But when I’ve stopped, you tell me I’ve not stopped.
What can the meaning of this riddle be?
How is it you have stopped and I have not.’

THE BUDDHA:

‘Angulimāla, I have stopped for good
From desecrating any living thing;
But you show no respect for things that breathe,
That’s why I say I’ve stopped and you have not.’

So the cipher was deciphered; the riddle solved; the situation resolved. Repentant (we are told), the highwayman flung aside his sword and threw himself at the Buddha’s feet, henceforth to become a devoted and exemplary disciple.

The surrealism of the whole scene eerily corresponds to the Buddha’s quibbling riposte as he dallied and toyed with that criminal thug. But his humour was equally teasing when conversing in private with his son:

‘What’s a mirror for, do you think, Rāhula?’ he once asked him.

‘For the sake of its reflection, sir,’ the seven-year-old replied.

‘So remember, Rāhula, only after continual reflection should an act be performed; only after continual reflection should an assertion be made; only after continual reflection should a decision be reached.’²⁹

This light-hearted, humorous quality was something the Buddha shared with his contemporaries. If he

transcended his age, he was also clearly a man of his age – akin even to those madcap Licchavi youths, in their make-up and finery, whom he had jokingly compared to the Thirty-Three Gods.³⁰ Just as they had (contemptuously) snapped their fingers at the courtesan Ambapālī, he had (metaphorically) snapped his fingers at the highwayman Angulimāla. Just as they had cheekily called her the ‘mango-woman’, he too loved every kind of cheeky and unexpected pun. Sometimes he was even caught with a smile flitting across his face for no apparent reason. ‘What, pray, is the reason for the Exalted One’s smiling?’ Ānanda twice asked him. ‘Tathāgatas surely never smile without cause.’³¹ Only to be fobbed off with a long shaggy-dog folk-tale of a reply.

* * *

Too much in the later tradition (of legend and iconography) seems altogether too solemn and remote. For an Enlightened One, after all, the world must appear a comically tawdry, incongruous affair. The tenth and last of the so-called ‘ox-herding’ pictures (of Ch’an Buddhism) presents a gleeful, high-spirited old hobo. In Chinese, his name is *Pu-tai* (*Hotei*, in Japanese), the laughing Buddha with a big belly, arms upraised and a widely distended grin. Even the most moving, meditative Buddha-images – those of Khmer workmanship from eleventh- and twelfth-century Angkor Wat – harbour a serene, inward, almost sensuous

archaic smile. As King Pasenadi of Kosala testified in his final, poignant remarks to the Buddha: ‘But here I see monks smiling and cheerful, sincerely joyful, plainly exuberant, their faculties fresh and unruffled, living by what others give, dwelling with minds aloof as the wild deer.’³²

Similarly, the Buddha must have seemed cheerfully at ease in his detachment from human foibles, as if only a keen sense of the absurd still exercised his mind. As in this sketch (already quoted) of a relentlessly enquiring, if terminally deluded, intellectual:

‘Suppose ... someone had been wounded by an arrow thickly smeared with poison and his friends and companions, relatives and kinsfolk, called for a surgeon; but he insisted: “I won’t have this arrow extracted till I know whether my assailant was of the warrior-noble caste, or the brahman caste, or the agricultural caste, or the menial caste ...”

running on and on about the archer’s name, his family, his height (whether tall, short or medium), his complexion (whether dark, brown or fair), his domicile (whether in this or that city, town or village), continuously shifting to more and more irrelevant, more ludicrous detail – the style of his bow (whether longbow or crossbow), of his bowstring (whether of fibre, or reed, or sinew, or hemp, or bark), of his arrow-shaft (whether wild or cultivated), of its binding (whether of ox-gut, or buffalo-gut, or lion- or monkey-gut), of its feathering (whether a vulture’s, or hawk’s, or kite’s, or peacock’s, or crane’s), of its arrowhead (whether tipped, or curved, or barbed, or toothed)

– until finally – inexhaustibly – the Buddha reached his *reductio ad absurdum*: ‘That man would die, Mālun̄kyāputta ...’³³ without completing even a fraction of his preliminary research.

But such insistent multiplication of detail was never indulged with caustic glee. Nor allowed to tumble viciously into farce. Nor to hint at ridicule, intended to wound or taunt. Nor to wallow in Swiftian ‘*saeva indignatio*’.³⁴ It found expression, rather, in a subdued, affable, sly, down-to-earth, man-to-man approach, as in his jocular reply to Navika, the Ganges ferryman who had been ordained into the Sangha. When Navika asked him, ‘Lord, if anyone wonders who I am, what am I to say?’ the Buddha laughed: ‘Tell them you are a *samaṇa*, a Brahman, one proficient in wisdom, who has crossed over and reached the Further Shore’.³⁵ In other words: ‘Say you’ve become a metaphor personified, a “stream-winner”, a ferryman of the wise and a living embodiment of the Dhamma.’

For Navika had passionately espoused the Dhamma, unlike those inept spoons, castigated in the *Dhammapada*, forever stirring soup and serving soup, without once absorbing ‘the taste of soup’:

‘Though all his life a foolish man
Attends upon a wiser man,
No more of wisdom he discerns
Than spoons discern the taste of soup.
Though just for an hour a shrewd man
Attends upon a wiser man,
Wisdom he rapidly discerns
As tongues discern the taste of soup.’³⁶

It's a generous tribute. But the joke must have been aimed, in part at least, at pundits and Brahmans (the intellectuals of their day) endlessly investigating the Dhamma and dishing out the Dhamma, without ever personally experiencing the Dhamma. Flexible organs, after all, can both taste and speak. But why mock the dumb imperviousness of spoons? Aren't spoons inevitably suffused by the *temperature* of the soup? Aren't they more sensitive, more instantaneous conductors of their environment than the Buddha lets on? Which might well be part of the joke. Even the dumbest supporters are likely to be less thick-skinned, less casually apathetic than mere hangers-on.

* * *

It was with such kinds of playful, double-edged conceits that the Buddha engaged all comers: ferrymen, householders, pundits, Brahmans, especially your average punter who knew all about doubling stakes on a bet. As he memorably challenged the Kālāmas: 'If there's *no* world beyond and so no fruit of *kamma* (either well-intentioned or ill-intentioned), still you'll be exempt in this life from hostility and affliction ... And should even *kamma* turn out to be an illusion, you'll still prove blameless here and now, winning respect from your fellow men and happiness for yourself.'³⁷ 'But, just think, should another world be confirmed,' he sportingly added, 'your single throw will have proved not once, but doubly, lucky: being both lauded here

and rewarded hereafter.’³⁸ So give it a try, he urged. It’s a wager, gentlemen, you can’t refuse. You’re covered against all the odds; everything runs in your favour; and the risk, either way, is nil.

Even with the merchant élite, he adopted this same man-to-man approach. As an ex-prince, no doubt, he knew all about the vagaries of wealth – its uncanny tendency to depreciate or diminish:

‘However well it be laid by
 Deep in a water-level pit,
 Not all of it will be enough
 To serve you all the time; perhaps
 The store gets shifted; or perhaps
 You foolishly forget the marks;
 Or *Nāga*-serpents haul it off;
 Or spirits fritter it away;
 Or else some heirs you can’t abide
 Abstract it while your back is turned ...’³⁹

Which, roughly rendered in today’s terms, reads:

‘However ample your bank account, you’re bound to face occasional cash-flow problems until, one day, you’re shocked to discover an unauthorized transfer of funds just when your personal pass-code has expired. Or a sudden bear market develops. Or a downward plunge of the exchange-rate. Or your own legatees siphon off the bulk of your capital behind your back ...’

The Buddha clearly enjoyed such droll scenarios. ‘Bhikkhus,’ he coaxed his disciples, ‘though you may yearn to free your minds from defilement, you won’t

begin to succeed unless you devote yourselves to a steady programme of mental training.’ ‘Imagine,’ he continued, ‘a broody hen refusing to sit on her eggs to warm and hatch them. Yearn as she may for her chicks to claw and peck their way safely out of those eggs, it would be impossible for them to do so.’⁴⁰ But why introduce this oddly restless bird? What exactly is her problem? Why isn’t she broody? Why isn’t she sedentary? In any case, defilements (*āśāva*) do not need incubating. Far from it! They are in constant eruption, instinct with organic life, scrabbling and scratching their way to our appalled attention. Because, for once, no allegory is intended. The whole point of the joke concerns only one aspect – though an essential aspect – of the farmyard scenario: ‘Persevere! Imitate broody hens in your practice of meditation! Life-processes take their time.’ It’s simply on patience that the Buddha was comically insisting.

* * *

For he was fond of broody hens, though casting himself in a more waggish, more disconcerting role. Since his jokes could also be deftly played at his own expense. As in this mock-heroic version of his Enlightenment:

THE BUDDHA: ‘Brahman, consider a hen with a clutch of eight, or ten, or twelve eggs over which she has brooded properly, properly incubated and hatched. What should we call the first chick to pierce its shell with claw or beak? Should we call it the youngest? Or the eldest?’

THE BRAHMAN: 'The eldest, Master Gotama, since it is the eldest of the clutch.'

THE BUDDHA: 'Even so, Brahman, I alone pierced through the shell of ignorance for all those encased in ignorance – sealed in by ignorance. I am unique in the world, egg-born, utterly enlightened with unsurpassed enlightenment, the world's eldest and foremost.'⁴¹

Not a broody hen, then, incubating his disciples: that we could readily accept. But this surrealistic, Max Ernst-like 'Self-Portrait of the Tathāgata as Newly-Hatched Squab' must strike us, at the very least, as whimsical. Or, if not whimsical exactly, as bizarre; and it was clearly meant to be bizarre. For a fluffy chick, of all things, was claiming the world's triumphant priority. The rhetorical name for such a dive from the sublime to the ridiculous is 'bathos'. But, in the Buddha's mouth, it hardly suggests bathos even. As in all his teaching, that unfledged Buddha-chick is completely and comfortably at one with the mysteries of nature. In the last resort, the joke is not so much on himself as on this whole amazing universe where such births are possible. 'I am unique in the world, egg-born ...' the Buddha crows with a *cocorico* on the world's dunghill – a comic variant (in this context) of his more customary 'Lion's Roar'.

And he remained a joker to the end, even turning his deathbed into a kind of celestial theatre:

Just then the Venerable Upavāna was standing in front of the Lord, fanning him. And the Buddha gestured him aside, saying: 'Step to one side, bhikkhu! Don't stand in my way!'

‘But why?’ the Venerable Ānanda wondered. ‘The Venerable Upavāna has long attended intimately on the Lord – waiting on him at all times – always at his beck and call. Yet now, in his final hour, he’s asked him to step aside. What on earth could have made him say that?’

So the Venerable Ānanda enquired why the Lord had asked the Venerable Upavāna to step aside. The Buddha replied:

‘Ānanda, most of the *devas* from the ten world-spheres have assembled here to see the Tathāgata. For a distance of twelve leagues, around this bend of the road leading to Kusinārā, there isn’t a spot that can be reached by the tip of a hair not crowded with powerful *devas*. And the *devas* are grumbling, Ānanda. They are grumbling: “We have come a long way to see the Tathāgata. It is rare for a fully-enlightened Buddha to arise in the world and tonight – towards dawn – the Tathāgata will attain final nibbāna. Yet this brawny monk, standing in front of the Lord, is blocking our view and now we shan’t get a glimpse of the Tathāgata in his final hour!”⁴²

What Ānanda conceived as a personal tragedy (lamenting against a doorpost) was turned by the Buddha into a pop performance as he waved that hunk of a bhikkhu aside, casually translating his deathbed vigil into a cosmic auditorium – with sky-*devas* tearing their hair and earth-*devas* tumbling about on the floor

– while the Superstar courteously acknowledged the restless grumbling of his fans.

Such are the comic asides of the metaphysical imagination, elsewhere scattered in logjams of hilarious incompatibilities and contradictions. Like that buffoon with a hoe intent on stripping ‘this great Earth’ of earth.⁴³ His intrusion, in itself, was signally odd in a spiritual context: that of maintaining loving-kindness under all manner of harassment and duress.⁴⁴ Why, then, his appearance? And what was he up to? Why such desperate scrabbling in the dirt?

‘When others address you,’ the Buddha had forewarned his disciples, ‘their speech may well be untimely, or false, or harsh, or otherwise spiteful and distressing. But you should train your minds to remain calm and unruffled; never to give vent to foul language; but always to preserve a compassionate regard not only for your interlocutors’ welfare but for the whole frame of this all-encompassing universe.’⁴⁵ There followed a set of four parables mysteriously to enforce the theme:

‘Suppose someone came along, holding a basket and hoe, with just one thought in mind: “I shall strip this great Earth of earth.” So he set to digging holes here and there, scattering sand here and there, spitting and urinating in all directions, continually chanting: “Vanish earth! Vanish earth!” What do you think? Could he strip this great Earth of earth?’

Or again:

‘Suppose someone came along with a dish of crimson or indigo powder, saying: “I shall draw pictures in space. I shall make pictures appear in this empty space.” What do you think? Could he paint in space? Could he make pictures materialize in empty space?’

Or again:

‘Suppose someone came along with a blazing grass-torch, saying: “I plan to heat up the waters of the Ganges with this burning torch.” What do you think? Could he heat up the River Ganges with a torch?’

Or again:

‘Suppose someone came along with a stick, saying: “Look at this catskin bag, ladies and gentlemen. Feel how sleek and soft and supple it is! How thoroughly well tanned! Now just watch me whack it until it crackles and pops.” What do you think? Could he make that skin pop and crackle by applying his stick?’

All quite mad, of course. Or, more likely, tricksters and charlatans travelling the country roads. But, again, why that space-painter here? Or that catskin man? Whose absurdist dramas rehearse one single, repeated theme: the inanity of various boastful enterprises which, by their very nature, are bound to be self-defeating? Each of their antics, note, are not just physical impossibilities, but logical absurdities to match the incomprehensible conundrum of absolute love in the face of those who hate us and persecute us. Genuine loving-kindness is bound to seem inconceivable and measureless as the Ganges, or Earth,

or Space – and ultimately as paradoxical – if it is to frustrate all attempts at undermining or transforming it. Enlightened Love, as this cluster of anecdotes suggests, remains insoluble.

Logically insoluble, but not for that reason morose, or heavy-hearted, or tragic. Quite the contrary. The tone throughout these parables is essentially comic. That oddball attempting to cart off the earth from Earth is not engaged in some profound metaphysical enterprise. He's earthy enough to spit and pee. His self-defeating, horny-handed routine is closer akin to a snatch of Samuel Beckett than of Schopenhauer.

* * *

Such slapstick, too, illumines the Buddha's persistent fondness for accumulating and multiplying burlesque detail. As in his account of the mounting hysteria of a man traumatized (so he claims) by a whole relay of predatory forces – four venomous snakes, a psychotic stalker lurking at his heels, a five-man death squad closing in to jump him from the rear – until panic-stricken, in headlong flight, he bumps into a gang of terrorists who cut off his retreat.⁴⁶ Or as in another more erotically charged, even more dreamlike cliffhanger where a bowl, brimming with oil, has to be carried between 'a crowd of villagers and a local beauty queen' with an executioner – sword upraised – breathing down the contestant's neck. 'Should he spill the least drop,' lands the punchline, 'that executioner will chop off his head!'⁴⁷

These knockabout farces and fantasies were presumably meant to shock. As this thriller, addressed to King Pasenadi of Kosala, was certainly meant to shock:

‘What do you think, O King? Suppose a loyal and reliable man were to come to you from the east and say: “Your majesty, I have come from the east and there saw a huge mountain, as tall as the sky, advancing and crushing every living thing in its path.” And then a second were to come from the west ... a third from the north ... a fourth from the south, and approaching you should say: “Your majesty, I have come from the south and there saw a huge mountain, as tall as the sky, advancing and crushing every living thing in its path.” In such a predicament, O King, what would you do?’⁴⁸

Those blundering juggernauts, uprooted from the Himalayas, rival Gothic fiction for nightmare intensity. That their marauding presence turns out to be ‘old age and death’ is largely irrelevant unless the King had already been bowled over by the sheer dynamism and sensational flair of the Buddha’s imagination as it unpredictably ranged from the sedate to the boisterous, from horizon to foreground, from horror to humour with equal abandon.

The same shock tactics were at work in his riddles, as we have already seen. Especially darker, more unsettling pronouncements such as this:

‘Mother and father having slain
And then two warrior kings, a realm

And its treasurer having slain,
 One goes immune, a Brahmana.'
 'Mother and father having slain
 And then two learned kings, the fifth
 A fearsome tiger having slain,
 One goes immune, a Brahmana.'⁴⁹

But what can it mean? For once, no allegorical key is supplied. So it remains a riddling knot, or rune, for intuitive unravelling. Of only one thing we can be sure: that an Arahant is no Nietzschean Superman privileged to claim 'immunity' from good and evil. To the contrary, all killing is taboo. He may take no life whatsoever with conscious intent. Let alone the life of his own parents! As a later verse of the *Dhammapada* confirms:

'Joyful to serve one's mother here,
 To serve one's father too is joy ...'⁵⁰

But the Buddha was never concerned with comprehension (as an ultimate goal) so much as spiritual apprehension. That sudden karate chop, or kick in the pants, was delivered to a party of visiting bhikkhus with startling effect: the monks all gained immediate enlightenment. The mock-violent, almost clownish rough-and-tumble of this aspect of the Buddha's teaching was later to be given exclusive emphasis by the Chinese Ch'an and Japanese Zen masters.

* * *

Whatever is shocking, moreover, can usually be mocking. Especially when the joke is at an antagonist's expense: Jains and Brahmans, for the most part, during the Buddha's lifetime. A fine example of sustained ridicule being his dialogue with an ascetic (first met in Chapter 1) who had put to him a series of questions about the self (*attā*). What exactly was the self? Was it, like the body, temporal and contingent? Or was it eternal? Before confronting these questions, some spurious assumptions needed to be exposed on which Brahman doctrines were based:

'Poṭṭhapāda, some ascetics and Brahmans declare that, after a man's death, his self – far from perishing with the body – lives on in eternal bliss. So I approached a number of them and enquired whether they shared this view.

"Yes, indeed," they replied.

'Then I asked: "Friends, have you ever experienced a world without suffering, that offers only bliss?"

"No," they replied.

'Again I asked: "Friends, have you personally experienced this state of bliss? If only for a night? Or a day? Or half a night? Or half a day?" "No," again they replied.

'So next I asked: "Friends, do your religious practices hasten the realization of this ever-blissful world?"

'Yet again they declined ...'

The Buddha then clinched his argument by comparing such an imaginary state of bliss to a compulsive, though fictitious, love affair. Self-infatuation, he implies, is as ludicrous – and unhealthy – as sexual fantasizing. The teasing mockery of his approach now becomes apparent:

‘Poṭṭhapāda, isn’t this just like a lover sighing: “How I long for the most beautiful girl in the whole land!” But when asked, “Who is she? Does she belong to the ruling caste? Or the Brahman caste? Or the merchant caste? Or the artisan caste?” he replies: “I don’t know.”

‘And when bombarded with prying questions, such as “What’s her name?” “Well, what’s her clan?” “How tall is she?” “Is she petite, then?” “Or of middling height?” “Is she dark-skinned or fair?” “Or of a golden complexion?” “In what village, or town, or city does she live?” he simply shrugs: “I don’t know.”

‘So naturally people would say: “Young man, do you mean that you’re pining with love for a sweetheart you’ve never even seen?”

“That’s right,” he says.

‘Now, Poṭṭhapāda, what do you think? Don’t such love-pangs – or romantic daydreams, rather – turn out to be totally unfounded?

“Certainly, venerable sir, his love would have no justification.”

‘Poṭṭhapāda, I tell you, it’s the same with those ascetics and Brahmans who postulate a so-called “eternal self” but, under close questioning, admit that they have no personal, first-hand acquaintance with it.’⁵¹

So infatuation with ‘self’, the Buddha mischievously maintains, is as whimsical as a passionate urge for a wholly imaginary girl: without caste, without name, without clan, without vital statistics, without complexion, without address – unseen, unknown, undiscoverable, absurd.



Sometimes tart, then, he could also be surprisingly scathing, when irritated by another's wit (for instance), or attempted wit, or apparent wit. During a discourse on impermanence, before a large congregation, this thought flashed through a bhikkhu's mind:

'So, it seems, form is not-self; feeling is not-self; perception is not-self; ideas are not-self; consciousness is not-self. Then what "self" exactly will these deeds [*kammas*], engendered by the not-self, affect?'⁵²

The Buddha, scanning for a public reaction, at once singled him out. 'Is it possible,' he observed, 'that some misguided man – some ignoramus obsessed by craving – might presume to outstrip his Master's teaching?'; and he proceeded, word for word, to repeat the thought that had flashed through the bhikkhu's mind.

Unlike Socrates, of course, the Buddha could thought-read. To him, other minds were transparent; the poor monk had not even *voiced* his doubts. But why did the Buddha surreptitiously pick on this one particular monk? Why the personal abuse? The heavy irony? And careful anonymity? Why call the fellow a nitwit? Why expose him at all? Why broadcast aloud his muddled predicament? Why, finally, dangle his private misconception verbatim, like some filthy rag, before the gathered assembly? As misguided as the monk may have been, what was so exasperating about his query? Why, one cannot help wondering, was the Buddha's reaction so highly charged?

For, on the face of it, the question seems surprisingly astute. It logically derives from the very arguments which the Buddha had step by step been presenting; so if the young man's grasp of their logic had gone astray, it surely deserved a patient, dialectical response: that 'intention' or 'will' (*cetana*), however veiled, constitutes the very essence of *kamma*; and unprofitable deeds would indubitably spring from such *self*-conscious elaboration.⁵³ But, as if this were too tiresome to expound yet again, the Buddha merely reiterated the doctrine of impermanence, word for word repeating the discourse that had triggered the puzzle in the first place. Though that in itself was *not* the puzzle running through the monk's mind.

Furthermore, the Buddha condemned the monk's naïve, though logical, move not only as 'obsessed by craving' (as if it were hypocritically self-promoting and instinctively vicious), but also as competitive in some nasty way, springing from an urge to upstage his teacher. Since the Buddha was omniscient, we have to take his word for it; perhaps such impromptu licence was in itself offensive. The problem of *kamma*, as transferred from Hindu to Buddhist practice, remains highly elusive and complex. In theory at least, if not in practice. Far from wilful, the monk's confused and paradoxical formulation may strike a contemporary reader as both witty and sympathetic.⁵⁴

But one thing the Buddha was not accustomed to facing in others was wit; and wit, of course, can usually be shown to be some kind of insubordination. Perhaps that

explains his sudden outburst of petulance. The kindest assumption is that he realized the dangers inherent in language for confusing and outmanoeuvring the step-by-step clarity of his own compulsive logic. His sense of the limits implicit in verbal exposition, as a means to non-verbal transcendence, was always acute. In this rare instance, it seems, the Buddha was suddenly and precariously thrown off-balance.

* * *

For he could certainly be irked: by too much bustle and chat in the monastery, for instance.⁵⁵ Worse still, by dissention in the Sangha: ‘stabbing with verbal daggers’, as it was called.⁵⁶ Three times the Buddha had to intervene at Kosambi (a particularly quarrelsome monastery) in an effort to stop the brawling. But each time he was effectively sidelined; the infighting continued, until he was forced to withdraw.

What irked him above all, however, were muddle-headedness and imprecision. And interruptions which vitiated the lucid rigour of his disquisitions.⁵⁷ Already piqued, on one occasion, at hearing how a young bhikkhu had failed to analyse correctly a garbled text (though quoted verbatim, allegedly), he felt further baited and put upon by what he clearly considered a wholly uncalled-for – if not impertinent – intervention:

‘I don’t even know the wanderer by sight, Ānanda. How could there have been such a conversation? The wanderer Potaliputta’s question ought to have been answered after

due analysis, but this misguided man Samiddhi answered it without qualifications.'

On hearing this, the Venerable Udāyin broke in: 'But, sir, supposing when the Venerable Samiddhi spoke, he merely meant "Whatever is felt is suffering".' Then the Buddha turned pointedly to the Venerable Ānanda: 'Do you see how this misguided man Udāyin intervenes? As soon as I saw him I knew that this misguided man would rashly interfere ...'⁵⁸

Though the strongest pejoratives the Buddha usually allowed himself were 'foolish', or 'thoughtless', or 'unreasonable', here again he bitterly harps on 'this misguided man Samiddhi' and 'this misguided man Udāyin', repeating the phrase five times with mounting sarcasm, before letting the matter drop.

What threw him were always such intrusions on either his outer or his inner calm: the ordered regimen of monastic life and the ordered regimen of his mind. For interruptions were uncontrollable and what he prized, above all, was mental and physical self-control. Thus the louring gaze, the peevish reprimand. As if such thoughtless spontaneity were the ultimate vulgarity, the spiritual equivalent of heckling. It brought out his grimmest ill-humour.

* * *

More than sardonic, he could be abrasive as well as dismissively contemptuous (of astrologers, say). He ridiculed every kind of ritual hocus-pocus. 'If river

water could really wash away sin and suffering,' he once scoffed:

'then the frogs, fish, turtles and crabs bathing in those sacred rivers should long ago have been relieved of their sufferings too ... If a man could eliminate pain by simply making offerings and obeisances, there should by now be no pain in the world, since anyone can pay homage and pray. But as pain pervades even the rituals of prayer, that clearly cannot be the path to liberation.'⁵⁹

Not only Hindu cults were derided. The Buddha had nothing but scorn for Brahman insistence on caste-stratification in Hindu society, comparing it to 'thrusting a joint of meat on a penniless man, then telling him to eat and pay for it!'⁶⁰ And that in a predominantly vegetarian culture! Such sudden imaginative spins, such feline pounces, must often have roused resentment. Were they calculated to irritate? They certainly had this effect on young Subha, a Brahman student, intent on interviewing the Buddha on the pros and cons of a 'household' versus a 'homeless' (monastic or wandering) life. But the Buddha undercut all aspects of brahmanical lore on the grounds of their not being arrived at first-hand (from experience), but at second- and third- and fourth-hand (through study of the Vedas). 'Imagine,' he exclaimed, switching to an image as familiar on roads then as it was for Flemish Breughel two thousand years later,

'Imagine a file of blind men, each man clinging to the next one's arm or back or shoulder. Neither the first, nor the second, nor the last can see. So it is with the Brahmins.

Their leader can't see; his follower doesn't see; and his follower's followers don't see.'⁶¹

Calling the Brahman tradition one of 'the blind leading the blind',⁶² however, proved inopportune, or at least counterproductive, on this occasion: by visually dramatizing the argument, that is, the Buddha seemed openly to taunt and disparage the young Brahman who at once turned angrily dismissive, muttering something like: 'We'll see about that! I'll soon make him eat his words! Gotama Bhikkhu will be proved mistaken!'

But the Buddha was used to such charges and counter-charges. His hide was tough. When really riled, however – by a disrobed monk who had openly ridiculed him before the Vesālī assembly – he ritually cursed his opponent: 'Unless Sunakkhatta recants his slander, unless he publicly drops his charge, he'll find himself hauled off to hell!'⁶³ hammering home his prophetic curse again and again and again and again. The main target for such ritual anathemas, though, was his cousin and rival, Devadatta. For which in turn he was slandered by Jains who maliciously treasured each virulent phrase to use against him:

'Devadatta is a nefarious nihilist;
Devadatta belongs in hell;
Devadatta will remain in hell for all eternity;
Devadatta is incorrigible.'⁶⁴

Nor were such ritual curses empty threats. Five of the Buddha's most vicious detractors were swallowed live by the earth, according to Buddhist folklore:

Devadatta, while attempting to murder his cousin and rival;⁶⁵ Devadatta's father, while drunkenly obstructing the Buddha on a highway;⁶⁶ Nandaka, the ogre (*yakkha*) who had struck Sāriputta a blow on the head;⁶⁷ Ciñca, a Brahman woman, cajoled by the Buddha's enemies into accusing him of making her pregnant;⁶⁸ and lastly Nanda, the Brahman youth, for raping the beautiful nun Upalavaṇṇa, who was an Arahant.⁶⁹

* * *

Self-mortification may, in retrospect, have helped in detaching and disciplining and toughening the Buddha. A prolonged hunger-strike in his early thirties, attended by headaches and stomach cramps, had rapidly accelerated into a gut-wrenching crisis:⁷⁰

'I thought: suppose I take less and less food, just a handful each time, whether of bean soup, or lentil soup, or pea soup? So I did. And as I did, my body contracted to skeletal proportions: my limbs shrank to jointed segments of bamboo or withered creepers, because of eating so little; my buttocks grew calloused as a camel's hoof; my spine protruded like a string of beads; my ribs jutted out as gaunt as rafters on a roofless barn; my eyes, sunk deep in their sockets, gleamed like water far down a well; my scalp shrivelled as a ripe gourd withers in wind and sun. If I pressed my belly, I touched my backbone; feeling my backbone, I encountered my belly. For my belly-skin stuck to my backbone. Whenever I passed water or emptied my bowels, I fell flat on my face. If I tried easing myself

by rubbing my limbs, the rotting hairs rubbed off on my hands because of eating so little.⁷¹

Feverish – and racked with pain – he would crawl on all fours to the cow-sheds, after the cattle had left for pasture, to lick up the young calves’ dung:

‘As long as my own excrement and urine lasted, I fed on that ... I would bed down at night in a charnel ground, with bones for a pillow, where herd boys would creep up to spit on me and piss on me, chuck dirt at me and poke sticks into my ears.’⁷²

This close-up of the Tathāgata as cadaverous grotesque constitutes, as it happens, the only explicit self-portrait that has come down to us: limbs, ribs, spine, buttocks, eyes, scalp, skin, hair, every detail from top to toe meticulously itemized and anatomized and recorded. Though later he gave up such orgies of self-humiliation, they were to be frequently and elaborately recalled. It could even be argued that the comic virtuosity of his Buddhahood was in some ways dependent on that highly-strung, yet coolly objective, experiment. For what he continuously trained on this frenzied and feverish world was the same intense, unflinching, dispassionate gaze he had earlier turned on his own agonized and emaciated physique.

8

FOLKLORE

A peculiar problem of Pali literature is the total absence of comparative texts. Non-Buddhist or wholly secular texts, that is. For much of the language of the suttas must have been of popular origin. Proverbial sayings clearly abounded:

‘One hand washes the other as one foot the other.’

‘If a man’s reputation suffers, his income suffers.’

‘A clean cloth, from which all stains have been removed, takes the dye perfectly.’¹

When a Brahman, to snub his quick-witted spouse, tells her: ‘Wife, you are always seeing a crocodile in a drop of water!’² he is hardly likely to have been original. His pompous self-assurance, not shrewd wit in that context, was at issue.

The Buddha naturally shared a whole range of such folksy idioms. Even in verse. When unmasking Māra, for example, he exclaimed:

‘I recognize your ploys –
Of whatsoever kind – to be as vain
As a ship’s oars and rudder on dry land,’³

this was certainly no novel *jeu d’esprit*, but as old and hackneyed as Māra’s tricks, or sayings like ‘buying a pig in a poke’, or ‘bleeding like a stuck pig’, or waiting ‘until pigs might fly’, are for us. Again, when on visiting three fellow-hermits, the Buddha enquired:

‘I hope you all live in harmony, Anuruddha, as undisputing as milk with water, viewing each other with kindly eyes,’⁴

this was a standard formula of extreme courtesy, we must assume, not some wilfully extravagant *bon mot*. It can be heard dolefully echoed by a very much chastened King Pasenadi on his final visit to the Buddha: ‘But here I see bhikkhus living in harmony, as undisputing as milk with water, viewing each other with kindly eyes.’⁵

A long list of catchphrases could be compiled, none of which – in all likelihood – is of unique coinage. Take the stock epithet for monastic calm, for instance: ‘as utterly pure and polished as a conch-shell’.⁶ Or the *figura* from archery as emblematic of tense self-control: ‘just as a well-trained archer can nimbly shoot an arrow across a palm’s shadow’.⁷ Or the posturing of a muscle man to signal sudden and unexpected transport:

‘When the Lord came to the Ganges, the river was so full to overflowing that even a crow could drink out of it ... But as swiftly as a strong man can flex his extended arm or again unflex it, the Blessed One vanished from the near bank of

the Ganges and reappeared with his Sangha of bhikkhus on the far shore.’⁸

And mark that intrusive crow!

All these were commonplaces, though they may sound as fresh and vigorous to our ears as similar turns of phrase in Homer or Chaucer. They naturally suited the Buddha’s homely style. As when – caught off guard by five hundred monks, headed by Sāriputta and Maha-Moggallāna, bursting into his retreat, exchanging greetings, preparing beds, storing bowls and outer robes – he expostulated: ‘Ānanda, what’s this riff-raff doing here? They’re as noisy as fishermen peddling fish!’⁹ Or, on another occasion, upset by an incursion of Brahman families bringing food-offerings, he exclaimed: ‘Nagita, what’s all this hubbub about? It beats fishermen landing a prize catch!’¹⁰

Nor did he shy away altogether from low talk. He could participate in the coarsest slang. For example, while expelling Devadatta for conspiring to hijack his Order, he disdainfully sank to his antagonist’s abusive level:

‘I would not hand over the Sangha of bhikkhus even to Sāriputta and Moggallāna. Then why should I deliver it to such a good-for-nothing gob of spittle as you?’¹¹

Free-for-all slanging-matches, of course, were to be avoided, but their very verve may have helped tip his natural bias towards comic exaggeration.

* * *

For hyperbole is the hallmark of slanging. Not of slang only, but of grossness, of vulgarity, as well as of all untrammelled flights of the imagination:

‘Idiots, you’ve tried to split a rock
By dabbing it with lily stems;
To dig a hollow with bare hands;
To chew up iron with your teeth;
Secure a foothold on a cliff,
Balancing boulders on your heads;
Or shove a tree down with your chests.
Of course, you’ve come from Gotama
Frustrated and discomfited.’¹²

This is Māra piling up paradox on paradox to humiliate his three daughters – Craving (*Taṇhā*), Boredom (*Aratī*) and Lechery (*Ragā*) – after their failure to seduce the Buddha. But a Buddhist catechism could be even more breathtaking in its hyperbolic display:

QUESTION: ‘How long is one cycle of time?’

ANSWER: ‘Longer than a mountain of solid rock – a league in length, a league in breadth, a league in height – without crack or flaw takes to erode when wiped, once every hundred years, with a silk handkerchief.’

QUESTION: ‘How long are the cycles of rebirth?’

ANSWER: ‘Imagine the bones of a single human being in transit from birth to birth raked here into a pile; that pile would dwarf the whole of the Himalayan range stacked vertically peak on peak. Imagine every stalk, stick, bough and twig whereabouts gathered in a heap, each named for a mother and a mother’s mother and a mother’s mother’s mother; the supply of stalks and sticks and boughs and

twigs would run out before counting the mothers of all those mothers... Imagine the whole earth rolled into pellets the size of cola seeds and itemized thus: "This is my father, this my father's father, this my father's father's father"; the earth itself would be exhausted before enumerating all the fathers of those fathers.'¹³

QUESTION: 'What are the odds on returning from hell to the human realm?'

ANSWER: 'Suppose someone threw a yoke, drilled with a hole, into the ocean where it tossed from East to West and from North to South; then suppose a blind turtle popped its head above the surface once every hundred years. What do you think? Would that turtle eventually poke its head through that borehole? Bhikkhus, I tell you, the blind turtle would sooner penetrate that hole than a fool, gone to perdition, would find his way back to the human state.'¹⁴

QUESTION: 'What are our filial duties towards our parents?'

ANSWER: 'Even should you cart your parents about on piggyback for the rest of their lives, massaging and anointing and feeding them, you would still be in their debt; even should they do nothing but piss and shit on your shoulders, you could never repay them.'

Such dizzying perspectives were the very stuff of the Indian imagination in its recurrent shifts from the divine to the human and back to the divine. After the merest glimpse of heaven, Prince Nanda reviled his once beloved fiancée in these outrageous terms:

'Lord, the Sakyan beauty Janapadakalyānī is like a scalded she-monkey – with ears and nose lopped off – compared to these five hundred dove-footed *yakshas*.

She can't hold a candle to them. She's not got the ghost of a chance. There's no earthly comparison.'¹⁵

* * *

The *Dhammapada* seems particularly rich in telltale reminders of its folklore origins, though only single images, unsustained by narrative hints or extrapolations, usually survive. Especially of animal fables with their cast of crows and lions, bees and spiders, elephants and hares. Like proverbs, their cautionary mode suggests the last trace or distillation of an implied narrative, as if they were summing up a far more elaborate account, no longer extant, in one terse epigraph. What Walter Benjamin compared to visible ruins on some archaeological site of otherwise vanished stories.

Oral transmission, as I argued earlier, was more likely to contract than expand such ornamental – or, as we might say, literary – aspects of the Dhamma. Such solo images may well have been more expansive before being anthologized: that queer catalogue of ten heterogeneous items, for instance, discussed in Chapter 5.¹⁶ There seven tales, unique to the *Potaliya Sutta* (*Majjhima Nikāya* 54), were found in exactly the same sequence reduced to a list (with addenda) peculiar to the *Alagaddūma Sutta* (*Majjhima Nikāya* 22): its jumble of bare bones, a lump of flesh, a torch of straw, a pit of burning coals, a dream, borrowed goods, a fruit-bearing tree, a slaughterhouse, a palisade of swords and

a snake's head becoming intelligible only as kernels, or remnants, or memos of already familiar stories. In much the same way, the complete 423 quatrains of the *Dhammapada* constitute a mnemonic list of markers to an obviously well-known Buddhist repertoire.

* * *

Key sources of such metaphoric sites, then, were proverbs, or folk tales, or a mixture of both, though often reduced to merest echoes:

'Life is easy for one who is
Shameless and bold as a crow, who
Aggressively slanders others
While wantonly bragging himself.'¹⁷

Which reappears, almost word for word, in a more obviously proverbial context: 'Easy is the livelihood of the crow – that boldly aggressive bird – whose deeds are shameless; but it is a most evil life.'¹⁸ Possibly even closer to its folkloric origins was the Tempter (*Māra*) encircling the Buddha with his sly enchantments:

'A crow there was who stalked around
A stone that seemed a lump of lard.
"Shall I gulp down this morsel? Fat's tasty enough to
gobble up."¹⁹

Yet such instances seem rare.

Full-scale, un mutilated folk tales, however, undoubtedly do survive. Take the story of the blind men and the elephant. As a Buddhist text, it was used

to make fun of disputes arising out of partial or fugitive experience. But in its inventive wit, it clearly predates, and overrides, any purely Buddhist interpretation:

‘In Sāvattthī, once upon a time, the king commanded all men blind from birth to assemble before an elephant. First, one group was led to feel the elephant’s head; then another to feel each ear; yet another only its tusks; or its trunk; or its belly; or its hooves; or its rump; or its penis; or the tuft at the end of its tail, each being assured that “that’s what an elephant was like.”

‘Eventually the king enquired: “Now tell me, blind men, can you describe what an elephant’s like?” Then those who had felt only the elephant’s head replied: “Your majesty, an elephant is like a water-jar.” Those who had felt only his ears replied: “Your majesty, an elephant is like a winnowing-basket.” Those who had felt only his tusks replied: “Your majesty, an elephant is like a ploughshare.” Those who had felt only his trunk replied: “Your majesty, an elephant is like a plough-pole.” Those who had felt only his belly replied: “Your majesty, an elephant is like a granary.” Those who had felt only his hooves replied: “Your majesty, an elephant is like four plinths.” Those who had felt only his rump replied: “Your majesty, an elephant is like a mortar.” Those who had felt only his penis replied: “Your majesty, an elephant is like a pestle.” Those who had felt only the tuft at the end of his tail replied: “Your majesty, an elephant is like a fly-whisk.”

‘At which point they began arguing and quarrelling so heatedly that they swung their fists at each other, shouting:

“No, not like that! An elephant’s like this!” “That’s not at all what an elephant’s like!” Which cheered the king, who was diverted by their brawling.²⁰

Or again, take the fable of the Partridge, the Monkey and the Elephant, deployed by the Buddha to urge the principle of seniority upon bhikkhus competing for precedence on the basis of caste, or liturgical expertise, or spiritual achievement:

‘Once upon a time, on the slopes of Mount Himavat, grew a huge banyan tree under which resided a partridge, a monkey and an elephant. Having little in common, they took scant notice of each other, yet couldn’t help wondering which of them was the eldest, thus outranking his neighbours.

‘So one day the partridge and the monkey asked the elephant: “How far back, sir, can you remember?” “When I was a calf, my good sirs, I used to walk over this banyan, scrupulously aligning it between my thighs; the tips of its shoots would just tickle my belly. That’s as far back, sirs, as I can remember.”

‘Next the partridge and the elephant asked the monkey: “How far back, sir, can you remember?” “When I was a baby, my good sirs, I used to squat on the ground, nibbling the tips of the shoots of this banyan. That’s as far back, sirs, as I can remember.”

‘Finally, the monkey and the elephant asked the partridge: “How far back, sir, can you remember?” “When I was a youngster, my good sirs, a huge banyan grew over there in that clearing. I ate one of its fruits and voided the seed right here. From which sprang our present banyan.”

‘Thereupon the monkey and the elephant respectfully

deferred to the partridge: “You, sir, by rights are our senior. In future, we shall honour and obey your every precept, wish or command.”²¹

Both tales were among the best-loved in the whole Canon.

* * *

Yet this fable of the Partridge is picked up verbatim in an uncanonical *Jātaka* tale (37),²² just as the fable of the Falcon is retold as a *Jātaka* tale (168).²³ Which, then, was their source? Were both of the Buddha’s making, only later winning widespread popularity? Or were both of folk origin (as I believe) and merely adapted to the Buddha’s purposes? Or was the traffic perhaps two-way? The tale of the Wise and Foolish Caravan-Leader (found in *Dīgha Nikāya* 23) is a possible source for *Jātaka* 1,²⁴ just as the tale of the Poisoned Dice (in the same sutta) is a possible source for *Jātaka* 91.²⁵ Or do both versions perhaps derive from a single lost source?

The tale of the Falcon is the most arresting of all these parallels:²⁶

‘Once upon a time, a she-falcon swooped down and seized a quail. Sailing through the air, the quail lamented: “Trust my luck! I lack merit. Serves me right for trespassing on others’ property. If only I’d stuck to my ancestral pastures this falcon could never have bested me!”

“But tell me, quail, what are your ancestral pastures?”

“A field, all covered with clods, turned up by the plough.”

‘Then the falcon, disdainfully relaxing her grip, replied: “Off with you, quail! Back to your pastures! But don’t think you can dodge me!”

‘So the quail flew back to the ploughed land and, perching on a clod, called out: “Try diving now, falcon! Dive down, I dare you!”

‘Momentarily dropping her guard, the falcon folded back her wings and swooped down upon the quail. In a trice, though, the quail had slipped within a crack of the earth and the falcon crashed, shattering her breast.’

That is the fable as the Buddha told it; but in its uncanonical (*Jātaka*) version the Future Buddha himself was reborn as a quail who outwitted a falcon. Which is very much in the spirit of the Afro-American Uncle Remus cycle with little Sis Quail tricking Sis Falcon just as (in *Jātaka* 357) she has her ghastly revenge on Brer Elephant for maliciously trampling her chicks.²⁷ That tale, too, needs recalling at length:

‘Once upon a time, a bull-elephant with a retinue of eighty-thousand followers made his home in the foothills of the Himalayas. By chance, a quail laid her eggs in the elephants’ stamping-ground. When the eggs were hatched – but before her chicks could fly – fearful of their being crushed, she courteously begged the elephant-king for protection. “Don’t worry, I’ll protect your little ones,” he assured her and stood guard over her nest while the eighty-thousand elephants trampled by. Then he added, “But there’s a solitary bull in the rear who won’t listen to me. You’ll have to ask him personally for his protection.”

‘So the quail flew to meet this solitary bull and, courteously folding her wings, begged him to spare her little ones.

‘But the bull merely snorted: “I shall kill your ‘little ones’, quail. You’re too feeble to injure me. Even a hundred-thousand like you, I could crush with my left hoof.”

‘And he smashed her chicks with one step and flushed them away in a torrent of piss. Then he shambled off trumpeting.

‘The quail perched on a branch, plotting revenge: “For strength does not always prevail. Furious is the strength of a fool. Elephant, I’ll avenge myself on you for trampling my darlings.”

‘Over the next few days she ingratiated herself with a crow who was so taken in that he asked what he might do for her in return. “Just one thing, Master,” replied the quail. “Please peck out the eyes of that solitary bull.” “Very well,” agreed the crow.

‘Next she ingratiated herself with a blowfly until she too asked what she might do for her in return. “As soon as that bull’s eyes are gouged, please fill their sockets with nits.” “Very well,” agreed the blowfly.

‘Next she ingratiated herself with a frog until he too asked what he could do for her in return. “Once that bull-elephant is blinded and dying of thirst, please croak from above till he has clambered uphill; then hop back below and continue croaking till he has stumbled down. That’s all I ask.” “Very well,” agreed the frog.

‘So one fine day the crow pecked out both the elephant’s eyes and the blowfly laid nits in their sockets until the elephant, maddened by the maggots – thrashing blindly about to quench his thirst – heard a frog croaking above. Desperately he clambered uphill. At which point he heard

a frog croaking below. Stumbling back, down and down, he plunged over a precipice and was crushed.

‘When the quail heard the crash, she exulted: “I’ve seen the back of my enemy!” and strutted a dance of victory on the bull-elephant’s prostrate shoulder.’

* * *

Like Brer Rabbit outwitting Brer Fox, Brer Wolf, Brer Coon, Brer Possum, etc., the quail is a prototype of a vulnerable, though unscrupulous, victim revealed as folk-heroine. ‘Even the quail, that small bird,’ ran a proverb, ‘can talk as she likes on her own nest.’²⁸ Tiny, but canny, she repeatedly triumphs over the huge, the fierce, the strong. Her exultant cry, ‘I’ve seen the back of my enemy!’ is echoed by the Future Buddha in the *Jātaka* version of the falcon’s dive.

Though a far more gruesome and ruthless trickster than we usually tolerate, she appeals to the underdog in us all; and the Future Buddha was reborn on at least two more occasions in her guise. In *Jātaka* 35, as a quail-chick, newly hatched, still unable to fly: though the runt of the brood (from rejecting live titbits offered by his parents), single-handedly he overcomes a terrifying forest blaze. In *Jātaka* 33, however, the trickster is tricked through no fault of his own. Reborn as a quail-cock ‘with a retinue of many thousand quails’, he finally fails to outwit a fowler on account of the quarrelsome and argumentative character of his fellow-quails.²⁹

What seems odd, though, is that the Buddha (or his later redactors) did not aim the Parable of the Falcon at the suicidal recklessness of the raptor. Since at heart she despised the silly quail, the falcon first relaxed her grip and then dropped her guard.³⁰ Why should a handicap bother her? Such petty prey had a lesson to learn! That impertinence was futile – even on home ground! But she was sporting with a far trickier adversary than she reckoned. It's the old adage, 'Pride goes before a fall,' that we are bound to recall.

But that was not the Buddha's objective. Nor his moral. What he wished to stress, above all, was the inquisitive, restless, incautious roaming of the quail. His resounding moral was 'Don't stray off your own turf! Don't trespass on prohibited ground! Else you'll be caught in the claws of your adversaries.' Such a lopsided moral plainly points to a rather different pre-Buddhist bias, or kernel, at variance with the Buddha's version, just as surely as a rather different comic tale underlies the Parable of the Monkey appended to it.³¹ As if to clinch matters, the two texts are not only juxtaposed but linked by a common introduction and conclusion.

But that selfsame tag, 'Stick to your own patch; don't stray on to prohibited ground,' turns out to be an even more inappropriate guide for construing the shenanigans of the monkey:

'Throughout the Himalayas are regions so elevated that neither monkeys nor men can survive; and certain less elevated regions so rugged that only monkeys venture there. But below that extends an upland terrain in which both men and monkeys delight.

‘There sadists torment the monkeys by spreading lime on their trails. Wise and temperate monkeys simply avoid the lime. But a foolish and greedy monkey is bound to dab the strange stuff with his hand. And there it sticks! “I’ll tug at it with my other hand,” he thinks. Now both hands stick! “I’ll shove my foot in and heave,” he thinks. Now that’s stuck too! Then he tries with the other foot. Now both are stuck! “I’ll free both hands and feet,” he thinks, tearing at them with clenched jaws. Now even his face is fast!

‘So there he rocks, curled up in a ball – with his hands, feet, mouth, face smeared with lime – where men can skewer him at their leisure and roast him on a bed of coals.’

To us, this reads like a folksy analogue (in an Asian setting) to ‘Brer Rabbit and the Tar-Baby’. Which of the two, we may ask, is more impulsive, the monkey or Brer Rabbit? And aren’t both as reckless in their different ways as the falcon? But the Buddha blithely skipped all such aspects of the fable. Neither the rapacity (of the falcon) nor inquisitive greed (of the monkey) was of even marginal interest. The Buddha’s sole and characteristic concern was to hammer home a single lesson: don’t pry, stray, trespass, explore and expose yourself unguarded on prohibited ground. Ignoring the inconvenient fact that the lime had been spread on the monkeys’ own trails! Whoever supposed those trails constituted alien ground? Whoever exhorted the monkeys to desist from travelling there?

* * *

If the fit between parable and folk tale at times seems partial, at other times the very stories-as-stories fail to carry conviction. This failure is inevitably due to interpretative pressures which overdetermine, and so undermine, normal narrative expectations. In the Parable of the Snake, Crocodile, Bird, Dog, Jackal and Monkey, for instance, each is tethered to a rope whose other end is tied to a single post:

‘Now, monks, these six animals with different ranges and diets would swing round and struggle, each trying to head for his natural habitat: the snake, for an ant-hill; the crocodile, for water; the bird, for the upper air; the dog, for a village; the jackal, for a charnel-ground; the monkey, for the jungle. But, wearied with struggling, they would eventually yield to whoever was strongest.’³²

Really? Far from struggling in their separate ways for air, water, jungle, etc., wouldn’t they, as likely as not, *set on each other*: crocodile snapping up dog; snake devouring bird or monkey; jackal mopping up the carnage? Something vital is suppressed which makes nonsense of the Buddha’s explication. Those six could never crouch together as selflessly as our faculties in meditation; nor is it clear just why a snake, crocodile, bird, etc. were ever chosen to represent eye, ear, nose, mind, etc. in the first place.

The homiletic aim is transparent enough. But oral improvisation, like the requisitioning of folklore, can lead to awkward tangles.



Such transpositions of human foibles or failings into bestial forms, or vice versa, became a hallmark of the Buddha's teaching. Its very touchstone even, since the non-human world (it was believed) not only commented on but reflected – at a further spin of the wheel of rebirth (*saṃsāra*) – the human condition with all its ingrained habits, its feuds and attachments. Or, put another way, a Buddhist bestiary could be compiled to define and illustrate that teaching, since ultimately both man and beast were part of a single cyclical consciousness. Had not the Buddha, uniquely conscious of his reincarnations, instant recall of all previous brushes with the vicious and virtuous?³³ As King of the Parrots, for example, he had roosted in a grove of fig-trees on the banks of the Ganges (in anticipation, no doubt, of the Bodhi tree under which he was to win enlightenment); or as a timid fawn, he had confronted the evil Devadatta as deer-stalker.³⁴ These ever-popular tales of the five hundred and fifty births of the Buddha, prior to his final birth as Gotama, were eventually enlisted to embellish the official commentary on the *Dhammapada*, whose minimalist quatrains were selected to enhance and intensify the Buddha's programme.

The *Dhammapada* was a teaching tool and mnemonic handbook and moral primer and anthology of extracts capable at all points of re-inflation (as later commentators were only too happy to demonstrate). That is why folklore so early on accumulated around

it. Especially around animal fables – even maxims with no discernible folk content. For example, typecasting monks in meditation by their postures: the monk dozing off (as a coiled snake); the monk doodling with his fingers on the ground (as an earthworm); the monk rocking a tree (as a monkey); the monk gazing abstractedly at the sky (as an astronomer).³⁵ Or the cautionary tale of Tissa, reborn as a louse ‘since he was so attached to his brand new set of robes’.³⁶ Or a millennially drawn-out feud between a housewife and her hen.³⁷

These are all essentially comic interventions, and the verses themselves often suggest Aesop-like scenarios. But their lessons, for the most part, are profoundly troubling. Take the Spider:

‘All those who are slaves of desire
Run into the stream of desires,
Even as a spider runs in
to the web that it has just made.’³⁸

Not only is it implied that our bonds are of our own making but that, like spiders, we are deluded into thinking them essential for our survival. For spider-like, we are mean, selfish, solitary, predatory, vicious. We make ourselves at home in our lusts. We accept them as a perpetual source of vital nourishment. There we brood, lour, pounce ... Yet how flimsy that web of covetousness is, hung across the void, to which we run for shelter! All this, so discreetly evoked, is clumsily paraphrased by Buddhaghosa:

‘Just as a spider, after spinning its web, sits motionless at the centre – scuttling off to kill a trapped fly, then sucking its juice, then resettling again at the centre – so creatures led by passion, depraved by hatred and maddened by anger, run along a stream of desire (*taṇhā*) of their own making, for which they’ll find no crossing.’

Jonathan Edwards summed up the image more tersely – albeit in Christian terms – by comparing our predicament to a spider hung by a thread over the abyss of eternal damnation.³⁹

* * *

That spider, that crow, act on us in psychosomatic ways akin to Tarot cards, or emblems. A bestiary, as I suggested, could be compiled from the *Dhammapada* alone, consisting entirely of similar epigrams.⁴⁰ But I foraged further afield to gather the following twenty-one items which invite woodcuts by Thomas Bewick, or miniatures by Mansur, or reliefs from Sanchi, to confirm their characteristic poses.⁴¹

* * *

A FIVE-PART BESTIARY:

1. CRAVING (TAṆHĀ)

The Crow (sign of the professional thief):

Watch him impudently flapping over a ploughed field and settling to pick over the furrows:

‘Life is easy for one who is shameless and bold as a crow, who aggressively slanders others while wantonly bragging himself.’

Caw! Caw! Caw! Our everyday world is a shameless rookery, loud with mutual bickering, where crafty self-assertion and wanton aggression rule the roost.

The Spider (sign of delusion):

‘All those who are slaves of desire run into the stream of desires, even as a spider runs in to the web that it has just made.’

So beware of such homespun filaments!

The Dung Beetle (sign of accumulation):

‘Fatal is hunger for gain and fame ... It’s just like a beetle, feeding on dung, full of dung, gorged with dung, posing before a great dung-hill as if to say: “I’m a dung-eater, filled with dung, gorging on dung, the sole proprietor of this great dung-hill!”’⁴²

A Jātaka tale tells of his comeuppance

‘A dung-beetle was attracted by the smell of dung to a deserted camp-site. Spotting spilt liquor on the ground, he sipped and sipped until he clambered up a dung-hill, tipsily chortling whenever the moist ground gave way:

“Ha! The earth can’t support my weight!”

‘Just then an elephant in musth approached, sniffed and again retreated. “That chap’s fleeing,” the dung-beetle concluded. “I’ll challenge him to battle.”

‘So he did. The elephant pricked his ears and looming over him trumpeted:

“‘I’ll kill you not with hoof, nor tusks, nor trunk; with dung I’ll kill; let filth be slain with filth.”

‘And dropping a massive turd on the beetle, he flushed his dead body away in a torrent of piss.’⁴³

The Hare (sign of restlessness):

Lust never runs in a straight line. It is the zigzag path of its flight – now dodging this way, now that – which evokes the image of the hare:

‘Steeped in lust all beings cower
Terrified as the hare ensnared;
Hobbled by fetters they incur
Endlessly a repeated doom.’⁴⁴

This loss of gambolling mirth reveals a terror-stricken conscience, caught in vicious circles of desire.

A Calf Tied to a Cow (sign of connubial bliss):

But uxorious stay-at-homes are equally condemned:

‘Whoever would not lance the lust
He feels for women will be bound
In everlasting servitude,
Like a milch-calf tethered to its dam.’⁴⁵

A Hog Fed in its Sty (sign of slothfulness):

Just as all sluggards, wallowing in domestic ease, are condemned:

‘A lazy glutton drowsy from
 Huge meals – rolling in his sleep like
 A hog in his sty – again and
 Again must re-enter the womb.’⁴⁶
 ‘The vigilant exert themselves, delighting in no
 fixed abode ...’⁴⁷

The Ox (sign of obtuseness):

Nor does stolid stoicism prove a virtue. Dumb patience, by itself, remains dumb. The phlegmatic, far from persisting, merely resist:

‘A man who has learnt but little
 Grows old like an ox, his *rūpa*
 (Fleshiness) increases, but his
Nāma (mentality) never.’⁴⁸

As Ajahn Chah once remarked: ‘It’s about the same as the equanimity of a water buffalo!’⁴⁹ Oxen expand only in bulk, that is, not in brain-power. Like Puṇṇa, the ‘ox-duty ascetic’, whose ox-mind developed by ox-behaviour ensured him a rebirth (at best) in ‘the company of oxen’.⁵⁰

The Crane (sign of the wasted life):

Which is the Buddha’s drollest, yet most desolating, picture of morose old age:

‘Those who dissipated their youth,
 Without earning spiritual wealth,
 Drag out their lives like aged cranes
 Lingering round a fished-out pond.’⁵¹

All longing in that ecological wasteland – all ‘thirty-six streams of desire’ – long ago dried up.

2. DISTRESS (*DUKKHA*)

The Jackal (sign of unease):

“‘Bhikkhus, have you heard that jackal howling at night towards dawn?’ ‘Yes, Lord.’ ‘That will be an old jackal afflicted by mange. Wherever he chooses to go, or stand, or sit, or lie, there the cold wind blows ...’”⁵²

In Ajahn Chah’s paraphrase: ‘Standing it suffered, running it suffered, sitting it suffered, lying down it suffered. Whilst in the underbrush, a tree-hollow or a cave, it suffered. It blamed standing for its discomfort, it blamed sitting, it blamed running and lying down; it blamed the tree, the underbrush and the cave. In fact, the problem was none of those things. That jackal had mange. The problem was with the mange.’⁵³

The Leashed Dog (sign of masochism):

‘Consider a dog, bhikkhus, tied with a leash to a strong stake. If he moves, he approaches that stake; if he stops, he stands next to that stake; if he sits, he squats by that stake; if he lies down, he settles close to that stake.’⁵⁴

In his despair, the stake becomes his only refuge. His ‘dog-mind’, developed by ‘dog-behaviour’, enforces submission to the very source of his humiliation. Like the ‘naked dog-duty ascetic’ Seniya assured of rebirth (at best) in the abject ‘company of dogs’.⁵⁵

But aren’t we all lashed to our bodies as to stakes? And, in distress, don’t most of us cling to those bodies, not the *Dhamma*, for refuge? By appropriating our sense

of touch, our feelings, our discriminations, our mental faculties, our very consciousness, as constituents of an inalienable self, the Buddha argued, we merely reinforce our dog-like surrender to the prime source of our physical and emotional and mental ill-being.

The Cobra (sign of duplicity):

Beware of the cobra. He is deadly dangerous. His head holds poisonous fangs; if you touch it, the cobra will bite straightaway. So steer clear of the head. But don't think of picking him up by the tail either. Should you grab hold of the tail, in a flash his head will spin back and bite you.⁵⁶

That split-second pause between grabbing the head or tail is all that distinguishes *sukha* from *dukkha* ('happiness' from 'unhappiness') in this life. For the two are linked, indivisible aspects of one whole. As Socrates, ruefully massaging his leg in prison, remarked:

'What a queer thing it is, my friends, this sensation which is usually called "pleasure"! How inextricably linked to its antithesis "pain"! Yet they never put in a joint appearance. Only if you chase one and catch it, you're almost bound to catch the other – like two bodies attached to the same head ... Which is just what's happening to me now. My leg throbbed from the fetter I was wearing, and now that it's been removed, a gush of relief is flooding through it.'⁵⁷

Traditionally viewed as guardians of sacred places – sliding between darkness and light, secrecy and revelation, earth and air, divinity and mankind – cobras (or *nāgas* in Sanskrit) should be offered a saucer of milk

and left strictly undisturbed.⁵⁸ So watch out! As long as you don't interfere with cobras, they'll simply glide away. For all their venom, you won't be affected. Just don't go near them, or try to catch hold of them, and they won't bite!

A Flock of Birds (sign of vulnerability):

The images of darkness, imprisonment, death are always linked. Like a 'crafty fowler', death lurks everywhere, camouflaged by foliage, concealing himself in bushes and tall grasses.⁵⁹

'The world is indeed in darkness!
Blinded, how few can peer within!
Few as birds escaping a net
Are those who escape to heaven.'⁶⁰

Winged lightness, in itself, may not be enough; the world is trapped. Spiders spin webs out of themselves; but birds, like insects, fall into alien nets.

3. RESTRAINT (*SĪLA*)

The Elephant (sign of endurance):

Only the elephant has a whole chapter, or *vagga*, devoted to him. Just as his tracks could encompass those of every other land-bound creature, so could his character be requisitioned to evoke almost every aspect of self-awakening.⁶¹ For elephants' minds (a mahout's son declared), unlike men's, were transparent:

'Sir, I can drive an elephant to be trained and, in the time it takes to get from here to the Campā city-gate and

back, every sign of fraud and duplicity, dishonesty and deception, will have shown up. As for men, their bodies play one role (be it slave, or messenger, or servant), while their minds and tongues enact quite another.⁶²

The method of training was this: first a forest elephant was roped to a royal elephant by the neck and force-marched to cleared land; then, fastened to a stake, was lovingly foddered and watered before being taught the six basic commands: 'Forward!', 'Back!', 'Kneel down!', 'Get up!', 'Take up!', 'Put down!'; finally, with a shield buckled to his trunk – eye to eye with his mahout threatening him with a lance – was poked and prodded with spears and swords and arrows, amid a hullabaloo of trumpets and kettledrums, until 'he shifted neither his forehooves nor hindhooves, neither his front nor back, neither his head, nor ears, nor tusks, nor tail, nor trunk ...'⁶³

An elephant's prime characteristic was his determination:

'Delight in watchfulness; guard well
Your mind, lifting yourself up from
Evil ways as an elephant
Stuck in mud, floundering to rise.'⁶⁴

Such vast exertions could be harnessed for battle, or for logging, or for shouldering the king's howdah:

'They lead trained elephants to war
And kings ride throned on elephants.
Best among men are self-trained men
Who silently endure abuse.'⁶⁵
'Too many folk lack self-control,

But I shall silently endure
 Abuse as battle-elephants
 Endure shot arrows in their sides.⁶⁶

Yet, despite their thick hides, elephants (like us) remained visibly agitated by yearning and sexual arousal:

‘Mourning for his native forest
 Dhanapalaka, the tusker
 In pungent musth, chafing his chain,
 Refuses one mouthful of food.’⁶⁷

Musth aside, though, they remained at all other times imperturbably self-contained:

‘If you can find no prudent friend
 To share your life, then live alone
 Like a king surrendering land
 Or bull-elephant in the wilds.’⁶⁸

Elephants crossed the Buddha’s path from his conception to his death. His mother, Rani Sirimahāmayā, is said to have dreamt of an albino elephant before his birth. Bull-elephants had a habit of bursting in on him in the course of his meditations or alms-round.⁶⁹ The *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta* wistfully compares his farewell gaze at Vēsalī, shortly before death, to ‘an elephant looking back’ since (the commentary explains) like an elephant he turned his whole body round.⁷⁰ All in all, it could be said that the Buddha paradoxically combined two roles: that of bull-elephant (beset by cow-elephants, calves and sucklings) and that of supreme mahout marshalling his forest bhikkhus into disciplined, rule-bound communities.⁷¹

The Racehorse (sign of awakening):

‘As thoroughbreds from Sind ...’;⁷² ‘As a thoroughbred touched by the whip ...’⁷³ Is this the Buddha speaking from his youthful training as a Khattiya? Had he followed cavalry usage in laying on the whip, on an authorized graded scale, from flicking the hair, to touching the skin, to beating the flesh, to striking through to the bones?

‘Where on earth can be found a man
So noble, so restrained by shame,
Who starts from his sleep like a horse
Flinching from the flick of the whip?’⁷⁴
‘Watchful among the unwatchful,
Wide awake among those who sleep,
The wise man confronts life’s course like
A racehorse outrunning a hack.’⁷⁵

This is to be a thoroughbred – skittishly alert, nervously avoiding the whip; and such is the Buddha’s stable. Whether we realize it or not, a race is on.

4. CONCENTRATION (SAMĀDHI)

The Monkey (sign of mutability):

There is a legend of a monkey who came one day to offer the Buddha a bowl of wild honey. In his joy at having his offering accepted, he gambolled about so distractedly that he killed himself. As a reward, however, he was promptly reborn as a *muni*.

A ‘monkey-mind’ is the very antitype of the restrained and meditative mind. A ‘monkey-mind’

is one without self-control, with only the briefest of attention spans:

‘Just as a monkey ranging through a forest seizes a branch and, letting that go, seizes another, in the same way, bhikkhus, of that which is called ‘mind’, is called ‘thought’, is called ‘consciousness’, one moment arises as another ceases continually, both night and day.’⁷⁶

A ‘monkey-mind’, therefore, can never escape the wheel of *samsāra*:

‘Like creeping-māluva, cravings
Sprout in a heedless man. He leaps
From birth to birth, like a monkey
Seeking out fruit from tree to tree.’⁷⁷

The Frog (sign of pretension):

Behold the bullfrogs sitting on pads of lotus leaves – remaining motionless for hours without once losing awareness of life around them! ‘Just as an owl on a branch, watching for voles, meditates ... just as a jackal on a river-bank, watching for fish, meditates ... just as a cat, watching for mice by some dustbin or drain, meditates ... just as an unladen donkey by its hitching-post meditates ...’⁷⁸

A frog is the very pseudo-type of the restrained and meditative mind. ‘If by practising *zazen* one becomes a Buddha ...’ scribbled Master Sengai (1750-1837) beside his sketch of a ‘Meditating Frog’ – then all frogs are clearly Buddhas!⁷⁹

The Tortoise (sign of restraint):

‘Whoever withdraws his senses on all sides, as a

tortoise draws in his limbs, is firmly established in wisdom.’⁸⁰ Which are the exact terms in which the Buddha vindicated his own bhikkhus:

‘As a tortoise draws into his
Shell each limb, so a monk withdraws
Into his mind, all passion spent:
Blameless, unblaming, unattached.’⁸¹

5. WISDOM (PAÑÑĀ)

The Fish (sign of right effort):

This marks the decisive shift – much as our emergence, at birth, from the watery sack of the womb to take our first choking lungful of air:

‘As a fish cast up on dry land
From its liquid home, so the mind,
Freed from sensuality, gasps
To escape the clutch of Māra.’⁸²

For those swirls of passions and ‘thirty-six streams of desire’ were our accustomed habitat outside of which, at first, we are bound to flounder and gasp.

The Bee (sign of the pure mind):

Snakes may lurk in the grass but bees flit untroubled overhead, drawn to the scent of sandalwood and rosebay, orchid and jasmine:

‘Let a sage call on a village
As a bee alights on flowers
And makes off with due sustenance,
Harming neither colour nor scent.’⁸³

The bee settles and flies on, settles and flies. It never clings to a blossom. It never attaches itself like a snail.

It picks up pollen and lets go. It picks up nectar and puts it down. It harms neither others nor itself. Drawn by its senses of odour and hue and taste, it appropriates a minimal essence which it alone can distinguish and isolate. That is sagacity.

The Swan (sign of transcendence):

‘The vigilant exert themselves,
Delighting in no fixed abode
As swans, abandoning a lake,
Leave home after home in their wake.’⁸⁴

Heaviest of birds, the swan is cumbersome, flapping energetically on take-off. Awkward on land, graceful on water, its strong and purposeful flight proves an unpredictable triumph:

‘Swans follow the path of the sun.
Plunging powerfully through space –
Conquering Māra and his host –
The wise rise far above the world.’⁸⁵

The Lion (sign of certainty):

It was the lion’s unchallengeable roar that most affected the Buddha. It sounded for him the fearless trumpeting of truth – or rather, of the Four Noble Truths (*Aryasacca*): the truth of suffering; the truth of the cause of suffering; the truth of the cessation of suffering; and the Noble Eightfold Path (*atthangikamagga*).

Yet the figure of the lion (*sinha*), oddly enough, derived from Persian (Achaemenid) imagery. Rare on

the Ganges, the lion became the Buddha's personal trademark for everything from his teaching, called *sīhanāda* or 'Lion's Roar', to his deathbed posture, posthumously compared to that of the 'king of lions'.⁸⁶

MORAL ITINERARIES

The afterlife in Dante's *Divina Commedia* is divided into three equal parts: first, a spiralling descent to a dead end (*Inferno*); followed by a spiralling, ever upward ascent (*Purgatorio*); and last, the airy flights of *Paradiso*. Purgatory at that time was still a fairly recent annex.¹ Unknown before the end of the twelfth century – or if known, unnamed – its rapid colonization by medieval fantasy was mainly a product of the thirteenth century; and since the *Divina Commedia* opens in the Anno Santo of 1300, the poem's elaborate tripart structure must have helped stabilize and guarantee that division for posterity.²

Yet there may also be something universal in the symbols involved. Jungian even, for those who prefer the collective unconscious. Not only in juxtaposition to the Buddhist afterworld – similarly divided into three parts of Sense-Desire (*Kāma-loka*), of Form (*Rūpa-loka*)

and Formlessness (*Arūpa-loka*), as finely gradated and enumerated from plane to plane as Dante's – but in the contrast between a fateful (downward sloping) and benign (upward sloping) path.³ For 'in the heavens', both the Buddha and Dante agreed, 'there is no path ...'⁴

Both, too, had reached exactly thirty-five on confronting their mid-life crisis: Dante, as a character in his own poem, taken on a guided tour of the afterlife from cold to warmth, weight to weightlessness, darkness to light; the Buddha, setting out on a not dissimilar mission, with not dissimilar metaphors, but here and now to alarm and arouse the human condition. For our bodies, he insisted, were ephemeral as the 'foam of a wave',⁵ or 'withered gourds' tossed out in the autumn;⁶ in their very prime just 'a mass of sores', 'a nest of diseases',⁷ each incessantly tortured by thirst and plagued by fever.⁸ So it was only here and now (it followed) that we could indulge our sado-masochistic tantrums of lust; only here and now that we could purge ourselves of our infatuations; only from here and now that we could take flight for *nibbāna*:

'Soon, soon, alas, this body here
Will lie recumbent on the earth,
Rejected, void of consciousness,
And useless as a rotten log!'⁹

No dress-rehearsal was on offer. No resurrection of the physical body. No Last Judgment. Just this one-in-a-million chance to avoid turning inadvertently back into a crow, or a spider, or a dung-beetle, or a hare, or a crane, or a jackal.

Image-clusters, from the *Dhammapada* alone, suggest some vast, fragmented allegory of a kind that Dante (heir to an epic tradition) was to multiply within his own poetic structure.

The ultimate source of this structure was Plato's Parable of the Cave: that twisting about from shackled dependence (on shadows) to the source of light, which was given its supreme Christian interpretation by Dante. But, millennia earlier, the whole burden of the Buddha's teaching could also have been understood – and doubtless was understood – as an extended phenomenology of confinement (in suffering through craving), followed by a probation (of disciplined introspection), with a final bid for enlightenment (or liberation).¹⁰

* * *

PART 1: INFERNO

The Bondage of Lust: Whose symbol is fire. 'There is no fire like lust ...'¹¹ Our bodies – unruly worlds within worlds – are ablaze:

'Why so much laughter, why such joy,
When there's nothing that's not blazing ...'¹²

'Bhikkhus, all things are blazing. And what is it that's blazing? The eyes are blazing. Visible forms are blazing. Eye-consciousness is blazing. Eye-contact is blazing. Also feeling ... arising from eye-contact is

blazing. Blazing with what? Blazing with the fires of lust, with the fires of hate, with the fires of delusion; they are blazing with birth, ageing and death, I say, with sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair.

The ears are blazing. Sounds are blazing ...
 The nose is blazing. Odours are blazing ...
 The tongue is blazing. Flavours are blazing ...
 The body is blazing. Sense-data are blazing ...
 The mind is blazing. Mind-consciousness is blazing. Mind-contact is blazing ...¹³

And within that fiery furnace what did the Buddha's ear detect? The same lugubrious clank caught by Blake in his peregrinations around eighteenth-century London:

'In every cry of every Man,
 In every Infant's cry of fear,
 In every voice, in every ban,
 The mind-forged manacles I hear.'¹⁴

The mind-forged manacles of lust, and of anger, and of delusion! In Buddhist terms these are literally the ten shackles (*saṃyojana*) which include pride, doubt, restlessness and belief in paths other than the Noble Eightfold Path:¹⁵

'The bond of iron, wood or hemp,
 Is not so strong – wise men have said –
 As lust's attachment soldered to
 Sons or to wives, earrings or gems.'¹⁶
 'There is no fire like lust, no grip
 Like aversion's, no equal to
 Delusion's cage, no river with
 The untrammelled flux of craving.'

For here there is also water with swirling currents,¹⁷ it turns out, bordered by couch grass and jungle creepers.¹⁸ As with Dante's relay of seaborne images threading the *Commedia*, the Buddha's metaphors fit both shipwrecks on headlong surges and landlocked incarcerations.¹⁹

* * *

PART 2: PURGATORIO

i. *The Struggle for Self-Control*: But fire is an ambivalent sign, capable of continuous shifts of meaning. Once on the Noble Eightfold Path, it may even swoop as a purging, purifying agent combusting those mind-forged manacles into flames:

'Those who delight in watchfulness,
Contemptuous of thoughtlessness,
Go forth as an advancing fire
Consuming fetters great and small.'²⁰

– a very different conflagration, then, ablaze with concentration and resolve. Dedication so fired was always viewed by the Buddha as a matter of professional skill akin to the task of acquiring a trade or craft. As the ex-dacoit Angulimāla was quick to recognize:

'Irrigators guide the water,
Fletchers straighten out the arrow,
Joiners even out the timber,
Wise men seek to tame themselves.'²¹

Reclaimed by the Buddha from the brutalities of manslaughter, that is, he had now slowly and surely to recondition himself.

Just as an arrow-maker has to learn how to check for biased arrows, and a carpenter how to plane uneven timber, and a water-engineer how to channel floods down conduits, and a silversmith how to scum off molten silver, so every man and woman must learn how to discard stray promptings, how to straighten thought processes, how to control emotions and how to purify consciousness for himself alone and for herself alone;²² or, put another way, the resolve to rein in and discipline the vagrant mind is exactly the same as that needed to train mules, rein in horses, or ride royal elephants.²³ Good husbandry, the Buddha taught, begins not in the outhouse but within, just as good craftsmanship begins not in the workshop but in the mind.

The Buddha clearly enjoyed the company of coachmen and stable lads. As this dialogue in *Sāvatthī* suggests:

‘You too, Kesi, are a professional. Now how do you train a horse due for taming?’

‘For my part, your worship, I treat an untrained horse mildly at times, at other times harshly, and sometimes mildly and harshly turn and turn about ...’

‘But suppose, Kesi, some horse just doesn’t give in, then what do you do?’

‘In such cases, your worship, I destroy him. Why, you may ask? Simply not to discredit my teacher. But how does your worship train disciples? How can a man be tamed?’

‘For my part, Kesi, I too train such a man mildly at times, at other times harshly, and sometimes mildly and harshly by turns.’

‘But supposing he just doesn’t comply?’

‘In such cases, Kesi, I destroy him.’

‘Destroy him? But surely the Exalted One doesn’t take life!’

‘True, but if an apprentice doesn’t submit to training whether treated mildly or harshly, or treated now mildly, now harshly, then neither the Tathāgata nor his fellows in the holy life think it worthwhile to admonish such a man ...’²⁴

For a horse-trainer, or mahout, had himself to be trained; and the essential ingredients for such training, as the Buddha pointed out to Prince Bodhi, consisted of good health, energy, understanding and genuine dedication. But, above all, *faith*.²⁵ The apprentice had to have undeviating faith in his teacher, whatever his expertise: whether it was multiplication tables for accountants, exercises for thoroughbreds, or archery – or the Dhamma – for beginners.²⁶ For the Dhamma, too, had its apprentices. It, too, provided instruction. It, too, required ‘skilful practice’. It, too, offered drills. It, too, supplied a training schedule of ‘progressive practices’ for its bhikkhus.

Today, in fact, this training might well be labelled a ‘science’, an experimental therapy to be tested within the guidelines of a laboratory. Just as a merchant with a delicate tilt adjusts ‘a pair of scales’, that is, so a monk has to perfect his mental equilibrium.²⁷ Just as a goldsmith, after first washing, then melting, his grains, grips the gold with his tongs, now gently blowing on it,

now sprinkling moisture on it, now closely scrutinizing it, so a monk (to achieve equal pliancy and gloss) has constantly to check and recheck the exact focus of his concentration (*samādhi*), the exact degree of his persistence (*virīya*), the exact level of his equanimity (*upekkhā*).²⁸

* * *

ii. *On the Fine Art of Letting Go (Paṭinissagga)*:²⁹ This emphasis on acquiring a skill, for exercising a craft, suggests the preliminaries; but psychological expertise, in itself, can never suffice. It establishes a precondition merely for a further, essential stage: that of finally relinquishing the socialized identity, of no longer clutching at self-preservation, but simply ‘letting go’: ‘just as the *vasika* jasmine/ sheds its withered flowers ...’³⁰ As if an eternal vacation – an utter emptiness – were the ultimate goal:

‘This boat, O bhikkhu, empty out!
When emptied, it will swiftly sail ...’³¹

Or, with another shift of scene:

‘When with a mind at peace, a monk
Enters a solitude, he sees
Deep into the penetrating
Radiance of the Dhamma’s truth.’³²

But this could hardly consist of a simple reflex, a mere sigh of relief. It requires unflinching determination, a ceaseless baling out of the bilge (of aberrant thought)

from that ‘boat, O bhikkhu’ (of his mind). Only then could it lift against the current (of passion for the phenomenal world), reversing the inevitable glide downstream for the bracing tack (*uddham-soto*) upstream.’³³

* * *

iii. *On the Travails of Attachment (Upādāna)*:³⁴ That bilge-water, among other things, added weight; and it was this insidious excess, so sloppily destabilizing, which the two subsequent parables illumine. Neither, as quoted here, is authentic exactly; though in each case the Buddha supplied the kernel or germ (preserved in the *Saṃyutta Nikāya*).

Let us call one ‘Who is King of the Castle?’ The Buddha must have been watching village children by a river or during the monsoon rains:

‘Just think of how little boys and girls play with mud-pies. As long as they’re busied with their pies – full of enthusiasm – amused and excited by them – so long they value and cherish them. But as soon as their attachment wanes – as soon as their pleasure sours – as soon as they’re no longer excited and delighted by them – then with both hands and feet they scatter those mud-pies, smash them and utterly demolish them – in short, stop playing with them.’³⁵

Which, some seven centuries later, was fancifully revised into this far more dramatic Indian version:

‘Some children were playing beside a river. They built sand-castles and each child defended his castle, shouting, “This one’s mine!” “This one’s mine!” Their castles were built well apart, leaving no scope for challenging whose was whose. But when all were completed, one boy kicked down another’s castle and utterly wrecked it. The furious proprietor pulled the boy’s hair, punched him in the nose and yelled: “He’s ruined my castle! Come, give me a hand! Let’s teach him a lesson!” The others promptly took his side. They thrashed the trespasser with sticks and trampled him into the sand. Then they went back to squatting in their castles, shouting, “This is mine! Keep out! You can’t have it! Don’t you dare touch it!” But shadows lengthened; it was growing dark and suddenly all realized it was high time to go home. Now no one cared what happened to their castles. One child stomped on hers; another shoved his over with both hands. Then they turned and hurried on their way, everyone to their own home.’³⁶

This is no nursery tale. Our own vulgar refrains ‘Look at Me! Me! Me!’ but ‘Keep off Mine! Mine! Mine!’ are equally paradoxical and childish. If anything, our egoism tends to grow ever more exorbitant, more pressing, until (as Thoreau put it) almost all are ‘well-nigh crushed and smothered under [their] load, creeping down the road of life, pushing before [them] a barn seventy-five feet by forty ... and one hundred acres of land, tillage, mowing, pasture, and wood-lot!’³⁷ Or their equivalent in cash or kind.

The Buddha summed up this dung-beetle mindset in one octosyllabic quatrain:

*‘Bhārādānaṃ dukkhaṃ loke
 Bhāranikkepanaṃ sukhaṃ
 Nikhipitvā garuṃ bhāraṃ
 Aññaṃ bhāraṃ anādiya.’³⁸*

‘Carrying weights is suffering;
 Tossing away burdens is bliss.
 The wise discard those weights, without
 Accumulating further weight.’

Which, some twenty-five centuries later, the Venerable Ajahn Chah in Thailand refashioned into this short parable. ‘The Caryatid’, we might call it, or ‘The Telamon’*:

‘It’s as if we were carrying a heavy rock. After a while we feel its weight but don’t know how to let go. So we stagger on. If advised of the benefits of dropping it, we say: “I can’t. I won’t have anything left!” All further discussion is useless; we just keep insisting: “If I drop it, I shall have nothing!” Until we’re so utterly weak and exhausted that finally we have no choice but to let go ...
 What instant relief! What a surge of joy! How light-hearted we suddenly feel. At last, heart’s ease!’³⁹

* * *

iv. *On the Verge of Sīla* (Self-Control): What Ajahn Chah did not add in this context was the unexpected

* A ‘caryatid’ is a sculpted female figure that serves as a supportive column or pillar in a classically styled building; a ‘telamon’ is a sculpted male figure serving the same purpose. (Ed.)

bonus to be gained from dislodging such excess weight; that by surrendering the rock it was the mind which would turn (potentially) rocklike: ‘Even as a great rock which is/ not shaken by the wind ...’; ‘a giant rock which neither wind/ nor Māra can o’erthrow ...’⁴⁰

Far from lightweight then, the result – to the contrary – could be adamant: like a city-pillar, say, or, in more grandiose architectural terms, a watchtower high in the Himalayas, or a frontier fortress that is well guarded.⁴¹ Absolute self-control would be impregnable. Or to turn to more pliant forms of repulsion: think of a lotus leaf from which moisture, briefly clinging, drips; or a mustard-seed dropping from the point of a needle.⁴² Or immerse yourself in the translucent depths of a lake: pure and peaceful and clear and deep – water, as usual, betokening boundless, fluid strength.⁴³

But at this point such a vision is still no more than a glimpse. As long as his ‘mindfulness’ remains rudimentary, ‘the wise man makes an insular/ retreat no flood can overflow.’⁴⁴ Like the rhinoceros of the *Khaggavisana Sutta*, ‘*anissito ca viharati*’ (he dwells independently) ‘*na ca kiñci loke upādiyati*’ (clinging to nothing in the world) – except his solitary, segregated, insulated self:

‘His self is refuge for himself.

Where else indeed could refuge be?’⁴⁵

That is the first shock to Western sensibility. Why this sudden withdrawal from the world? This moral isolation? Because affectionate feelings on their own,

the Buddha taught, are bound to wobble. Altruism, by itself, does not grow rocklike. Good intentions, left to themselves, will collapse and crumble:

‘One’s own good one should never spurn for others’ good, however great.’⁴⁶

Which comes as a second shock: that personal one-upmanship should be given such blatant advantage; that self-interest carries no stigma of narcissism or self-delusion. But then, on second thoughts, why should it? King Pasenadi of Kosala once descended from the upper terrace of his palace at Sāvattthī, where he had been conversing with his wife, to report the following exchange to the Buddha:

KING PASENADI: ‘Mallikā, is there anyone dearer to you than yourself?’

QUEEN MALLIKĀ: ‘Your Majesty, there is no one dearer to me than myself. And you, sire, is anyone dearer to you than yourself?’

KING PASENADI: ‘No, Mallikā, no one is dearer to me than myself.’

The Buddha, far from reproving such unromantic sentiments, clearly found them exemplary, and uttered the following quatrain:

‘Though our thoughts range throughout the world,
Dearer than self we’ll nothing find.
Since others, then, hold self so dear,
Cherish yourself! But injure none!’⁴⁷

The Buddha, that is, positively encouraged such a mutual self-admiration society. For his injunction, ‘Cherish yourself! But injure none!’ is merely a rhetorical inversion, it turns out, of the injunction by Leviticus (and Jesus), ‘Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.’⁷⁴⁸ *Amour propre* is revealed as the universal ground of altruism. While Jew or Christian, one might say, must first lose himself in order to find himself (in God), the Buddhist must first find himself in order, eventually, to lose himself (in nibbāna). Compassion, joy, equanimity – whether in the losing-as-finding or finding-as-losing – emerge in all higher religions as spontaneous, inexplicable common denominators.

That is a lesson supremely conveyed by the Parable of the Bamboo-Acrobats:

‘Once upon a time, a bamboo-acrobat set up his pole and called to his apprentice, “Come, my lad, jump on my shoulders and climb the pole”; and the apprentice did as he was bid.

Then the bamboo-acrobat told his apprentice: “Now, my lad, you look out for me and I’ll look out for you. By watching and protecting each other in that way, we shall show off our skill, earn a good fee and come down safe from the bamboo pole.”

But, perched aloft, the apprentice replied: “Master, it can’t be done like that. You look out for yourself, Master, and I’ll look out for myself. If we both watch and protect ourselves, then we’ll be able to show off our skill, earn a good fee and come down safe from the bamboo pole.”⁷⁴⁹

At this point, no doubt, the Buddha turned to his monks as if to ask which of the two was right; and a monk must have ventured the opinion: ‘The apprentice’. A calculated risk since he can hardly have missed the unprecedented cheek of an apprentice contradicting his Master. Especially when perched so airily overhead. In Asian cultures, to this day, apprentices do not correct or criticize their employers.

But the Buddha approved:

‘The Blessed One said: “That was the correct way of practice in this case. Just as the apprentice addressed his Master, thinking ‘I shall protect myself’, you must practise *satipaṭṭhāna*; and when thinking ‘I shall protect others’, you must also practise *satipaṭṭhāna*.⁵⁰ Bhikkhus, in protecting oneself, one protects others; in protecting others, one protects oneself.”

What the Buddha effectively encouraged by this parable, then, was an unfettered independence of mind: each man (boy, pupil, apprentice) not only *acting* for himself, but *thinking* for himself; each woman (girl, pupil, acolyte) not only *acting* for herself, but *thinking* for herself.

Yet the two positions really converge in the end until they amount to much the same thing. The key question, it seems, was rather: ‘Where do you begin?’ To which the Buddha unequivocally backed the answer ‘with yourself’, as opposed to the Christian norm of universal altruism. Then he continued:

‘And how does one, in protecting others, protect oneself? By forbearance, by non-violence, by possessing a heart of loving-kindness and compassion. In that way, by protecting others, one protects oneself.’

For really there was no such thing (in this world) as ‘unfettered independence’. It was rather a matter of quasi-dependent independence or quasi-independent dependence. Charles Darwin, in his *Voyage of the Beagle*, recorded: ‘Mr. Daniell has observed, in his meteorological essays, that a cloud sometimes appears fixed on a mountain summit, while the wind continues to blow over it.’⁵¹ A phenomenon also observed by the famous Zen master Tōzan, who explained it thus:

‘The blue mountain is the father of the white cloud. The white cloud is the son of the blue mountain. All day long they depend on each other, without being dependent on each other. The white cloud is always the white cloud. The blue mountain is always the blue mountain.’⁵²

That conundrum was to be marvellously deployed by Dickens in *Oliver Twist* when Fagin inducts a new recruit into his gang of young thieves and pickpockets. There it constitutes a comic code, as it were, for criminal reciprocity; yet it retains the same uneasy equilibrium – for good or ill – dramatized by the Bamboo-Acrobats:

“‘In a little community like ours, my dear ... we have a general number one; that is, you can’t consider yourself as number one, without considering me too as the same, and

all the other young people ... You see, we are so mixed up together, and identified in our interests, that it must be so. For instance, it's your object to take care of number one – meaning yourself."

"Certainly," replied Mr. Bolter. "Yer about right there."

"Well! You can't take care of yourself, number one, without taking care of me, number one."

"Number two, you mean," said Mr. Bolter, who was largely endowed with the quality of selfishness.

"No, I don't!" retorted Fagin. "I'm of the same importance to you, as you are to yourself ... To keep in the easy road, and keep [the gallows] at a distance, is object number one with you."

"Of course, it is," replied Mr. Bolter. "What do yer talk about such things for?"

"Only to show you my meaning clearly," said the Jew, raising his eyebrows. "To be able to do that, you depend upon me. To keep my little business all snug, I depend upon you. The first is your number one, the second my number one. The more you value your number one, the more careful you must be of mine; so we come at last to what I told you at first – that a regard for number one holds us all together, and must do so, unless we would all go to pieces in company."⁵³

* * *

v. *The Self Surrendered*: But that fortress-like independence, even as it is attained, must be simultaneously dismantled and demolished. The strength, paradoxically, is tried in the surrender:

‘An Arahant is one who has removed the cross-bar, filled in the moat, shattered the pillar, unbolted the gates, lowered the flag, laid down the burden and broken the fetters.’⁵⁴

An elaborate allegory of the mind promptly decoded point-counterpoint:

‘And how is he one who has removed the cross-bar? By abandoning ignorance ...

And how is he one who has filled in the moat? By abandoning the cycle of rebirths ...

And how has he shattered the pillar? By abandoning craving ...

And how has he unbolted the gates? By abandoning the five lower fetters ...

And how has he lowered the flag, laid down the burden and broken the fetters? By abandoning the conceit of self ...’

The embattled Dhamma was thus proclaimed as one of unconditional surrender.

* * *

vi. *The Self Questioned*: But what exactly was surrendered, unbolted and demolished here? And where exactly? The very act turned out to be a dismantling of a phantasm or illusion:

‘Potṭhapāda, it’s just as if someone were to build a ladder and carry it to a crossroads, saying he meant to climb a mansion wall. But when people asked: “What mansion do you mean? Where is it exactly? And your scaling-ladder – is it for an east-facing wall, or west-, or north-, or south-facing

wall? Are its turrets tall? Or of low or middling height?” He’d shrug, “I’ve no idea.” “So you’ve never seen this mansion then?” they’d press him. “You don’t know what kind of wall it is you intend to scale?” “Haven’t a clue,” he’d reply. Now, Poṭṭhapāda, can you make head or tail of that? It’s just the same with those ascetics and Brahmans who insist they survive happily after death.’⁵⁵

As if there really were such a ‘thing’ as an immortal and self-contained ‘self’ in the first place!

* * *

PART 3: FROM PURGATORIO TO PARADISO

i. *Illusion Discarded:*

‘Poṭṭhapāda, suppose these ascetics and Brahmans were to challenge me: “You preach the elimination of self, yet you argue – if we’ve understood you aright – that there is no self. So what ‘self’ exactly do you have in mind?” To which I would reply: “Whether it’s this, that or the other self doesn’t concern me, but whatever self you privately conceive and cleave to, that’s the one that needs eradicating – for your own good!”

It’s just like a man building a ladder, and carrying it to the foot of a mansion and propping it up against the foundations. Should someone ask: “Which wall exactly are you thinking of scaling? Does it face east, or west, or north, or south? Is the mansion tall? Or low, or of middling height?” He’d answer: “Why, it’s this very house, of course, at the foot of whose walls I’ve propped my ladder!”’⁵⁶



ii. *Ascending the ladder: Paṭinissagga*, then, implies not only abandoning possessions and eliminating stains (*kilesas*), but eradicating this pervasive but illusory sense of self.⁵⁷ The metaphors are all of lightness and whiteness and brightness and transparency and aerial ascent.

Their essential buoyancy is fuelled by a paradox. ‘To study the Buddha Way is to study oneself’, wrote Dōgen; ‘to study the self is to forget the self.’⁵⁸ Somehow we need to utilize the self without exactly clinging to the self – the secret being to hold on, as one holds on to a ladder, and mounts step by step:

‘Having passed a particular step, one does not hold on to that rung and try to carry it with one. One simply goes up until one reaches the room at the top where one wants to go. Then one leaves the ladder behind without trying to cling to it.’⁵⁹

In the words of a Tibetan proverb: ‘Remember where you’re climbing to, and don’t just stick to the ladder.’ Or as Wittgenstein far more recently put it:

‘My propositions are elucidatory in this way: he who understands me finally recognizes them as senseless, when he has climbed out through them, on them, over them. (He must, so to speak, throw away the ladder, after he has climbed up on it.) He must surmount these propositions; then he sees the world aright.’⁶⁰

Bamboo gymnastics naturally continued to attract attention in this symbolic arena. The Buddha himself, it is said, addressed the following quatrain to an acrobat poised on top of his pole:

‘Let go contingency – Time Past,
And Future Time, and Present Time –
Until, with mind released, through birth –
Decay you’ll never circle more.’⁶¹

Which Ch’ang-sha Ching-ts’en, with Chinese bravura, translated into:

‘You who sit on top of a hundred-foot pole,
Although you have entered the way, it is not yet authentic.
Take a step from the top of the pole
And display your whole body in ten directions.’⁶²

Which Japanese Dōgen, in his turn, condensed into a single plunge: ‘So you’ve climbed to the top of a hundred-foot pole. Now keep on going.’⁶³

* * *

PART 4: PARADISO

i. *Liberation*: However hard and wearisome the ascent, this turns out to be nothing short of a miracle:

‘Even as on a rubbish tip
Beside the highway, a lotus
Blossoming with its pure fragrance
Beguiles and enraptures the mind.’⁶⁴

The images of liberation are few – ultimately merging (as in Dante) into a single source: the radiance of sunlight, moonlight, starlight. All those heedless once but now living heedfully, all those (like Angulimāla) overcoming the evil they have done with good, or devoting themselves (like a young bhikkhu) to the Buddha's teaching,⁶⁵

'shed a light over the world like
that of the moon when freed from clouds.'

All noble ones

'are pure and bright, clear and serene,'⁶⁷

even as the moon follows 'the star's path,'⁶⁸

'The sun is bright by day, the moon
Illumines the night. The warrior
Glow in his armour; the Brahman,
In contemplation. But all day
Long and all night long, resplendent
Without respite, shines the Buddha.'⁶⁹

But unlike the moon's path travelling across 'the star's path', which can be plotted by astrologers, the paths of the enlightened are pathless – *apadam* – beyond detection of the enquiring intellect:

'Their paths are as impossible
To trace as that of birds through space ...'⁷⁰
'What track can there be to trace those
Who are trackless, without craving ...?'⁷¹

Like a flight of swans with whirring wings, they miraculously lift off from their native haunts⁷² to ‘follow the path of the sun’.⁷³

But such airy ascents are paralleled, as already observed, by river-traffic below: of ‘stream-winners’ battling – *uddham-soto* – against the current (of worldliness), and ‘ford-finders’ crossing the turbulent rapids (of life) to gain ‘the other side’.⁷⁴ A supreme instance of such a crossing is related in the Parable of the Raft.⁷⁵

* * *

ii. *The Dhamma* 1: ‘Monks, I shall teach you the Dhamma. I shall show you, monks, how the Dhamma resembles a raft designed for a particular practical purpose, not for retention as an unwieldy keepsake.* Listen and heed well what I have to say.’

‘Suppose, monks, a traveller is confronted by a vast expanse of water whose near shore poses the most fearful danger, but whose far shore seems relatively secure and free from harm. With neither bridge nor ferry in sight, however, he decides on reflection to gather what reeds and sticks, branches and foliage, he may and tie them together into a raft. Afloat on that raft, he contrives to paddle, using both hands and feet, safely to the other side.

* Beaver has extended the description of the raft from the more accurate ‘being for the purpose of crossing over, not for the purpose of grasping.’ (Ed.)

Once across, though, he is caught in a bind. “That raft has really been useful to me,” he reflects, “since it gave me safe passage to this side. Perhaps I should now keep the raft, hoisting it on to my head or shouldering it as I continue on my way?” What do you think, monks, would that have been the right thing to do?’

‘No, Lord.’

‘What then should he do? The raft had certainly been useful, enabling him to make safe passage to the other side. What if he now hauled it up on dry land and beached it there? Or perhaps simply let it sink off-shore and continue as he pleased?’

The moral was loud and clear:

‘In either case, monks – whether by beaching or sinking the raft – the traveller would have done exactly as he should have done.’

Such was the Buddha’s demonstration of how the Dhamma resembled a raft; and ‘whoever grasps the meaning of this parable,’ he concluded, ‘should learn to surrender even the highest teachings, let alone contemptible low ones!’⁷⁶ The Dhamma, in other words, may be essential for salvation; but once salvation is attained, it simultaneously loses its value – without, of course, shedding an iota of its inherent truth.⁷⁷ The final act of *paṭinissagga* relinquishes not only ‘I’ and ‘mine’ back to nature – to Dhamma – but abandons, in the end, even unconditioned truth (as a concept) itself.

* * *

iii. *The Dhamma* 2: But there are other, less isolated crossings. Elsewhere the Buddha appears as a Magadhan herdsman on the banks of the Ganges, expert in driving his cattle across a ford so that the whole herd of bulls, cows, heifers, young oxen and calves cross safely to the far side: that is, all of mankind, whatever their spiritual attainments, who are ‘mature in the Dhamma’ and have placed their faith in him.⁷⁸

Even here miracles may irrupt, as in the Ganges crossing touched on in the last chapter, when the river was so brimful that even a crow could drink out of it:

‘People, eager to cross from shore to shore, were bustling around for boats. Or log rafts. Or starting to lash reed-floats together. Then, as swiftly as a strong man can flex his extended arm or again unflex it, the Blessed One vanished from the near bank of the Ganges and reappeared with his Sangha of bhikkhus on the far shore.

Looking back at the crowd still hunting for boats or building rafts, the Buddha exclaimed:

“While some have crossed the flooded stream
By *samādhi*’s suspension bridge,
Others still tinker with their rafts.
The wise already have moved on.”⁷⁹

As elsewhere in the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta*, miracle is turned to parable, or parable reinterpreted as miracle. But a final truth emerges: not only were rafts to be ultimately abandoned, but for the Buddha’s closest disciples – by his personal intervention – no home-made raft had ever been necessary in the first place.

Miraculous winged progress was possible without any clumsily patched and improvised, haphazard, Do-It-Yourself contrivance.

A DIALOGUE ON SELFLESSNESS

After examining so many truncated texts, it is time to present a complete, (substantially) unabridged sutta. The choice was huge, but I wanted one which supplied a reasonably full account of the Buddha's teaching, in as dramatic a setting as possible, restoring at least some incidents, images or vignettes, quoted earlier, to their original setting.

My choice fell on the *Sāmaññaphala Sutta* (*Dīgha Nikāya* 2), the source of numerous passages already discussed. The teaching, too, covers a wide range from *sammā kammanta* (right conduct) and *sammā sati* (right attentiveness) to the four *jhānas* (absorptions) and eventual full realization of the Four Noble Truths. But it was the dramatic irony, the uncanny chiaroscuro, pervading this confrontation between the young king of Magadha and the Buddha, that most attracted me. The whole scene – with lamps flickering, torches

flaring – trembles with an inner tension. As if in the moon's reflected sheen, the Buddha was well aware that King Ajātasattu was well aware that the Buddha was well aware what had led him to pay this one and only surprise visit: it being no state secret that he had had his kindly old father, King Seniya Bimbisāra, assassinated; or rather, thrown into prison, after his voluntary abdication, and wantonly starved to death.¹

The late King, his brother-in-law King Pasenadi of Kosala and the Buddha all belonged to the same generation, born some time in the c. 560s BCE.² So King Bimbisāra would have been at least seventy when he died in c. 491; the Buddha, at the time of this interview, well over seventy. An elderly man, that is, he was courteously receiving a regicide and usurper with his father's blood still fresh on his hands. Not only that, but his venerable father had been a particularly devout supporter of the Sangha, having long ago granted the Buddha a bamboo-grove near the palace for his retreats. It was there, in Rājagaha, that the Buddha passed most of the last twenty years of his life. From there, he set off on his final journey. By the time of his death, some eighteen large Buddhist monasteries, it is said, flourished in Rājagaha.

Buddhism must have permeated the whole court; this very 'summit' took place in a mango-grove belonging to the royal physician.³ The wary parricide was clearly scared out of his wits. For months he had been visiting and quizzing every celebrated sophist in the kingdom to put off this crucial encounter with his

father's favourite. Even now, as he marched off into the night with his bizarre retinue of five hundred wives on the backs of five hundred elephants, flanked by torch-bearers, this Machiavellian suspected a trap. The silvery moonlight – the very silence – unnerved him. Oddly, it seems that the young Ajātasattu Vedehiputta had never been introduced by his father to the Buddha. Or perhaps, in his agitation, he just failed to recognize him at night in that sea of saffron. As he stood, self-consciously ill at ease, in the lamplight to one side of the seated Buddha, his restless thoughts promptly dodged to his own ever-restless son, the Crown Prince Udāyabhadda.

Further ironies resound here. The royal house of Magadha – precursor of the Mauryan Empire – for all its eventual glory was to be as cursed from one generation to the next as the house of Atreus. Just as Ajātasattu had murdered his father, so Prince Udāyabhadda (some thirty-two years later) was to murder his father, only to be assassinated in his turn by his son. The Buddha must have foreseen this treacherous succession even as he graciously received the present usurper. The foreknowledge clinched his solemn verdict: 'The King is done for; his fate is sealed!' There was no refuge for parricides. Their *kamma* was ineluctable. Such outrages entailed instantaneous consequences in the world to come.

No wonder, then, that the King, for all his retinue, was terrified. Racked by guilt, worn out by insomnia, plagued by goose-flesh, he could hardly afford, at this

solemn hour, to fall back on displays of petulance or insolence.⁴ Yet nothing was openly hinted on either side throughout the initial exchange and long midnight oration, until Ajātasattu at last blurted out:

‘Transgression overcame me, Lord – foolish, erring and wicked as I was. For the sake of the throne I deprived my father – that good man and just king – of his life.’⁵

As soon as this confession was made and publicly condoned, however, he disappeared into the night with some flimsy excuse (‘I am busy and have much to do’), only too obviously relieved to be let off the hook.

That is how royalty and mendicants, it seems, interacted: in a power play constrained within a code of mutual respect. For the sutta is also a study of political control in a spiritual context as well as of spiritual control in a political context. Whatever Ajātasattu actually felt, for example, about the amoral counsel offered by Pūraṇa Kassapa (which clearly suited his Machiavellian designs), he was so overawed by these wanderers and so overburdened by his conscience that he could only dismiss Pūraṇa’s exposition, in retrospect, with a colloquial quip: ‘just as if he’d been asked about a mango-tree and described a breadfruit, or, being asked about a breadfruit-tree, described a mango’. Yet with each of his six interlocutors – though suspicious of being fooled – he had repressed his usual propensity to sneer and snub. For at heart he knew all too well that he was only fooling himself by thus obstinately evading the decisive rendez-vous.

The Buddha, in his way, was equally devious, never alluding to his benefactor's imprisonment (in tantalizing sight of the palace) or excruciating death. What was suppressed, however, slyly resurfaced in the provocative fictions first put into a domestic slave's (or labourer's) mouth, then again into a tax-paying farmer's (*vessa's*) mouth:

'Here's King Ajātasattu of Magadha who is a man; and I, too, am a man. The King is addicted to all five sense-pleasures, just like a god, while I'm a mere ...'

Voicing such egalitarian sentiments was the Buddha's initial move to undermine not only the hierarchical apex of the monarchy, which *de facto* perpetuated the caste system, but also the snobbish and patronizing views of that system which never deigned even to mention (as beneath courtly and military contempt) such essential occupations as that of a domestic, or a farmer, or an estate-steward.⁶ Those opening parables, then, concealed a hidden agenda. As in all his encounters – with merchants, or Brahman students, or village headmen – the Buddha was always scrupulously, if surreptitiously, engaged as protagonist in testing and amplifying the dialectic frame. His teaching, though often repetitive, was always custom-tailored to his antagonist.

The title has been translated as 'The Fruits of the Homeless Life'.⁷ But, characteristically, it is not primarily delivered for the *bhikkhus'* benefit at all (though a huge crowd of 1,250 monks was present), but that of this proud, preoccupied monarch who not

only claimed to be too busy to linger in the moonlight, but disdained even inviting the Buddha's Sangha, as custom required, to share a meal at some future date with him in the palace grounds. Far from contrite, he went immediately to war, overrunning Vesālī, north-east of the Ganges, capital of the Vajjian Confederacy.⁸ Meanwhile, his cousin, Prince Viḍūḍabha, after his own successful coup (deserting his father, King Pasenadi of Kosala, on Sakyan territory), overran the Sakyās and Koliyās. Then, predictably, the two cousins collapsed, like mirror-images, on each other.

* * *

THE SĀMAÑÑAPHALA SUTTA:⁹

Thus have I heard. Once, at the end of the rainy season, the Lord was staying at Rājagaha, in a mango-grove belonging to Jīvaka, the adopted son of Prince Abhaya, with a large assembly of some twelve hundred and fifty monks. On the fast-day called Komudi (after the white water-lily which blooms then), King Ajātasattu Vedehiputta of Magadha climbed up on to the roof of his palace to recline in the light of the full moon, surrounded by his ministers.¹⁰ 'How lovely this moonlit night is!' he solemnly exclaimed. 'How remarkable to behold the white lilies blooming by the light of the moon! How auspicious such a moonlit night must be, my friends! Could we not attend on some ascetic or Brahman to help calm our troubled mind?'

‘What about Pūraṇa Kassapa, Sire?’ a minister proposed. ‘He teaches his own disciples, surrounded by supporters, and is universally acclaimed as the founder of a philosophical school. Virtuous and venerable, moreover, he has spent long years as an ascetic. Let Your Majesty visit this Pūraṇa Kassapa. If anyone, he should be able to calm Your Majesty’s mind.’ But King Ajātasattu did not deign to reply.

Another minister spoke, suggesting Makkhali Gosāla; another, suggesting Ajita Kesakambali; another, suggesting Pakudha Kaccāyana; another, suggesting Saṅjaya Belaṭṭhaputta; another, suggesting Nigaṇṭha Nāṭaputta – all popular teachers with widespread reputations as founders of philosophical schools. But King Ajātasattu remained sunk in silence.

Then, turning to Jīvaka seated at his side, he asked: ‘My friend, why do you alone hold back?’ ‘Sire’, Jīvaka replied, ‘the Exalted One, the Arahant, the Fully Self-Enlightened One is at this moment staying in my mango-grove with a large company of some twelve hundred and fifty bhikkhus. The fame of the Blessed Gotama has spread far and wide as one who has penetrated the Dhamma by his own determined insight; is endowed with supreme wisdom; practises perfect morality; speaks only what is beneficial; knows the animate and inanimate and conditioned worlds; trains all who deserve to be trained; is teacher of *devas* and men as a unique, incomparable Buddha. Let Your Majesty attend on the Lord Buddha. He will surely pacify Your Majesty’s mind.’

‘If that be so, Jīvaka, have the riding-elephants made ready.’

‘Very good, Sire’, Jīvaka nodded, rapidly descending from the upper terrace to order five hundred cow-elephants caparisoned as well as the imperial tusker; later reporting back: ‘The riding-elephants are waiting, Sire. You may proceed at your leisure.’

Having placed his five hundred wives, each on her own cow-elephant, King Ajātasattu rode the state elephant, in a royal progress, escorted by torch-bearers from Rājagaha to Jīvaka’s mango-grove.

On approaching the grove, however, the King became so fraught and jittery that his hair stood up on end. ‘Friend Jīvaka,’ he murmured in consternation, ‘you’re not deceiving me, I trust? You’re not playing me some trick? You’re not delivering me into the hands of an enemy? How is it that from these twelve hundred and fifty bhikkhus not a sneeze, not a cough, not a whisper can be heard?’

‘Trust me, Sire! There’s no need for alarm. I wouldn’t dream of deceiving you, nor of tricking you, nor of delivering you into the hands of an enemy. Just proceed, Sire, proceed! Look, lights are burning in the round pavilion!’

King Ajātasattu, having ridden his elephant as far as the ground permitted, dismounted, continuing on foot to the door of the round pavilion. ‘But where is the Lord, Jīvaka?’ He suddenly stopped. ‘That, Sire, is the Lord,’ Jīvaka indicated. ‘The One sitting with his back to the middle pillar, facing east, with his order of bhikkhus before him.’

Thereupon the King went up to the Lord and standing to one side, observed how the assembled bhikkhus were gathered calm and silent as a clear lake. 'If only my son, Prince Udāyabhadda,' he exclaimed, 'were possessed of such calm as this order of monks!'

'So your thoughts turn to the one you love, Your Majesty', broke in the Blessed One.

'True, Venerable Sir, I love the young prince dearly. If only he were possessed of such calm as this order of monks!' Having made obeisance to the Lord and saluted the order of monks with joined palms raised, King Ajātasattu sat down to one side, saying: 'I have a question for you, Venerable Sir, if Your Honour would deign to answer me.'

'Please, proceed. Let Your Majesty ask whatever he wishes.'

'Venerable Sir, there are men of various callings. And what are they? They are mahouts, cavalrymen, charioteers, archers, standard-bearers, adjutants, commandos and seven other grades of military personnel, secretaries, cooks, barbers, bath-attendants, confectioners, garland-makers, dhobi-men, weavers, basket-makers, potters, clerks and accountants, etc. etc. Now what can be the point of renunciation and joining a sect like yours? Ordinary folk, by mastering ordinary crafts, get something out of them. They can make themselves comfortable in the world and maintain their families and friends in comfort too. Let alone wanderers and Brahmans whose upkeep ensures admission into the supramundane, heavenly

realms. Can you, Venerable Sir, indicate any such clear advantage in this world for the life of a recluse?’

‘Your Majesty, do you recall ever putting such a question to ascetics and Brahmins?’

‘Yes, Sir. I do.’

‘If it’s of no inconvenience to Your Majesty, could you briefly sketch their replies?’

‘For the likes of you, Sir, no trouble at all.’

‘In that case speak, Your Majesty.’

‘One time, Sir, I visited Pūraṇa Kassapa, and – after exchanging greetings and sitting to one side – asked him to indicate one clear advantage in this world for the life of a recluse.¹¹ He replied, in effect, that whoever mutilated others (or was responsible for their mutilation), or burned others (or was responsible for their death by burning), or tormented others (or was responsible for their torment), or oppressed, threatened, lied, killed, stole, plundered, committed adultery or highway robbery, could not be considered a criminal. Even should he mince everyone on this earth with a circular saw into steak tartare, no evil would result. Consider the opposing shores of the Ganges: neither on the south bank would such a massacre, such mayhem, accumulate evil, nor on the north bank would alms-giving, temple offerings, abstinence, strict adherence to truthfulness and self-control accumulate merit. That, Sir, was how Pūraṇa Kassapa explained “non-causative action” (*akiriya*) to me. It was just as if someone, asked about a mango-tree, had described a breadfruit; or, asked about a breadfruit-tree, had

described a mango. But, I thought, why malign any Brahman or ascetic living in my kingdom? So, despite feeling irked, I neither applauded nor rebutted the exposition but, without a sign of pleasure or displeasure, simply rose and departed.

Another time, I visited Makkhali Gosāla and asked him the same question.¹² He replied, in effect, that there was no root cause for either defilement or purification, there being no such lever as human initiative. All animate objects were passive, powerless, pre-determined on a complex calculus of 1,406,600 types of birth, within 8,400,000 time cycles, each with sixty-two intermediary aeons, constituting 4,900 different modes of living and 4,900 kinds of wandering ascetics ... All happiness and misery, therefore, was predestined along one of sixty-two paths, by six classes of humankind, seven classes of rebirth (as conscious beings), eight stages of human progress and two thousand sentient existences. Exactly as a ball of string, when thrown, will fly only as far as the length of string unravels, so both fools and the wise cycle from one existence to another until they make an end of suffering. That, Sir, was how Makkhali Gosāla explained “purification by the round of suffering” (*saṃsāra suddhi*) to me. Again, recalling the mango- and breadfruit-trees, I neither applauded nor rebutted his exposition but, without a sign of pleasure or displeasure, simply rose and departed.

On a third occasion, I visited Ajita Kesakambali and yet again put my question.¹³ He argued, in effect, that there was no such thing (on either the physical

or mental plane) as spontaneous conception in this world, since we are composed of nothing but the four great elements: the earthy part, on death, reverting to earth, the watery part to water, the fiery part to fire, the airy part to air and our faculties melting into space. The pallbearers' footfall can be heard as far as the cemetery. All alms-giving ends in ashes; the bare bones lie greying like pigeons. Since all is matter, and matter decomposes, nothing survives. Both fools and the wise are destroyed and utterly perish. That, Sir, was how Ajita Kesakambalī explained the doctrine of materialism (or annihilation) to me; and again, without either applauding or rebutting his exposition, I simply rose and left without a word.

On the fourth occasion, I visited Pakudha Kaccāyana and yet again put my question. He answered, in effect, that there were seven things in all unshaken as mountain-tops and firm as columns. They were the earth-body, the water-body, the fire-body and the air-body, together with pleasure and pain and an *élan vital* (*jīva*, or life-principle). It follows that there can be neither killer nor killed, neither speaker nor listener, neither student nor teacher since chopping off a head with a sword is not so much depriving someone of life as inserting a blade into the intercalary space between these seven bodies. Again, I neither applauded nor rebutted his exposition, but simply rose and left without a word.

On the fifth occasion, I visited Nigaṇṭha Nāṭaputta and yet again put my question.¹⁴ He answered, in effect,

that a Nigaṇṭha was restrained by a fourfold restraint: abstention from water; abstention from sin; abstention from sex; and abstention from all restraint. Again, neither applauding nor rebutting his exposition, I simply rose and left without a word.

Lastly, I visited Sañjaya Belaṭṭhiputta and yet again put my question. He answered, in effect, by catechizing an extended variant of the ten dilemmas, or “undeclared points” (*avyākatāni*).¹⁵ For example: Is there another world? Or isn’t there another world? Or both? Or neither? Is there life after death? Or isn’t there life after death? Or both? Or neither? Do good or bad deeds (*kamma*) entail consequences after death? Or no consequences? Or both? Or neither? That, Sir, was how Sañjaya Belaṭṭhiputta shilly-shallied and prevaricated, saying: “If I thought so, I would say so. But I don’t think so and don’t say so. Nor do I say it’s otherwise. Since I don’t say it’s not so. And I don’t say it’s not not so.” Well, of all these ascetics and Brahmans, I thought Sañjaya Belaṭṭhiputta was the most muddle-headed and stupid. Without either applauding or scorning his exposition, therefore, I simply rose and left without a word.

So now, Venerable Sir, I put it to you. There are men of various callings who make themselves comfortable in the world while maintaining their families and friends. What clear advantages, then, do you claim for those joining your sect? Can you point to a palpable reward here and now for the life of a recluse?

‘Your Majesty, I can. But first I must put to you a few questions in return. Answer, Sire, as you see fit.

What do you think? Imagine you had a domestic in your household who each morning got up earlier than you and each evening retired later than you – always affable, always quick-witted, always on his toes. “How strange,” he might think, “how extraordinary are the fruits of merit! Here’s King Ajātasattu of Magadha who is a man; and I too am a man. The King is addicted to all five sense-pleasures, just like a god, while I’m a mere domestic, always on the alert, always on the go. Perhaps I too could have been a King like him. Suppose I earned myself some merit. Suppose I shaved off my hair and beard, donned saffron robes and renounced hearth and home for the homeless life.” So deserting his family and abandoning his property, he shaved hair and beard, donned saffron robes and went forth into homelessness.

As a recluse – further imagine – he persistently restrained his body, speech and thought, delighting in solitude, content with the minimum of food and clothing. Then one day it’s announced: “Your Majesty, do you recall that domestic who attended on you – the one who shaved off his hair and went forth into homelessness? He now lives the holy life, perfecting his mindfulness and morality.” What would your response be? “Tell him to return here at once and start waiting on me as before!”?’

‘Of course not, Venerable Sir. We should pay him due respect, warmly welcome him, even bid him receive robes, food, shelter and medicine, as well as taking proper measures for his protection.’

‘If that’s so, Sire, it surely proves one clear advantage of the homeless life?’

‘Certainly, a decided advantage, Sir.’

‘Then call this the first such fruit of the homeless life, Sire.’

‘But can’t you indicate a more explicit, more profitable reward, Sir?’

‘Your Majesty, I can. But first I must put a few questions to you in return. Answer, Sire, as you see fit. What do you think? Imagine you had a farmer in your service, cultivating the land and paying taxes on his estate. “How strange,” he might say to himself. “How extraordinary are the fruits of merit! Here’s King Ajātasattu of Magadha who is a man; and I too am a man. The King is addicted to all five sense-pleasures, just like a god, while I’m a mere steward and tax-payer on his estate. Perhaps I too could have been a King like him. Suppose I earned myself some merit. Suppose I shaved off my hair and beard, donned saffron robes and renounced hearth and home for the homeless life.” If news of that farmer’s decision reached you, what would your response be? “Tell him to return here at once and start paying his tithes as before!”?’

‘No, Venerable Sir. We should, of course, pay him due respect, warmly welcome him, even bid him receive robes, food, shelter and medicine, as well as taking ‘That being so, Sire, it surely proves another clear advantage of the homeless life?’

‘Certainly, Sir.’

‘Then call this the second such fruit of the homeless life, Sire.’

‘But can’t you show me some clear and outright reward, Sir, far in excess of these?’

‘Your Majesty, I can. But attend closely, I pray, to what I have to expound.’

‘Very well, Venerable Sir,’ the King assented. And the Blessed One continued: ‘Your Majesty, there sometimes arises in this world a Tathāgata, an Arahant, a Fully Self-Enlightened One who is endowed with supreme wisdom, practises perfect morality, speaks only what is beneficial, knows all three (animate, inanimate and conditioned) worlds, trains all who deserve to be trained, is teacher of gods and men as a unique, incomparable Buddha. Having penetrated ultimate truth (with its *devas*, *Māras*, *Brahmās*, *samaṇas*, princes and men) by his own superlative effort, he proclaims the Dhamma which is lovely in its beginning, lovely in its middle, lovely in its ending, in both spirit and letter.¹⁶

A householder, or his son, hears the Dhamma. On hearing the Dhamma, he gains confidence in the Tathāgata. Once confident, he reflects: “This household life is confined and dusty; the homeless life is free as air. It is hard for a layman to pursue the Noble Practice in all its purity and polish like a conch-shell. Suppose I shaved off my hair and beard, donned saffron robes and renounced hearth and home for the homeless life.” So deserting his family circle and abandoning his property, he shaves hair and beard, dons saffron robes and goes forth into homelessness.

As a recluse, he persistently restrains his body, speech and thought, skilfully perfecting his mindfulness and morality. And how, Sire, is a monk perfected in his morality?¹⁷ By never deliberately exterminating any form of life; by setting aside stick and sword; by always trembling with solicitude for all things living ...; by never taking what is not specifically given ...; by never succumbing to unchastity ...; by refraining from all base arts and mistaken means of livelihood ...; by uprooting all inclination towards lying ... or slander ... or harsh ... or frivolous talk. That is how a monk is perfected in morality.

Like an anointed king, Sire, who has subdued his enemies, this bhikkhu no longer apprehends harm from any quarter; and the happiness he enjoys is wholly blameless, closely guarding the doors of his sixfold faculties. When he sees something visible with his eye, for example, he never clutches at the impression (be it male or female), or its characteristic way of moving or behaving, in case greed or dissatisfaction flares up and overwhelms him. That's how he protects his eye-faculty from mental depravity. In the same way, on hearing a sound with the ear ... or smelling an odour with the nose ... or tasting a flavour with the tongue ... or contacting objects with the body ... or thinking thoughts with the mind, he is on constant watch to discipline any involuntary reflex. That, Your Majesty, is how a monk guards the doors of his sixfold faculties.

But how, Sire, does a bhikkhu train himself in mindfulness and clear awareness? By never starting

backwards or forwards without awareness; never glancing ahead or sideways without awareness; never bending or stretching his limbs without awareness; never wearing his outer and inner robes, or bearing his alms-bowl, without awareness; never eating, drinking, chewing or swallowing without awareness; never urinating or defecating without awareness; never walking, standing, sitting, falling asleep or waking without awareness; never speaking or observing silence without awareness. That, Your Majesty, is how a monk is endowed with mindfulness and clear awareness.

And how, Sire, does a bhikkhu learn contentment? By being satisfied with robes to protect his body and just enough alms-food to satisfy his belly so that, wherever he goes, he carries all his requisites with him, like a bird flying this way and that, burdened only by its wings. That, Your Majesty, is how a monk learns contentment.

Then endowed with this Noble Morality, Noble Self-Control, Noble Mindfulness and Clear Awareness – as well as Noble Contentment – the bhikkhu chooses a lonely spot at the root of a forest tree, or on a hillside, or in a gorge, or in a mountain-cave, or in a cemetery, or in a jungle-thicket, or on a heap of straw. There – after eating on return from his alms-round – he sits cross-legged, immobile and upright, to establish mindfulness in meditation.

Thus abandoning worldly desires, he dwells with a mind free from covetousness; abandoning hatred and ill-will, he develops compassion for all things living; abandoning sloth, he clarifies and cleans his

mind of torpor; abandoning worry and restlessness, he cultivates calmness and inner peace; abandoning doubt, he never wavers in his faith.

Your Majesty, suppose a man borrowed a loan, whose business prospering enabled him to discharge his debts and support his wife with the accumulated profit. He might well say to himself: "I used to speculate on borrowed capital. Now my business is flourishing. I've paid off all my old debts with profit to spare – I'm delighted to say – to provide for my wife and children."

Or suppose a man was so stricken with fever that he lay too weak even to eat or stir. On recovering his health, he might well say to himself: "I used to be racked with pain, so sick that I could hardly eat, let alone move. Now my appetite's come back, the fever's gone – I'm delighted to say – and I've regained all my former strength."

Or suppose a man were imprisoned only to be later freed without loss of goods. He might well say to himself: "I used to be locked up in prison. Now at last I've been released. I'm safe and sound – I'm delighted to say – with all my property intact."

Or suppose a man were a slave, wholly dependent on his master and restricted in movement. Once emancipated, he might well say to himself: "I used to be a slave, subject to another's whim, unable to move about as I pleased. Now that I've been freed – I'm delighted to say – I'm my own man again, able to go when and where I please."

Or suppose a merchant had led a caravan, laden with goods and treasure, across the desert where famine

and untold dangers threatened. On approaching the outskirts of a village, he might well say to himself: “Half-starved, I took a caravan across the desert. Now that long and dangerous trek is done. I’m back on my home ground safe and sound – I’m delighted to say – with no material loss incurred.”

As long as a monk, Sire, has not shed the hindrances of greed, aversion, sloth, worry and doubt, he feels like a debtor, a patient, a prisoner, a slave, or a merchant on a desert crossing. As soon as he has clearly discarded the five hindrances (*nīvaraṇas*), he feels like a discharged debtor, a recovered patient, a released prisoner, an emancipated slave, or a merchant on homecoming, overcome by gladness. From gladness arises rapture (*pīti*); from rapture, tranquillity (*passaddhi*); from tranquillity, joy (*sukha*); from joy, a concentrated mind (*samādhī*).

Thus, detached from sensual desires and all unwholesome factors, the bhikkhu enters and rests in the first *jhāna* (or tranced “absorption”), which is typified by conceptualization (*vitakka*) and discursive thinking (*vicāra*), accompanied by joy and rapture, until with this joy born of detachment he so soaks, drenches, permeates and suffuses his whole body that not the tiniest spot remains untouched.

Your Majesty, it’s just as when a bath-attendant, or his assistant, strews bath-powder into a brass bowl, gradually sprinkling it with water and kneading the moist mass until it sets. The water permeating that cake of soap, while suffusing it with unguents, remains

unable to seep out. That, Sire, is the third clear and visible fruit of the homeless life, far exceeding the former two.

As conceptual and discursive thinking subsides, with enhanced concentration and inner calm the bhikkhu enters and rests in the second *jhāna*, suffusing the remotest parts of his body with rapture and joy.

Your Majesty, it's just as when a deep lake, without inlets from either north or south or east or west, is replenished by water from a spring below. Despite only light and irregular rains, cool water welling up from that spring will soak, drench and permeate the whole until not a patch of the lake is not suffused. That, Sire, is the fourth sure and palpable fruit of the homeless life, far exceeding the former three.

As rapture fades, sensing in himself that joy of which the Noble Ones say, "Happy is he who dwells with composure in mindfulness," the bhikkhu enters and rests in the third *jhāna*, suffusing the remotest parts of his body with bliss pure and unalloyed.

Your Majesty, it's just as when blue or red or white lotuses grow submerged in a pond. They thrive under water – soaked, drenched and permeated from root to tip in cool water – until no part of any plant is not suffused. That, Sire, is the fifth sure and palpable fruit of the homeless life, far exceeding the former four.

Transcending gladness and sadness, the bhikkhu enters and rests in the fourth *jhāna*, composed to pure mindfulness beyond pleasure, beyond pain, suffusing the remotest parts of his body with intense lucidity.

Your Majesty, it's just as when a man sits wrapped from head to toe in a white sheet that leaves not a patch of flesh exposed. That, Sire, is the sixth sure and palpable fruit of the homeless life, far in excess of the former five.

With his mind concentrated, cleansed and unblemished, pliable but firm and unperturbed, the bhikkhu turns to Insight-Knowledge (*vipassanā ñāṇā*). He comprehends, that is to say, how this body of his is material, made of the four great elements, born of a union between his mother and father, fed on rice and gruel, impermanent, liable to disintegrate, requiring constant care and tender massaging; and how this is his consciousness which is attached to it and dependent on it.

Your Majesty, it's just as when a jeweller, placing a beryl on his outstretched palm, lifts it up to his eyes. Carefully examining it, he reflects: "Yes, it's genuine, all right. Well-cut. Strung on a multicoloured thread, yet flawless in every respect: brilliant, transparent, eight-faceted, crystal-clear." That, Sire, is the seventh sure and palpable fruit of the homeless life, far in excess of the former six.

With his mind thus concentrated and firm, the bhikkhu now focuses on the creation of a mentally-generated body: that is, out of his corporeal form he produces a mind-made entity complete with all its limbs, organs and faculties. Just as when drawing a stalk of grass from its sheath, or a sword from its scabbard, or a snake from its slough, Your Majesty, someone were to

grasp the essential difference between husk and core. That, Sire, is the eighth sure and palpable fruit of the homeless life, far in excess of the former seven.

With his mind concentrated, cleansed and firm, the bhikkhu next turns to supernatural psychic power, such as being one, he becomes many; being many, he becomes one; he makes himself visible and again invisible; unhindered, he passes through fences, ramparts, mountains, as if through thin air; he plunges in and out of the earth as if plunging through water; he walks on water as if pacing on land; cross-legged, he travels through space like a winged bird, even touching and stroking the sun and moon (mighty though they are) with his hand; and with his body reaches as far as the Brahma world.

Your Majesty, it's just as if a skilled potter, or his apprentice, were to form out of kneaded clay whatever shape of pot he desired. Or as if a skilled ivory-cutter, or his apprentice, were to produce from a smooth-polished elephant tusk whatever species of carving he might desire. Or as if a skilled goldsmith, or his apprentice, were to mould out of carefully wrought gold whatever ornament he might desire. That, Sire, is the ninth sure and palpable fruit of the homeless life, far in excess of the former eight.

With his mind concentrated, cleansed and firm, the bhikkhu next turns to the divine power of clairaudience until he can hear the sounds of both *devas* and men, whether nearby or far off.

Your Majesty, it's just as if a traveller on a highway were to catch the boom of a kettledrum, or the throb of a tabor, or the wail of a conch-shell, or the rat-a-tat of a snare drum, or the clashing of cymbals. That, Sire, is the tenth sure and palpable fruit of the homeless life, far in excess of the former nine.

With his mind concentrated, cleansed and firm, the bhikkhu next turns to the discrimination and penetration of other minds. He distinguishes all mental states and their opposites. He recognizes the lustful mind to be filled with lust and the dispassionate mind devoid of passion; the angry mind to be filled with hate and the compassionate mind devoid of hatred; the bewildered mind to be deluded and the undeluded mind devoid of distraction; the narrow mind to be constricted, the broad mind expanded, and the unsurpassed mind exalted. He knows the superior from the inferior, the concentrated from the unconcentrated, the liberated from the fettered mind.

Your Majesty, it's just as when a girl or boy, in a fit of vanity, puts on make-up. They peer closely into a mirror, or bowl of clear water, to examine their face. "There's a pimple," they cry on spotting some flaw in the skin, or "Not a blackhead today!" if there's none. That, Sire, is the eleventh sure and palpable fruit of the homeless life, far in excess of the former ten.

With his mind concentrated, cleansed and firm, the bhikkhu next turns to the recollection of past lives. He recalls one birth, or two, or three, or four, or five, or ten, or twenty, or thirty, or forty, or fifty, or a hundred,

or a thousand, or a hundred thousand births, in several cycles of contraction and expansion, thinking to himself: “At that time my name was such-and-such, my clan was such-and-such, my caste was such-and-such; I ate such-and-such food; I enjoyed such-and-such pleasures; I suffered such-and-such pains. My lifespan was such-and-such. Having died in one existence, I was born again in another ... and another ... and another ...”

Your Majesty, it's just as when someone travelling from village to village to village circles back to where he started. Once home, he might think to himself: “I left my own village for the neighbouring village where I stood or sat or spoke (or didn't speak), and so on to the next village where I stood or sat or spoke (or didn't speak), and so to the next ... and the next (with similar consequences) ... and here I'm back in my own village ...” That's how a monk recalls past births; and that, Sire, is the twelfth sure and palpable fruit of the homeless life, far in excess of the former eleven.

With his mind concentrated, cleansed and firm, the bhikkhu next turns to the divine power of clairvoyance until he can see life in the process of arising and passing away: both noble and ignoble beings; the well-favoured and the ugly; both those on a happy and unhappy trajectory, thinking to himself: “Friends! Whoever has inflicted physical, verbal or mental abuse, maligned the Noble Ones, and holding mistaken views made unavoidable wrong choices, will be reborn (on corporal dissolution) in a lower world, in a miserable condition, in continuous torment – in short, in hell. But whoever

was pledged to physical, verbal and mental well-being, honoured the Noble Ones, and holding correct views made inevitable right choices, on death will be reborn on a higher plane, in a happier condition, in the heavenly world of the *devas*.”

Your Majesty, it's just as if a lookout on the roof of a pinnacled mansion, with a 360-degree panorama at a crossroads, could spot everyone entering and leaving, strolling in the streets, or squatting near the intersection. That's how a clairvoyant sees beings arise and pass; and that, Sire, is the thirteenth sure and palpable fruit of the homeless life, far in excess of the former twelve.

With his mind concentrated, cleansed and firm, the bhikkhu last turns to the total extinction of all corruptions (*āsavas*), until he understands suffering as it really is, the origin of suffering as it really is, the cessation of suffering as it really is, and the path leading to that cessation as it really is; also knowing the corruptions for what they really are, their origin, their cessation, and the path leading to that cessation. Thus delivered from the endless round of ignorant hankering after sensual pleasure, he recognizes: “This is liberation! Rebirth is routed! The holy life accomplished!”

Your Majesty, it is just as when a keen-sighted traveller in the mountains gazes from the bank of an upland lake into water so crystal-clear that he can see the fish darting about in shoals and shells and bars of gravel and pebbles and molluscs and bits of broken

pottery scattered across the floor. That, Sire, is the fourteenth sure and palpable fruit of the homeless life, far in excess of the former thirteen. For a *samaṇa* can attain no other blessing, perceptible here and now, more perfect than this.'

At which King Ajātasattu exclaimed: 'Wonderful, Sir! Quite wonderful! It's like seeing someone pick up what's been knocked upside down, or disclose what had lain hidden, or direct travellers who have lost their way, or hold up an oil-lamp in the dark for those with eyes to see. Even so has the Blessed One revealed the Dhamma to me in various ways. Venerable Sir, I take refuge in the Buddha, I take refuge in the Dhamma, I take refuge in the Sangha. May the Lord from this day forth accept me as a lay follower to the end of my days. Transgression overcame me, Lord – foolish, erring and wicked as I was. For the sake of the throne, I deprived my father – that good man and just king – of his life. May the Blessed One accept this confession of my guilt so that I may better contain myself in the future.'

'Indeed, Sire, transgression overcame you when you deprived your father – that good man and just king – of his life. But now that you've acknowledged the deed and admitted your guilt, we shall accept your confession. For whoever acknowledges his sins, Your Majesty, promising to abstain from evil and make amends in future, will flourish in the Noble Practice.'

To which King Ajātasattu replied: 'Let me take my leave, Venerable Sir. I am busy and have much to do.'

'Feel free to go, Your Majesty, whenever you please.'

Cheered at his compliance, the King rose from his seat, saluted the Blessed One and departed.

As soon as he was gone, the Lord said: 'The King is done for! Monks, his fate is sealed! If only he had not put his father to death, then, as he sat here just now, the unpolluted, clear Dhamma-eye might have opened in him.'

Thus the Lord spoke and the monks rejoiced, delighting in his words.

A DIALOGUE ON THE AFTERLIFE

Monks, too, could deploy parables. Elders such as Khemaka and Sāriputta, too, could exercise a ready wit.¹ They, too, could draw on vivid anecdotes, local reportage, gossip and folklore, to pile parable on provoking parable. The Buddha's style, even at its most dramatic, was clearly not unique, as the *Pāyāsi Sutta* (*Dīgha Nikāya* 23) confirms. Admittedly, its protagonist, known as Young Kassapa, was described as 'the best preacher in the Sangha'.² But his protean imagination and formidable debating skills must have been stretched to the limit for him to stand his ground against such sly obduracy.

For Prince Pāyāsi, it turns out, was a sceptical materialist (common enough today), harbouring the same set of dismissive dogmas as Ajita Kesakambali whom King Ajātasattuhad consulted on his rounds.³ No intellectual, he doggedly reiterated his handful of

tenets, word for word, against the monk's onslaught: viz. there are no other worlds than ours; no *devas*; no mind-made *dhammas*; no *kamma* (effectual deeds), whether for good or ill. No wonder the versatile monk tried neither analytic, nor casuistic, nor doctrinaire approaches on this numskull, but simply blinded his dim wits with a plethora of (what today we might call) visual aids. Only a mixture of fact and fiction, he must have surmised, could touch the viceregal imagination.

For us, the interest lies in seeing how a first-generation Buddhist tackled such criminally obtuse contempt. The Buddha too, of course, had envisaged the possibility of scepticism when confronting the Kālāmas. 'Yes, Kālāmas,' he had argued, 'you may well doubt ... You may well be uncertain ... In uncertain matters, uncertainty does arise ...'⁴ But his advice all along had been never to rely on second-hand experience (on tradition, or legend, or teaching, or scripture, or conjecture, or hearsay, or logical inference, or extrapolation, or speculative theory, or conformity with received opinion), but rather on open-minded trial at first-hand. His was a consistent hands-on approach. Young Kassapa, on the other hand, confronted his pig-headed opponent head-on, by forcing him to envisage the constricting limits of unaided, uncompromising, indiscriminate and self-serving common sense.

The bhikkhu challenged this cold-blooded sadist with (1) the majesty of transcendent law (on the executioner's block); (2) a comparison to the foul stench of our common humanity (in the cesspit); and (3) the

sheer pettiness of human chronography compared to heaven's inconceivable timescale (for the Thirty-Three Gods); and above all, (4) the impenetrability of metaphysical realms to our opaque, or astigmatic, sense-organs (the Parable of Those Blind from Birth). For what Prince Pāyāsi, in his self-delusion, had failed to grasp (he taught) was (5) the finely tuned reciprocity between this life and the next (the Parable of the Pregnant Wife); (6) the impalpable nature of daydreams, let alone consciousness (the Parable of the Midday Siesta); and (7)-(9) the palpable distinction between the naked and the dead (the Parables of the Ingot, of the Trumpeter Among Frontiersmen, and of the Fire-Worshipper's Apprentice). The sutta culminates in a series of exasperated cautions against (10) naïve overconfidence in clichés (the Parable of the Two Caravans), as well as (11) obstinate truculence (the Parable of the Swineherd), and (12) unscrupulous trickery (the Parable of the Poisoned Dice), and (13) dim-witted, or pompous, obduracy (the Parable of the Two Scavengers).

I shall simply call the participants in this debate 'The Bhikkhu' and 'The Prince'.

* * *

THE PĀYĀSI SUTTA:

Thus have I heard. Once, on a tour of Kosala, the Venerable Kassapa came to a town called Setavyā, in a

densely inhabited area of grassland, where he settled with some five hundred monks to the north in the Siṃsapā Forest.

Now Prince Pāyāsi resided there at the time – with royal prerogatives on a royal domain – brooding on three outrageous tenets: that no other worlds exist; nor beings spontaneously born; nor effects determined by good or evil deeds.

One midday, climbing up to the veranda for his siesta, the Prince saw a crowd of Brahmans and householders streaming through the North Gate towards the Siṃsapā Forest and enquired why. His steward informed him that the wanderer Kassapa, a disciple of the ascetic Gotama, had settled with five hundred monks in the forest and rumours had swept the town that he was an Arahant, a scholar and an astoundingly versatile speaker. ‘Then, Steward, ask the Brahmans to wait. Tell them the Prince is personally intent on attending the Wanderer.’ ‘Doubtless,’ he continued, muttering under his breath, ‘this Kassapa will already have taught those foolish Setavyans that there are other worlds; beings spontaneously born; and effects determined by good or evil deeds. Whereas the precise opposite is true.’ ‘Very well, Sire,’ interjected the steward, who left to deliver the message.

With due ceremony, Prince Pāyāsi joined the throng of Brahmans and householders in the forest. Having exchanged courtesies with the Venerable Kassapa, he sat down to one side while all round him the Brahmans were still either saluting with joined palms

or announcing their names and clan-names. When everyone was seated at last, Prince Pāyāsi addressed the Venerable Kumāra-Kassapa:

THE PRINCE: 'I hold forthright views, Venerable Sir. They are these: that there are no other worlds; that beings cannot be spontaneously born; and that nothing is assured by good or evil deeds.'

THE BHIKKHU: 'Well, that's a new one for me, Prince. I've never heard such tenets before. So may I question you about them, Prince? Please answer as you see fit. Do the sun and moon rotate through this world? Or through another world? And are they human, do you think, or divine?'

THE PRINCE: 'Through another world, Reverend Kassapa; and they're not human, of course, but divine.'

THE BHIKKHU: 'Prince, in the same way it follows that there are other worlds and beings spontaneously born and results guaranteed by good and evil deeds.'

THE PRINCE: 'Though you play the sophist with me, Sir, I stick to my view: that there are no other worlds, no beings spontaneously born, and no effects assured by good or evil deeds.'

THE BHIKKHU: 'No doubt you have proof to back these contentions, Prince?'

THE PRINCE: 'I have, Reverend Sir.'

THE BHIKKHU: 'What is it, pray?'

THE PRINCE: 'Sir, I've had numerous friends and colleagues and blood relations who've committed murders and robberies and sexual affronts – and lied, for that matter, and cursed and swore. Whenever

they succumbed to a mortal ailment, I visited them at the very point of death to say: "Certain Brahmans and ascetics declare that anyone who's murdered and pillaged, or raped and lied, will be reborn after death in a most desolate spot – a place of torment and hell. Now you'll be the first to admit to having been a notorious assassin and thief and rapist and liar so that if what these Brahmans and ascetics claim is true, you'll undoubtedly go to hell. Now what I propose is this: if, on dying, you find yourself in this tormented place – this hell – please return to report that there are other worlds, and beings spontaneously born, and inevitable consequences flowing from our good and evil deeds. I, personally, have always found you dependable and trustworthy, my friend, so be my eyewitness. That's all I ask. Whatever you attest, I shall treat as if I'd seen it with my own eyes. Your testimony will be decisive." Each solemnly agreed; yet not one has ever returned as he promised, nor despatched a message even. That, in short, Reverend Kassapa, is my case for maintaining that there are no other worlds, that beings cannot be spontaneously born, and no consequences stem from either good or evil deeds.'

THE BHIKKHU: 'Let me question you, Prince. Let's pursue this a step further. Feel free to answer as seems right. What do you think? Suppose a thief were dragged before you – one caught in the very act – and you were told: "Lord, this fellow was surprised red-handed. Sentence him as you see fit." Your verdict might be: "Close-shave his head! Tie his arms fast behind his

back! Drum him through the streets and squares and so out through the South Gate! There chop off his head!” “Very well, Sire,” they’d comply, and so frogmarching him through the streets and out through the South Gate, they’d sever his head. Now imagine that thief pleading with his executioners: “Good men, wait! Just one day, please! I’ve friends and colleagues and blood relations in this or that town or village. Grant me but a moment’s grace to visit them!” Would they let him go? Would they listen to him even? Or would they put an axe to that chattering head?

THE PRINCE: ‘No, Reverend Sir, they’d not authorize a stay. He’d never succeed. They’d cut off his head.’

THE BHIKKHU: ‘So, Prince, if this thief couldn’t persuade even human executioners to wait while he visited his relations and friends, how could your partners in crime, after perpetrating such admittedly horrendous misdeeds, prevail upon the warders of hell by pleading: “Good warders, please! Grant us a momentary reprieve to report to Prince Pāyāsi that there is another world; that there are beings spontaneously born; and that *kamma* entails consequences even in hell!”?’

THE PRINCE: ‘Analogies be damned, Sir; I still maintain there are no other worlds, no beings spontaneously born, nor inevitable consequences to our deeds.’

THE BHIKKHU: ‘Have you some other justification, then, for these contentions, Prince?’

THE PRINCE: ‘I have, Reverend Sir.’

THE BHIKKHU: ‘And what may that be?’

THE PRINCE: ‘I’ve also had friends and colleagues and blood relations, Reverend Sir, who have steadfastly abstained from taking lives, or seizing what’s not given, or committing sexual offences, or lying, or abusing the power of speech. I, too, approached their sickbeds, when they lay beyond hope of recovery, to say: “Certain Brahmans and ascetics declare that those who abstain from murder and theft and lying and depravity will be reborn after death in a blessed state, a heavenly world. Now since you’ve refrained from all such deeds, if what these Brahmans and ascetics claim is true, that’s surely where you’ll go. Now what I propose is this: if, on dying, you find yourself in this blessed – this heavenly – place, please come back to report that there are other worlds, and beings spontaneously born, and inevitable consequences flowing from our good and evil deeds. I, personally, have always found you gentlemen dependable and trustworthy, so be my eyewitnesses. That’s all I ask. Whatever you attest, I shall treat as if I’d seen it with my own eyes. Your testimony will be decisive.” And they too concurred; yet not one has ever returned as he promised, nor sent me a messenger even. That, in short, Reverend Kassapa, is my case for maintaining that there are no other worlds, no beings spontaneously born, no consequences stemming from good or evil deeds.’

THE BHIKKHU: ‘Well, Prince, consider this parable, since lessons are often more readily absorbed by means of parables. Suppose someone had tumbled head first

into a cesspit and you'd ordered your servants to pull him out. Very well, they pulled him out. Next you instructed them to scrape off the filth and give him a triple shampoo with yellow loam. Then to anoint him with oil and wash him down three times with fine soap-powder. Then comb his hair and beard, dress him in white and adorn his head with garlands. Finally, you told them to escort him to your palace and there let him indulge all five senses to his heart's content. Prince, what do you think? Would such a man, now that he's cleansed and washed and combed and anointed and revelling in the palace desire to plunge back into the cesspit?

THE PRINCE: 'No, Reverend Sir.'

THE BHIKKHU: 'And why not?'

THE PRINCE: 'Because the cesspit is revolting and stinks to high heaven.'

THE BHIKKHU: 'Exactly as human filth stinks to high heaven, Prince, and revolts the *devas*. So why on earth should your friends, who committed neither immoral nor criminal acts, and whose good fortune after death was to be born into a happier, heavenly world, come back to report that there is indeed another world and beings spontaneously born and consequences attendant on good and evil deeds?'

THE PRINCE: 'Whatever corollaries you draw, Sir, I will still maintain there are no other worlds, no beings spontaneously born, nor guaranteed consequences to our deeds.'

THE BHIKKHU: 'Have you some other justification, then, for these assertions, Prince?'

THE PRINCE: 'I have, Reverend Sir.'

THE BHIKKHU: 'And what may that be?'

THE PRINCE: 'I've had friends, Reverend Kassapa, who abstained from taking lives, seizing what's not given, consuming strong liquor or enervating drugs, yet when on their deathbeds I ask them to pay a return visit from the Thirty-Three Gods (whose company, the Brahmans assure us, they'll join), they never do – despite their promises – nor bother to send back a messenger even. That, in short, Sir, is my reason for maintaining that there are no other worlds, no beings spontaneously born, no sure issue from good or evil deeds.'

THE BHIKKHU: 'Let me question you, Prince. Let's look into this further. Please answer as you see fit. A timespan – which, on our scale, extends to, say, one hundred years, Prince – for the Thirty-Three Gods lasts but a day. Or day and night. Thirty of which make a month; twelve of such months, a year; and a thousand such years, the lifespan of the Thirty-Three Gods. Now suppose your friends decided: "We'll indulge our five senses for just two or three days, then we'll return to Pāyāsito to tell him there *are* other worlds as well as spontaneously born beings and infallible consequences of good and evil deeds." Would that have been feasible?'

THE PRINCE: 'No, Reverend Sir, surely not, since we should long ago have died. But what evidence have you for these statistics? Who informed you that the Thirty-Three Gods are so long-lived? As for me, I don't believe that the Thirty-Three Gods exist, let alone live so long!'

THE BHIKKHU: ‘Prince, imagine a man blind from birth who cannot tell dark from light, let alone make out blue, yellow, red or crimson-coloured patches, distinguish rough from smooth surfaces (except by touch), or watch the moon and stars by night. He might well conclude: “There are no blue, yellow, red or crimson-coloured patches, no darker or lighter shapes, no rougher or smoother textures, no sun or moon or stars, nor anybody who can perceive them. For if I can’t see them, it follows that no one else can; and if no one’s aware of them, they can’t exist.” Would that be a sound line of inference, Prince? Would that seem a legitimate deduction?’

THE PRINCE: ‘Far from it, Reverend Sir, since, of course, there are coloured patches, rougher and smoother surfaces, lighter and darker shapes, as well as the sun by day and the moon by night. So anyone inferring their non-existence from the premise “I’m not aware of them, I cannot see them”, wouldn’t just be implausible – or illogical – merely so much as downright wrong.’

THE BHIKKHU: ‘Well, Prince, it seems you resemble the blind man in casting doubts on my axiom about the Thirty-Three Gods and their extended lifespan. Other worlds can’t be observed as you seem to think, with the mere physical eye. Those ascetics who seek out jungle retreats to purge the divine eye, it is they – with the force of clairvoyant sight – who pierce the veil that divides this world from the next and perceive beings spontaneously born. That’s how transcendent

worlds are transfixed. So confess, Prince, that there are other worlds as well as beings spontaneously born and incalculable consequences from good and evil deeds.'

THE PRINCE: 'However subtle your exposition, Sir, I still hold fast. There are no other worlds, I say, no beings spontaneously born, no consequences flowing from good and evil deeds.'

THE BHIKKHU: 'Then have you some further way of vindicating these propositions, Prince?'

THE PRINCE: 'I have, Reverend Sir.'

THE BHIKKHU: 'And what may that be?'

THE PRINCE: 'Just look at these rows of Brahmans silently sitting here – all profoundly moral and well-conducted men, who like comfort and dislike suffering, who want to live and not to die. Though, once dead, they're convinced they'll be well off – better off than folks who cut their throats, or take poison, or jump off cliffs, or string themselves up – yet they nevertheless continue to prefer life to death; they prefer, that is, *longing* for comfort and assuaging their sufferings here. That, Reverend Kassapa, is my reason for maintaining that there are no other worlds, no beings spontaneously born, nor certain issue from good or evil deeds.'

THE BHIKKHU: 'Well, Prince, consider this parable, since lessons are often more readily absorbed by means of parables. Once upon a time a certain Brahman had two wives, of whom one had borne a son, now ten or twelve years old, while the other was pregnant and nearing her term – when the Brahman died. The youth, thereupon, told the junior wife: "Lady, the whole

inheritance – gold, silver, property, whatever – is mine. My father made me his heir.” To which the co-wife replied: “Young man, wait till I’ve given birth. If the infant’s a boy, a portion shall be his. If a girl, she shall serve you.” The youth grimly repeated his claim and again she stood her ground. On the third repetition, though, she dashed into an inner room and, seizing a knife, sliced open her belly, desperate to discover whether it was a boy or girl. And thus she destroyed not only herself, fool that she was, but the living foetus and his share of the wealth, in seeking an inheritance without reckoning the hidden cost.

So, too, Prince, you incite hidden perils by advocating forced entry into another world. Just like that foolish Brahman lady in pursuit of her inheritance. But these Brahmans don’t seek to precipitate what’s not yet ripe, but rather, in their wisdom, await its ripening. Since this very life is profitable. The longer these Brahmans can stay alive, the greater the merit they may create, by practising for the welfare and happiness of many, out of compassion for the world and to the benefit of men and *devas*. So confess, Prince, that there are other worlds as well as beings spontaneously born and sequels determined by good and evil deeds.’

THE PRINCE: ‘Whatever cautions you cite, Reverend Kassapa, I shall continue to maintain: “There are no other worlds, no beings spontaneously born, no fruit of good and evil deeds.”’

THE BHIKKHU: ‘Then perhaps you have some further justification for your repeated claim?’

THE PRINCE: 'I have, Reverend Sir.'

THE BHIKKHU: 'Which is what, Prince?'

THE PRINCE: 'Again, take the case of a thief, caught red-handed and dragged before me. My officers will urge: "Lord, we caught this thief red-handed. Sentence him as you see fit." And I, for example, may devise this punishment. "Bind him," I say, "and stuff him live into a jar. Seal its mouth with a moistened skin and give it a good coating of thick clay; then shove it into an oven and light the fire." No sooner said than done. When we're sure the fellow's dead, we pull out the jar, break the clay, uncover the mouth, continually watching in the hope of seeing his soul escape.⁵ But we never do. We've never seen a soul escape. And that's why, Reverend Kassapa, I believe there *are* no other worlds, no beings spontaneously born, nor inevitable fruit of good and evil deeds.'

THE BHIKKHU: 'Prince, some further questions, please. Answer as you see fit. On retiring for a siesta, do you ever recall seeing visions of lovely parks and forests and lotus ponds, as it were?'

THE PRINCE: 'I do, Reverend Sir.'

THE BHIKKHU: 'And aren't you attended at all such times by retainers: your retinue of dwarves and hunchbacks and maidens-in-waiting?'

THE PRINCE: 'I am, Reverend Sir.'

THE BHIKKHU: 'And do they observe your soul slipping out of – or back into – your body?'

THE PRINCE: 'Never, Reverend Kassapa.'

THE BHIKKHU: 'So they don't see your soul emerging

when you're alive. So how could you expect to see it escaping from a corpse? Confess, then, Prince, that there are other worlds; there are beings spontaneously born; there are inevitable consequences to good and evil deeds.'

THE PRINCE: 'I cannot give ground, Reverend Sir. There *are* no other worlds, I repeat, no beings spontaneously born; no moral consequences to good and evil deeds.'

THE BHIKKHU: 'Perhaps, then, you have an additional cause for pressing your claim?'

THE PRINCE: 'I have, Reverend Sir.'

THE BHIKKHU: 'And what may that be?'

THE PRINCE: 'Again, take the case of a thief caught red-handed and brought before me. My officers will urge: "Lord, we caught this thief red-handed. Sentence him as you see fit." And I propose this punishment. "Take him," I say, "and weigh him live on a pair of scales. Then strangle him before carefully weighing him again." No sooner said than done. And the result of this experiment? While alive, the thief was lighter, softer, suppler; once dead, decidedly heavier, stiffer, tighter. And that, Reverend Kassapa, is why I maintain that there are no other worlds, no beings spontaneously born, nothing generated by our good and evil deeds.'

THE BHIKKHU: 'Well, Prince, consider this parable, since lessons are often more readily absorbed by means of parables. Suppose a blacksmith weighed a glowing ingot that had been in the forge all day; then weighed it again after it had cooled. On which occasion would it

be lighter, softer, suppler? When fiery hot? Or after the heat died down?’

THE PRINCE: ‘As long as the ingot was fired, Reverend Sir, it would of course be lighter, softer, suppler. Grown cold – with flames and air dispersed – it would grow proportionally heavier, stiffer, tighter.’

THE BHIKKHU: ‘Well, Prince, it’s just the same with the body. Possessed of life and heat and consciousness, it is lighter, softer, suppler. Once deprived of life and heat and consciousness, it turns heavier, stiffer, tighter. Prince, there’s only one conclusion to draw: that there *are* other worlds; there are spontaneously born beings; there are intractable after-effects to our good and evil deeds.’

THE PRINCE: ‘Twist as you will, Sir, I still repeat: there are no other worlds, no beings spontaneously born, no after-effects to our deeds.’

THE BHIKKHU: ‘Have you yet further reason, then, for insisting on this?’

THE PRINCE: ‘I have, Reverend Sir.’

THE BHIKKHU: ‘And what is that?’

THE PRINCE: ‘Again, Reverend Sir, let us take the case of a thief brought before me. This time, when urged to give a sentence, I may propose: “Kill him, but mind you don’t rip his skin (tearing neither dermis nor epidermis), nor gash his flesh, nor dislocate his bones, nor twist his sinews, nor spill his marrow.” No sooner said than done. “Now turn him on his back,” I say, when he’s already half-dead, “and maybe we’ll spot his soul emerging.” But we don’t. We never spot his soul

emerging. So I tell them to roll him to one side ... to the other side ... face down ... prop him upright ... stand him on his head ... thump him with their fists ... stone him ... thrash him with sticks ... prick him with swords ... shake him this way and that ... until we can spot his soul emerging. And the officers flop him over and prop him up and turn him upside down and thump and stone and thrash and shake him; but though he still has eyes, he cannot see; though he still has ears, he cannot hear; though he still has a nose, he cannot smell; though he still has a tongue, he cannot taste; though he still has a body, he cannot feel. That's why, Revered Sir, I believe there *are* no other worlds, no beings spontaneously born, no sure consequences to our deeds.'

THE BHIKKHU: 'Well, Prince, consider this parable, since lessons are often more readily absorbed by means of parables. Once upon a time, a trumpeter visited a frontier district with his conch-shell. On coming to a village, he took up his post at its centre, blew his conch-shell three times, set the conch-shell on the ground and sat down to one side.

Now that puzzled the locals. At once they asked themselves: "Where did this sound come from that's so beautiful, so exciting, so intoxicating, so entrancing, so utterly captivating?" Gathering round the trumpeter, they asked him: "Sir, how did you make such a beautiful, such an exciting, such an intoxicating, such an entrancing, such an utterly captivating sound?" "Friends," he replied, "it was this conch-shell that made the sound."

Crying, "Speak, Sir Trumpet, speak!" they grabbed it and flung it on its back. But, no, it just went "clonk". They laid it mouth down ... tossed it this way and that ... propped it over on one side and upside down ... thumped it with their fists ... chucked clods of earth at it ... thrashed it with sticks ... poked it with swords ... shook it sideways, downwards, upwards ... all the time crying, "Speak, Sir Trumpet, speak!" But it made no sound. No trumpet-sound.

What struck the trumpeter, throughout these proceedings, was: "What clowns these border folk are! What idiotic goings-on! How can they expect to hear a sound unless they tackle things right!" So, with all the villagers watching, he picked up his conch-shell, gave it three blasts and sauntered off.

At last it dawned on the frontiersmen. "Ah!" they sighed, "When that conch-shell was connected with a human being, and was connected with exertion, and was connected with wind, then it made a sound. But when that conch-shell was not connected with a human being, was not connected with exertion, was not connected with wind, then that conch-shell was mute!" In the same way, Prince, when this body is possessed by life, is possessed by heat, is possessed by consciousness, then it flits hither and thither, stands, sits and lies down, perceives with its eyes, listens with its ears, smells with its nose, tastes with its tongue, feels with its nerve-ends and knows with its mind. But when deprived of life, deprived of heat, deprived of consciousness, it can do none of these things. So,

Prince, rest assured that there *are* other worlds, beings spontaneously born and results assured by our good and evil deeds.'

THE PRINCE: 'Whatever you may say, Reverend Kassapa, I still maintain there are no other worlds, no beings spontaneously born, no knock-on effects from our good and evil deeds.'

THE BHIKKHU: 'Yet again I must ask: can you substantiate that proposition, Prince?'

THE PRINCE: 'I can, Reverend Sir.'

THE BHIKKHU: 'Then tell me how, Prince.'

THE PRINCE: 'Once again, Reverend Kassapa, take the case of a thief brought before me. This time, when urged to give a sentence, I propose: "First, slice by slice, detach his outer skin and maybe we'll see his soul emerging. Then, step by step, peel off the inner skin, scrape away the flesh, pluck out the sinews, strip clean the bones, gouge out the bone marrow ..." Nevertheless, not once have we seen his soul emerging. That's why, Reverend Sir, I believe there are no other worlds; no beings spontaneously born; no long-term consequences resulting from our deeds.'

THE BHIKKHU: 'Well, Prince, consider this parable, since lessons are often more readily absorbed by means of parables. Once upon a time, a mat-haired fire-worshipper settled in the jungle in a leaf-hut. One night he heard a band of nomads camp nearby and later move on. So the fire-worshipper decided to inspect the site in case anything serviceable had been left behind. Rising early, he found the site and there

saw an abandoned baby boy sprawled daintily on his back. And he was overwhelmed by the thought: "It's wrong to let a human being die. I'd better carry him to my shelter and foster him and feed him." And that's what he did.

When the lad was about ten or twelve years old, the hermit – having a function to attend – told him: "I've some business nearby. You watch the fire, my son. And make sure you don't let it die. Here's an axe, though, should you need it, some sticks, as well as fire-sticks to rekindle the fire just in case it goes out." With these instructions the hermit set off.

The lad, sure enough, became so absorbed in his play that he let the fire go out. When he noticed the charred wood, he thought: "Now what did Father say? Something about an axe ... some sticks ... as well as fire-sticks to rekindle the fire. I'd better get cracking!" So he chopped up the fire-sticks with the axe, thinking: "That's how to kindle a fire, I expect." But not a spark flew. Next he sliced the fire-sticks into two, into three, into four, into five, ten, a hundred slivers; he splintered them, he pounded them in a mortar, he winnowed them in the wind, desperately repeating: "That's how to kindle a fire, I expect!" But not a flame flickered.

"Why did you let the fire go out, Son?" was the first thing the hermit said on his return; and when the lad told him what had happened, he fumed: "What an ass the boy is! What an absurd way to try lighting a fire!" So, with the lad looking on, he took what was left of the fire-sticks and rekindled the fire, saying: "Watch

carefully, Son. This is how to ignite kindling, not the silly way you tried!”

In the same way, Prince, consider how you, too, are absurdly, desperately, foolishly searching for another world. Drop this sour attitude, Prince, give it up! Don’t let it be a source of misery and misfortune to you for years to come!’

THE PRINCE: ‘Though you hammer the point home, Reverend Sir, I can’t bear to give it up. King Pasenadi of Kosala is well aware of my convictions. As are several other kings abroad. If I were to abandon them now, they’d say: “What an ass Prince Pāyāsi is! How perversely he stuck to his views!” So I’m just landed with them, I’m afraid, out of self-respect – and spite!’

THE BHIKKHU: ‘Well then, Prince, consider this parable, since a lesson is often more readily absorbed by means of parables. Once upon a time, a caravan of a thousand carts was travelling from east to west, so huge that wherever it passed it exhausted all available fuel and greenstuff. Now this caravan consisted of two groups of five hundred carts, both with their own leader. Holding council together, they decided to go each their own way to economize on supplies. So the caravan was split; and, collecting plenty of grass, wood and water, one leader set off. After some two or three days’ journey, he saw a weather-beaten stranger with bloodshot eyes, approaching. A quiver hung on one shoulder and a wreath of white water-lilies crowned his head. Both hair and clothes looked soaked, while the wheels of his donkey-cart were splashed with mud.

“Where d’you come from, good sir?” the caravan leader hailed him.

“From such-and-such,” the stranger answered.

“And where are you going?”

“To so-and-so,” the stranger answered.

“Has there been much rainfall ahead, then?”

“Indeed, sir, a regular downpour; the land is deluged; and there’s plenty of grass, wood and water. I suggest you toss out your stores. With carts lighter-laden, you won’t tire your oxen so fast and make better progress.”

The leader relayed this information to the carters and they did just that. They ditched their stock of provisions to lighten their carts. But at the next campsite they found not a trace of grass, wood or water; nor at the second, the third, the fourth, fifth, sixth or seventh. And so they all came to grief. Every man jack – with his cattle – was devoured by that *yakkha* until only their bones lay scattered.

Meanwhile, the leader of the second caravan concluded his preparations, stocking up on grass, wood and water. Two or three days into the crossing, he too met the weather-beaten stranger, with bloodshot eyes, approaching – his hair wet, his clothes soaked – wearing a quiver on one shoulder and a wreath of white water-lilies on his head; and again driving a donkey-cart whose wheels were splashed with mud.

“Where d’you come from, good sir?” the caravan leader hailed him.

“From such-and-such,” the stranger answered.

“And where are you going?”

“To so-and-so,” the stranger answered.

“Has there been much rainfall ahead, then?”

“Indeed, sir, a regular downpour; the land is deluged; and there’s plenty of grass, wood and water. I suggest you toss out your stores. With carts lighter-laden, you won’t tire your oxen so fast and make better progress.”

So the leader assembled his carters, saying: “This fellow advised us to jettison our stores, with news of copious supplies ahead. But he’s neither a friend nor relation, so why should we trust him? Rather than discarding our provisions, therefore, I suggest we prudently follow the trail.” They unanimously agreed. And at the next campsite they found not a trace of grass, wood or water; nor at the second, the third, the fourth, fifth, sixth or seventh – where they discovered the debris of the first caravan and the scattered bones of men and cattle devoured by the *yakkha*. There the leader once again assembled his carters, saying: “That caravan came to grief through reckless confidence. Now’s our chance for scavenging all valuables from their train and weeding out the junk from ours.” Which they did. And under such wise command they passed safely across the desert.

You too, Prince, will come to a sorry end if you persist on seeking another world in such a reckless way. Those who trust the first thing they hear are heading for destruction – just like that caravan. So drop this sour attitude, Prince! Give it up, I say! Don’t let it be a source of misery and misfortune to you for years to come!’

THE PRINCE: ‘Despite your solemn appeal, Reverend Sir, I can’t afford to give it up. King Pasenadi of Kosala is privy to my convictions. As are several other kings abroad. If I were to abandon them now, they’d say: “What an ass Prince Pāyāsi is! How perversely he clung to his views!” So I’m just landed with them, I’m afraid, out of self-justification – and spite!’

THE BHIKKHU: ‘Well then, consider this parable, Prince, since a lesson is often more readily absorbed by means of parables. Once upon a time, a swineherd was passing from his village to the next when he saw a heap of dry dung. “Chucked out!” he thought. “What a waste! That would make fine fodder for my pigs. I’ll cart it off.” So he spread out his cloak, scraped up the dung, and gathering it into a bundle, raised it to his head. On the way home, however, clouds gathered and he was caught in a storm, till the melting turds oozed and splattered him all over with dung right down to his heels. Yet on he trudged. “Hey!” passers-by shouted, “Are you bonkers? Have you lost your marbles? Why cart that crap on your head? It’s drooling all over you!” “Smart-arse, eh? This stuff’s for my pigs, you jackass ...” Prince, you sound just like the swineherd in my parable. Ditch that dung, I tell you! Give it up! Don’t let it be a source of misery and misfortune to you for years to come!’

THE PRINCE: ‘Despite your imprecation, Reverend Sir, I just can’t give it up. King Pasenadi of Kosala, as well as other kings, know my convictions. If I were to chuck them now, they’d say: “What a jackass Prince

Pāyāsi is!” So I’m constrained to cling to my views out of self-righteousness – and spite!’

THE BHIKKHU: ‘Well then, consider this parable, Prince, since a lesson is often more readily absorbed by means of parables. Once upon a time, two gamblers were tossing nuts instead of dice; and whenever an unlucky “dice” was thrown, one of them swallowed it. “Well played! You’ve won!” the other congratulated him. “Just pass me those nuts, my friend, and I’ll dedicate them as an offering.” “O.K.,” the trickster agreed and handed them over. After injecting the nuts with poison, his adversary proposed: “Come, let’s have another game!” “Fine.” So they resumed their play. And again, when an unlucky “dice” was thrown, the trickster swallowed it while the other, grimly eyeing him, chanted:

“The dice is smeared with searing stuff,
Though he who swallows doesn’t cough!
Gulp it down, cheat! And swallow well!
Bitter it proves and burns like hell!”

Prince, you talk just like the gambler in my parable. Drop this sour attitude, Prince! Give it up, I say. Don’t let it be a source of misery and misfortune to you for years to come!’

THE PRINCE: ‘But what am I to do, Reverend Kassapa? Too many are apprised of my views. I’d be universally mocked if I abandon them now. I’m just stuck with them, I’m afraid, out of self-righteousness – and spite!’

THE BHIKKHU: ‘Well then, Prince, here’s one last parable, since a lesson is often more readily absorbed

by means of parables. Once upon a time, after a mass migration to a new land, a huckster proposed: "Let's go reconnoitre! We might pick up something valuable!" His friend agreed and so they crossed into the neighbourhood where, in the very first village, they stumbled on a pile of hemp that had been tossed aside. "Why, here's some hemp!" the huckster exclaimed. "You tie up one bundle and I'll tie up another; then we can both cart it off." Which they did. Proceeding to the next village, they discovered some hemp-thread. "What have we here?" the huckster exclaimed. "This pile of hemp-thread is just what we wanted the hemp for. Let's dump our two bundles of hemp and continue with a load of hemp-thread each." "I've lugged my pack this far," his friend insisted, "and it's well tied up. That's enough for me. You do as you please." So his companion threw down the hemp and shouldered the hemp-thread instead.

In the next village street what should they find but a pile of hemp-cloth? "Why, this hemp-cloth is just what we wanted the hemp and hemp-thread for! You dump your hemp and I'll dump my hemp-thread and we'll continue on our way with a load of hemp-cloth each." But his friend demurred: "I've lugged my pack this far and it's well tied up. That's enough for me. You do as you please." So the huckster threw down the hemp-thread and shouldered the hemp-cloth instead.

In the next village they saw a pile of flax ... in another, linen-thread ... in another, linen-cloth ... in another, cotton ... in another, cotton-thread ... in another,

cotton-cloth ... in another, iron ... in another, copper ... in another, tin ... in another, lead ... in another, silver ... in another, gold. Then the huckster said: "This pile of gold is just what we wanted the hemp, hemp-thread, hemp-cloth, flax, linen-thread, linen-cloth, cotton, cotton-thread, cotton-cloth, iron, copper, tin, lead and silver for. You dump your hemp and I'll dump my silver and we'll go on our way with a load of gold each." But his friend shrugged: "I've lugged my pack of hemp this far and it's well tied up. That's enough for me. You do as you please." So the huckster threw down the silver and shouldered a load of gold instead.

When they'd circled back to their village, the friend who brought home the hemp failed to please either his parents, or wife, or children, or colleagues; he even failed to derive satisfaction from it himself. But the wily entrepreneur who returned with a load of gold, delighted his parents, his wife and children, his friends and colleagues, as well as deriving lasting joy and happiness from it himself.

Prince, you talk just like the hemp-bearer in my parable. Drop this sour attitude, Prince! Give it up, I say! Don't let it be a source of misery and misfortune to you for years to come!

THE PRINCE (turning to the assembled Brahmans and householders): 'I was enchanted by the Reverend Kassapa's first parable, but resolved to test his quick wits on further debate.' (Turning to the Reverend Kassapa): 'Excellent, Sir! Excellent! You've proved a worthy opponent! Like someone setting upright what had

been knocked down, or giving directions to a traveller gone astray, or beaming an oil-lamp into the dark till all with eyes can see. In such multitudinous ways has the Reverend Kassapa expounded the Dhamma that I, Sir, now seek refuge in the Blessed Lord, and in the Dhamma, and in the Sangha. May the Reverend Kassapa accept me from this day forth as a lay disciple as long as life shall last! Furthermore, instruct me, Reverend Sir, how to perform a great sacrifice which may be to my lasting benefit and well-being.'

THE BHIKKHU: 'Prince, any sacrifice at which oxen, or goats, or fowls, or pigs are slaughtered is bound to be neither particularly illuminating nor effective unless celebrated with right view, right aspiration, right speech, right conduct, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration. Suppose, Prince, a farmer went to plough some virgin land where the soil was poor and riddled with stumps. If his seeds were stale, and improperly sown, and the rains came late, would those seeds germinate? Would they grow? And would the farmer harvest a full crop?'

THE PRINCE: 'No, Reverend Sir.'

THE BHIKKHU: 'Well, Prince, it's the same with sacrifices at which oxen, or goats, or fowls, or pigs are unmindfully slain. But where nothing is slain and the celebrants are mindfully engaged with right view, right aspiration, right speech, right conduct, right livelihood, right effort, and right concentration, there the sacrifice is bound to be brilliantly effective. Suppose, Prince, a farmer went to plough some well-tilled land, with

fertile soil, from which all stumps had been uprooted. If his seeds were fresh, and properly sown, and the rains were punctual, would those seeds germinate? Would they grow? And would the farmer harvest a full crop?

THE PRINCE: ‘Certainly, Reverend Sir.’

THE BHIKKHU: ‘So, too, a sacrifice where nothing is slaughtered. That alone is richly – luminously – productive.’

* * *

That concludes Prince Pāyāsi’s session with the Venerable Kumāra-Kassapa. The bhikkhu’s cascade of parables had triumphed; the Prince, surrendered. He had not only abandoned his odious views, but taken refuge in the Buddha as a lay disciple. It remains anyone’s guess whether he really intended to pursue the arduous Eightfold Path. But it was a recognition of a sort.

An epilogue supplies just the right dash of ambiguity to this peripeteia. Prince Pāyāsi, we’re told, established a charity for wanderers, beggars and needy Brahmans, where a young Brahman, called Uttara, was charged with dispensing split rice in sour gruel and coarse, fringed clothing.⁶ Until, that is, rumours reached the palace of slighting remarks overheard in the dispensary.

So Uttara was summoned and asked whether the rumour was true that he’d said: ‘Through this charity I’m associated with Prince Pāyāsi – but in this world only, not the world to come’?

‘That’s right, Lord’, he declared.

‘But why? Why cast such aspersions, Friend Uttara? Don’t all seeking merit expect rewards for their charity?’

‘But, Lord, the food you contributed – split rice in sour gruel – you wouldn’t dream of touching with your feet, let alone your lips. Those coarse, fringed clothes – you wouldn’t deign to step on, let alone wear. Lord, you’re considerate and gentle to us, so how can we square your bounty with such meanness? Your courtesy with such harshness?’

‘Very well, Uttara, organize a distribution of food such as I eat and a supply of clothes such as I wear’.

‘Certainly, Lord.’ And he made arrangements accordingly. Not that this change of heart (if such it was) did the Prince much good. For it wasn’t the *source* of the charity, but the spirit in which it was dispensed, that was now at issue. Because of his grudging gifts, made through others’ hands, as if casually tossed aside, he was reborn at death in the company of the Four Great Kings.⁷ While Uttara, who had dispersed the princely largesse unstintingly with his own hands and due concern, was reborn at death in the heavenly realm of the Thirty-Three Gods.⁸

* * *

Even here, however, folk interest was not exhausted; but a tall tale is appended to drive an increasingly bizarre point home.

‘Now at that time the Venerable Gavampati was in the habit of ascending to the lower heavens for his siesta; and Pāyāsi, now a *deva*, approached the Venerable Gavampati and saluted him:⁹

“Who are you, my friend?” asked the bhikkhu.

“Lord, I am Prince Pāyāsi.”

“Friend, aren’t you the one who used to say: ‘There are no other worlds; no beings spontaneously born; no inevitable consequences from good or evil deeds?’”

“True, Lord. There was a time I said this. But I was converted from that mistaken view by the noble Kumāra-Kassapa.”

“And where has that young Brahman, in charge of your dispensary, been reborn?”

“Lord, because he gave unstintingly – with his own hands and due concern – he was reborn in the company of the Thirty-Three Gods, while I who tossed scraps grudgingly aside – without due concern – was reborn in this deserted villa here. Please, Lord, on returning to earth, tell people to give liberally with their own hands and inform them how Prince Pāyāsi and the Brahman Uttara were reborn.”

So the story comes full circle and even the Venerable Kassapa is, in the end, proved wrong. For someone does mysteriously return from ‘the blessed, the heavenly’ world. The Venerable Gavampati, fresh from his siesta, reports that we should give ungrudgingly with our own hands, quoting the example of Prince Pāyāsi who, failing to do this, was reborn, at death, in the

realm of the Four Great Kings, and that of the Brahman Uttara, his zealous administrator, reborn in the higher, heavenly zone of the Thirty-Three Gods.

12

TEMPORAL POWERS

Traditionally, the Dhamma consisted of 84,000 verses or sayings (*Dhammakhandhas*). The Buddha's loyal attendant, Ānanda, claimed:

‘Eighty-two thousand teachings from the Buddha are known to me; two thousand more from his disciples. Now eighty-four thousand I’ve received.’¹

But this cipher was no more than a commonplace synonym for infinity: for cities, say, in a populous kingdom; or wives in a royal harem; or meditation subjects suited to various temperaments; or auditors enlightened by a single Dhamma talk; or the dizzying vista of generation, after generation, after generation of rebirths.² In fact, the first four *Nikāyas* alone contain some 17,505 discourses in all. The *Buddhist Catechism* (1881), devised by the American Colonel Olcott, includes the following exchange:

QUESTION: 'In the whole text of the three *Piṭakas*, how many words are there?'

ANSWER: 'Dr. Rhys Davids estimated them at 1,752,800' (filling forty-five printed volumes).

Which makes Ānanda's claim doubly astonishing. For he was not even a Brahman; not even trained, that is, in reciting the Vedas by rote. Like his cousin Gotama, Ānanda was of the Khattiya (or Warrior) caste, as his transparent love for chariots and archery contests repeatedly betrays. Yet the implication (at face value) is that he had memorized at least five or more discourses a day over a period of forty-five years! Can that be possible? Can anyone really learn so much verbatim by heart? And what is the price of so relentlessly stuffing the mind?

Devout Muslims are capable of reciting the whole of the Koran. Burmese monks, to this day, learn to recite all five *Nikāyas*, with the disciplinary code (or *Vinaya*) thrown in. As Matthieu Ricard, a French monk in Nepal, recently attested: 'Trained Easterners often have an astonishing memory. This isn't just fiction. On numerous occasions I've myself heard Tibetan teachers, and students too, reciting texts several hundred pages long from memory, stopping from time to time to comment on the meaning, with an accuracy that always amazed me as I followed the text in a book.'⁷³ But Ānanda, apparently, could memorize a snatch of dialogue or impromptu debate after only one hearing. He could flawlessly repeat (it is said) discourses by the Buddha of up to 60,000 words – or 15,000 quatrains – in length without stumbling over a syllable.

But the cost was high. Despite his honorific, ‘Guardian of the Dhamma’, he remained the sole disciple (of seventy-five named ‘preeminent’) stubbornly unenlightened. Not that this seemed to prejudice his official standing. Asked by a layman how best to honour the Dhamma, the Buddha replied: ‘Householder, go honour Ānanda, the Guardian of the Dhamma’; and just as Sāriputta was pronounced the ‘Marshal of the Dhamma’ (*Dhamma-sēnapati*), so Ānanda was named its ‘Treasurer’, as if these were roles in its public administration. Nevertheless, Ānanda was the sole non-Arahant of the five hundred summoned to Rājagaha on the Buddha’s death, just barely managing to attain nibbāna, hours before the deadline, at the dawn of the opening of the First Great Council.

The scholarly, archivist side of Ānanda, then, must for decades have hampered and spiritually frustrated that decisive breakthrough. The story is told of five hundred monks who, on arrival, finding the Buddha in deep meditation, tacitly joined him in ‘motionless concentration’. At 10.00 p.m., Ānanda arose and, prostrating himself before the Buddha, urged: ‘Lord, the bhikkhus have long been seated. May the Exalted One exchange greetings with the new arrivals!’ No one stirred. At 2.00 a.m., he again tried bringing the meeting to a close; and again his attempt to extend the customary courtesies was foiled. Only at dawn, towards 6.00 a.m., on his third attempt, did the Buddha finally emerge from meditation, saying:

‘Ānanda, if only you knew, it wouldn’t occur to you to interrupt so often. If you too could reach the realms of supermundane experience, you would have realized that these five hundred bhikkhus and I – all of us sitting here in motionless concentration – had entered into imperturbable absorption, where words cannot penetrate.’⁴

But Ānanda did not yet ‘know’! Nor it seems, even then, had fully grasped the reproof: that the Buddha, all along conscious of his request (for his words, of course, *had* penetrated), simply resolved to ignore his insistent, intrusive social fuss.

* * *

For twenty-five years Ānanda served as the Buddha’s secretary and general factotum.⁵ That is from around c. 508 BCE, when both turned fifty-five, to the Buddha’s death, when they were old men of eighty. Both physically and socially, Ānanda looked after him. We catch a glimpse of them at Sāvattihī, with the elderly Buddha ‘seated warming his back in the evening sun’ and Ānanda ‘massaging his limbs’, while clucking over his blotched and wrinkled skin, his now stooped, slack-muscled back.⁶

Yet he could be both diplomatic and decisive. He negotiated his own contract of employment on the most stringent terms: 1. that the Buddha never pass on to him a fine robe; 2. nor choice morsel of food; 3. nor include him on an invited alms-round; 4. nor offer him lodging in his own *kuti* or cell; 5. while permitting him

to accept formal invitations on the Buddha's behalf; 6. to introduce all visitors into his presence; especially 7. granting him the right 'to question, when puzzled, the exact meaning' of any aspect of the Buddha's teaching; 8. and above all to have whatever was 'taught in his absence' privately repeated and confirmed. What this amounted to, in a nutshell, was Ānanda's insistence that his role should not be seen to entail the least hint of favouritism, even while he – and he alone – controlled all access to the Exalted One. What he clearly most valued were his own privileged audiences as confidential file-clerk and secretary, insisting that if he couldn't explain the Dhamma and its categories, they would mock him: 'Friend, don't you catch on? Even though you follow him like his shadow?'⁷ He was wily enough, that is, not only to anticipate criticism but to fend off all mutterings well in advance.

But his most obvious characteristic was a relaxed and tender-hearted charm. His very name means 'joy'. As King Pasenadi of Kosala remarked: 'Truly, he looks like Ānanda!' His sense of self-identification with others was so intimate, so close, that when the Buddha was disabled by racking pain, he confessed feeling as if his body too 'sagged like a creeper; everything grew dim and my senses faltered'.⁸ This may be a stereotyped phrase (used again on the occasion of the death of Sāriputta), but it reveals the sensitive, vulnerable side of the man.⁹ An anxious dependence, an almost child-like need for approval, marked his relationship with his cousin. 'Venerable sir,' he chunters on, 'was

this well heard by me, well followed, well grasped and well remembered?’ to be patted on the head like a prize schoolboy: ‘Certainly, Ānanda, that was well heard by you, well followed, well grasped and well remembered.’¹⁰

Even at eighty, predictably, his master’s demise proved altogether disabling. On learning the Buddha’s instruction for his funeral, Ānanda dodged into his lodging and, sobbing against the doorpost, burst out: ‘I’m still a mere novice, alas, with such a long way to go! And my teacher who’s so compassionate towards me, my teacher is passing away!’¹¹ But the Buddha, supportive to the end, bequeathed him this heartfelt testimonial: ‘Ānanda, you have long lavished on the Tathāgata the most intimate services, at all times consistently and unreservedly helpful and devoted and cheerful in word and deed. You have made much merit, Ānanda.’¹²

His sunny, sympathetic temperament made him particularly popular with women, especially the nuns. In fact, he was instrumental in founding the nuns’ order; and it was he who interceded on behalf of Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī (the Buddha’s stepmother and aunt) at the gate of the monastery at Vēśālī, pressing her claims as Siddhattha’s wet-nurse who had ‘suckled the Exalted One with her milk when his own mother died’.¹³ But a charge, persistently brought, was his tendency to ignore the risks of mutual attachment. Once Ānanda invited Mahā Kassapa to accompany him to a nunnery for a teaching session there. After some slight

hesitation, Mahā Kassapa agreed. Once his discourse was finally concluded, however, an obstreperous nun accused him of hogging the limelight and not letting the wise Ānanda utter a single word. It was, she said, as if a needle salesman had tried to sell his wares in the presence of a manufacturer of needles. Ānanda pleaded with Mahā Kassapa to forgive her. But the venerable elder was not so easily cajoled, warning that an enquiry might have to be set up into Ānanda's overindulgence of women.

His social skills were exercised in all sorts of other ingenious ways, such as instituting sewing circles for patching and hemming robes (dismissed by the Buddha as too gregarious)¹⁵ or organizing group tours for younger monks (condemned as subversive by Mahā Kassapa).¹⁶ But it was as a teacher that he was most in demand. 'Ānanda possesses four remarkable qualities,' the Buddha confirmed. 'Whatever his audience – whether monks in assembly or nuns, whether laymen or laywomen – each and every group is always overjoyed to see him: delighted when he teaches Dhamma and ravenous for more when he falls silent.'¹⁷

Such a vast range of communal activities, of course, took their toll, constantly distracting him from his own needs and leaving scant time for meditation. But they were as nothing to the principal task which he set himself: the preservation of every word that passed the Buddha's lips. Imagine the incessant strain of exercising total recall! He aimed at literally turning himself into a kind of animated xerox or photocopying

machine. Apart from the daily filing of discourses and exchanges, moreover, he consciously played the role of Boswell to the Buddha's Johnson, or Eckermann to his Goethe, by deliberately initiating conversations and eliciting responses with a seemingly spontaneous flow of queries: 'Can a fragrance travel against the wind?' 'How do monks achieve happiness in the Buddhist order?' 'What is the purpose of virtue? What are the blessings of a clear conscience?'¹⁸ Which needed constant, nimble fielding, though so patently planted. No, friendship was *not* half of the holy life. (It was the whole of it.)¹⁹ No, the doctrine of dependent origination (*paṭicca-samuppāda*) was very far from self-evident. (It was of immense profundity.)²⁰

But Ānanda pushed on regardless: 'Sir, wouldn't it be helpful if this speech were explained? Hearing an explication from the Lord, the monks might better master it.' Whereupon the Buddha, as like as not, would dig in his heels: 'Ānanda, disciples should never follow a teacher just to hear an explication (*veyyākaraṇa*) of discourses in prose (*suttas*) or in prose and verse (*geyyas*).'²¹ This watchdog of his was far too keen on snuffling out authorized commentaries and bona fide hermeneutics. He wanted everything on record.²² He wanted the Sangha to retain every salvageable scrap, transforming doctrinal accumulation into an overriding mission. But the Buddha explicitly favoured intuitive wisdom and independent moral judgement over pedagogic prowess.²³ Despite seeming to collaborate, then, he must sometimes have simply been playing

along, at bottom averse to the repetitive drills inherent in mere commentary and exposition.

According to the *Āṅguttara Nikāya*, Ānanda excelled in five capacities: 1. he was preeminent among those who had ‘heard much’; 2. among those who had a retentive memory; 3. among those who had mastered the sequential order; 4. among those who were energetic; 5. and among those who attended on the Master.²⁴ In other words, he absorbed without resistance or distortion; retained mindfully; perceived the internal coherence of a discourse (*gatimanta*) which dictated its meaning and implications; while remaining the perfect attendant with unflagging devotion to his task of memorizing and recitation. In the moonlit, blossoming enchantment of the Gosinga Sāla-tree Forest, his reply to Sāriputta’s challenge (to evoke a monk worthy of its beauty) paints what is in effect his own self-portrait: ‘Having heard much and remembered much,’ he opens, ‘a monk consolidates what he has learnt ... with the right phrasing ...’ That is, he emphasizes the overriding need for an exact, *rhythmic recall*. Expanding on this summary, he continues: ‘Having examined it and speculated on it and compacted it in the mouth, he teaches the Dhamma with ready, well-rounded phrases unhesitatingly to the assemblies ...’²⁵

His own explanation for such virtuoso mnemonic retrieval, then, was above all musical; it was his rhetorical feel (‘right phrasing’, ‘by word of mouth’, ‘with ready, well-rounded phrases’) which enabled him permanently to tap into his archive (when prompted)

by listening for the ‘playback’ of whatever ‘track’ had once been ‘consolidated’. It was his ears which, by persistent training, had become abnormally retentive.

* * *

Nor was he alone. He was singled out and co-opted, rather. After forty-five years, many elderly bhikkhus survived, ‘expert in the traditions, memorizers of the Discipline (*Vinaya*) as well as the Codes’.²⁶ So many, in fact, that sometimes their heads had to be knocked together to resolve disputes. As at Kosambi, where there was a disagreement about some rinsing water inadvertently left in the latrines. This quarrel, egged on by various interested parties, blew so far out of proportion that the ‘master of the suttas’ (‘an expert on the Dhamma and the *Vinaya*’) was formally suspended and the Buddha in the end had to come over personally to sort things out.²⁷

Even as a professional, then, Ānanda was far from unique. To ‘memorize’ was recommended to *every* truth-seeker, as the Buddha explained to a sixteen-year-old Brahman student: ‘Having heard the Dhamma, memorize it; investigate the meaning of dhammas memorized; and, when investigating their meaning, ponder them ...’²⁸ All in all, the Buddha acknowledged four principal authorities as earwitnesses after his death. Anyone claiming, ‘This is the Dhamma, this is the Discipline, this is the Master’s teaching’, must have heard and remembered it *either* directly from the

Buddha's own lips; or from a sangha of *theras* (elders) with an abbot; or from a community of *theras* who are expert memorizers; or from a single such *thera* who is an expert memorizer. In every case, the Buddha warned that such a monk's statement 'should be neither approved nor disapproved', but checked against the public record, 'carefully studying the sentences word for word to see if they can be traced to the suttas and confirmed by the *Vinaya*'.

The public record was thus to be the ultimate authority; and Ānanda was its guarantor: 'If they are not found to be verified in the *Vinaya* or confirmed in the suttas,' the Buddha continued, 'it should be inferred: "These cannot be the Blessed One's words; they have been wrongly understood by that monk, or that community, or those elders," and should be rejected accordingly.'²⁹ Thus the implacable burden placed on Ānanda's shoulders.

But was this safety net (for verification procedures) already in place during the Buddha's lifetime? It may have been. But the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta* is more likely to have been proleptic in anticipating later tried-and-tested procedures. For tradition holds that it was the First Great Council (of c. 483 BCE), when five hundred Arahants convened in a cave near Rājagaha, three months after the Buddha's death, which decided to authenticate a definitive anthology of the Buddha's teachings: the suttas being recited by Ānanda; the 227 disciplinary regulations (*Vinaya*) by the ex-barber Upāli; while the Sangha's newly elected head, Mahā

Kassapa, himself traced their distinctive metaphysical implications (later collected in the *Abhidhamma*, or ‘Higher Dhamma’). Be that as it may, it was surely at this council that some sort of systematic recitation was attempted, as follows:

MAHĀ KASSAPA: ‘If the Sangha agrees, I shall now interrogate Ānanda on the Dhamma ... Friend, where was the *Brahmājāla Sutta* spoken?’

ĀNANDA: ‘Between Rājagaha and Nālandā, Lord, in the King’s rest-house at Ambalatthikā.’

MAHĀ KASSAPA: ‘On whose account?’

ĀNANDA: ‘On account of the wanderer Suppiya and the Brahman student Brahmadatta.’³⁰

– continuing with further cross-questioning about the source (or occasion) of the sutta and the character of the interlocutors. Moreover, rules must have been drawn up to govern the acceptance or rejection of any given item; a division of labour, among separate monastic communities, established to memorize the overlapping collections (*Nikāyas*); their preservation by constant recitation – perhaps even the chanting of versified sections – encouraged; and finally their formulaic structure agreed upon.³¹ That is, each discourse was prefaced ‘Thus [have] I heard’ (*evam me sutaṃ*) before proceeding to fix the geographic and dramatic coordinates, as it were, with an account of the setting of the discourse, its circumstances and addressees. For ‘where’ and ‘why’ determined the literary axes, never the chronological ‘when’. (Which

makes any biographical approach to the Buddha's doctrinal development, if any, after enlightenment so peculiarly complex.)

* * *

To comprehend this project, certain distinctions have to be drawn. Such bravura performances cannot be linked to theatrical feats of today. Monks were not actors being drilled into their parts. They had no scripts. Though accuracy, especially in poetic contexts, was clearly valued. The last two books of the *Sutta Nipāta* may be set-pieces of this kind since the *Udāna* records a recital of the *Aṭṭhaka-vagga*, by Sona Thera; and the *Anguttara Nikāya*, of the *Pārāyana-vagga* by the laywoman (*upāsikā*) Nandamātā. So public performances of verse with an archaic flavour were popular even then with monks as well as laity.

Nor can the suttas be remotely compared with the (so-called) *Analects of Confucius*, though both consist of a master's sayings passed on by word of mouth from one generation to the next.³² In China, the original homilies were excerpted, or abbreviated, or abstracted and partially edited with additional commentary, until almost none of the 512 sections that make up its twenty chapters contain more than a sentence or two – a short paragraph at most – so that the effect in print is more like a dictionary of quotations or a commonplace book with a variety of glosses and notes. More like the *Dhammapada*, in fact.

Can suttas, though, be compared to heroic lays? Did monks choose a sutta from their oral repertoire much as Demodokos among the Phaeacians chose the lay of the quarrel between Achilles and Odysseus, or of the cuckold Hephaistos outwitting Ares and Aphrodite, or (on demand) of the wooden horse at Troy, to sing in the palace of Alkinoös?³³ Certainly monks, like bards, transmitted their texts within a structure of set formulas employing similar techniques of expansion and distillation. Certainly bards, like monks, shaped their songs by a sequence of mnemonic tags hung on a scaffolding of standard themes (the Assembly, the Banquet, the Battle, the Journey) as was demonstrated by the pioneering work of Milman Parry and Albert Lord on Yugoslav and ancient Greek epic.³⁴

This parallel, therefore, seems nearer the mark, as long as the ‘singer’ (ᾄδός), who created the poem in the act of chanting, is sharply differentiated from the ‘rhapsode’ (ῥαψωδός), who is able to reproduce, on demand, the creations of a ‘singer’: the one being a master of composition (however traditional his devices and material), the other controlling a prodigious memory (whatever slight variations he plays on an established text).³⁵ For the Buddha and Ānanda, too, filled complementary roles. It was the Buddha who created the suttas spontaneously in performance; while Ānanda, rhapsode-like, took possession of the impromptu text.³⁶ His function, in today’s jargon, was limited to ‘record’ and ‘playback’. Not that this implies a mere mindless automatism. Ānanda, too, needed

to master the relevant formulas and compositional techniques. But only as aids to memorization. As he himself put it in the *Theraḡāthā*:

‘Knowing what comes first and later,
Testing overall cohesion,
Skilled in grammar and persuasion,
He investigates the context.
Keen in patient application,
He strives to weigh the meaning well.
Punctually he makes the effort
And inwardly collects his mind.’³⁷

The skills involved in constructing a *précis*, or performing as an actor, or improvising as a poet, or singing as a minstrel, or transmitting a devotional text – though clearly related – differ as widely as the Buddha differs from Homer, or Homer from Ānanda, or Ānanda from a Shakespearean player. Yet the Homeric text, as we have it, combines the techniques of the singer-creator and rhapsode-performer just as our Buddhist texts derive in part from extempore utterance, in part from monastic tradition; and of each it can be said:

‘Punctually he makes the effort
And inwardly collects his mind.’

For, finally, far more than memory training was at stake. It was the mind, or mindfulness: *sati*, in Pali, with its suggestion of self-discipline and self-control. The animated xerox metaphor, at best, was wholly inadequate to indicate this power of mastery over recollections and ideas. The orderly memory retains the sequential structure of words, of sentences,

of rhythms, of ideas. Some variations – elisions, expansions, repetitions – were bound to creep in. But the four analytical discriminations (*paṭisambhidās*) were attained in total mental absorption.

* * *

All Arahants, by definition, were:

‘Skilful in the ways of language,
Grasping the structure of signs and
Their meaningful combinations.’³⁸

But only the *Paṭisambhidapatto** attained the full ‘fourfold analytical discrimination’. ‘What, great King, is the Jewel of the Analytical Powers proclaimed by the Exalted One?’ asked Nāgasena, supplying his own answer: ‘Four in number, great King, are the Analytical Powers: Understanding of the Meaning of Words; Understanding of the Doctrine; Grammar and Exegesis; and Readiness in Speaking.’³⁹ That is,

Nirutti, roughly ‘grammar’: a skill in etymological analysis and current linguistic usage, including the parsing and declension of individual words;⁴⁰

Aṭṭha, roughly ‘meaning’: the skilful development of what the Buddha expounded in brief by discerning its likely effect on particular listeners (according to their temperament and IQ);

Dhamma, here roughly ‘text’: the skilful distillation of what the Buddha expounded at length – by extracting

* A ‘*Paṭisambhidapatto*’ is one who uses discriminative analysis. (Ed.)

its essence – from an intuition of the past causes of present *kamma* in listeners' lives;

Paṭibhāṇa, roughly 'rhetoric': the skilful deployment of *nirutti*, *aṭṭha* and *dhamma* by eloquence in exposition and a ready wit.

It is as if the *Paṭisambhidapatto* had seen through language, deconstructing its constituent signs, as he had dissolved all other (seemingly absolute) sensory and mental phenomena, while triumphantly manipulating and co-ordinating their potential meanings.⁴¹ Put another way: there are words; there are messages; there are meanings which may shift in pitch and determinacy between a sender's intention and his listener's reception. Of this whole complex interchange an Arahant becomes master. Having 'gone to the Unconditioned', that is, he has grown luminously aware of all that conditions signs: conscious (as Saussure was to demonstrate) that all signs are inherently vacant, being the product of a haphazard code, or network, which is the ground of their potential acts of transmission.⁴²

In the *Aṅguttara Nikāya*, the Buddha praises Mahā Koṭṭhita as being the 'foremost of the *Paṭisambhidapatto* Arahant bhikkhus'. Yet, oddly enough, in the *Theragāthā* only a single verse is ascribed to him; and on the dozen occasions when he appears in the suttas, it is always Mahā Koṭṭhita who is posing the questions!⁴³

* * *

For it was the Buddha, of course, who was the supreme *Paṭisambhidapatto*. Brahman grammarians (*vaiyākaraṇas*), by his time, had acquired the status of what we should call ‘literary critics’ today by switching to the largely extra-grammatical concerns of textual analysis and paraphrase; and, in so doing, had promptly split into two rival schools: one considering the text indivisible, based on a complex of propositions (*vākya*) as a whole, known as *vākyavādin*; the other considering the text divisible into terms and phrases (*pada*), viewed as fundamental units of expression, known as *padavādin*.⁴⁴ The *Brahmajāla Sutta*, for example, may well have taken a leaf out of the Brahmins’ own book with its hairsplitting classification of current philosophical theories into sixty-two varieties of ‘wrong views’; for the Buddha, as literary critic, clearly sided with the ‘indivisible school’, primarily considering the meaning of propositions as a whole, despite having a special fondness for the term ‘*pada*’. On at least five occasions, he turned to analytical commentary, explicating verses from the much-loved *Aṭṭhaka-vagga* and *Pārāyana-vagga*, even then renowned for their tricky verbal cruces and archaic usages.

But if the Buddha occasionally gave a lead, it was Sāriputta who became the Sangha’s key explicator, commentator and interpreter. His linguistic and hermeneutical skills were unreservedly commended by the Buddha: ‘You, Sāriputta, rightly succeed in turning the Unsurpassed Wheel of Dhamma turned by me’.⁴⁵ That is why the Buddha pronounced him *Dhamma-*

senāpati, or ‘Marshal of the Dhamma’. For his role and that of Ānanda were matched. If the ‘Treasurer’ trained himself to safeguard the Buddha’s every utterance, it was for the ‘Marshal’ systematically to edit and collate them. For which, it was said, he cultivated eight distinctive traits: being one who had heard *Dhamma-Vinaya* and who caused others to listen; one who was learned in *Dhamma-Vinaya* and who caused others to learn; one who himself understood *Dhamma-Vinaya* and who caused others to understand; one skilled in unravelling what was compatible from what was incompatible; and no fomenter of disputes.⁴⁶

Teaching for Sāriputta was no pedantic exercise, but a vital transaction based on his own most inward experience. Persistently, he classified such experience on rising from meditation, re-examining every stage of consciousness and sorting out its chief ingredients. He analysed each *jhāna* (absorption) in turn to the vanishing-point of perception and feeling.⁴⁷ It was on painstaking introspection, then, that his instruction depended, revealing him a master of the four *paṭisambhidās*. Of all the *theras*, to him are ascribed quite the largest number of discourses and explanatory interventions in the whole *Tiṭṭaka*.

* * *

Apart from the (already noted) ‘Greater Discourse on Explanations’ and the probe into the ‘Limits of the Explainable’, both the *Niddesa* and *Paṭisambhidā Suttas*

were ascribed to Sāriputta; the first, the sole work of an exclusively exegetical character in the *Tipiṭaka*; the second, a meticulous calculation totting up seventy-two distinct types of right and wrong speculative views (*ditṭhi*).⁴⁸ He further made legendary contributions to the *Abhidhamma*.⁴⁹ As one ancient commentator confirmed: ‘The textual order of the *Abhidhamma* originated with Sāriputta; the subdivisions of the Great Book (*Paṭṭhāna*) were also determined by him. Without distortion or bias, it can be said, he instituted the numbered sequence to facilitate learning, studying and teaching the Dhamma.’⁵⁰ So it seems that Sāriputta both classified the *Abhidhamma* and settled its order of recitation (*vacana-magga*), as well as devising the numerical sectioning (*gaṇanacāra*) of the *Paṭṭhāna*.

The same analytical rigour and exact methodology – the same mathematical elegance – were conspicuous in his own teaching, especially in his compilation of Dhamma terms.⁵¹ The *Sangīti Sutta* (Doctrinal Recitation) preached on the death of the Jain master, Mahāvīra, received the Buddha’s express approval for its warning against dissension and schism (then rife in the Jain camp). In the *Dasuttara Sutta* (Tenfold Series Discourse), such terms were classified into groups of ten (*sangīti*), further subdivided by ten, to highlight their precise practical consequences (*dasuttara*): what was of key importance; what should be developed, or explored, or abandoned; what implied progress or regress; what was hard to penetrate; what needed to be personally sustained, experienced and realized. If not a

creed (in the Christian sense) exactly, this classification aimed at tabulating and indexing the Dhamma on an encyclopaedic scale. What Sāriputta contributed, in a word, was not so much original thought as profound, logical insight. The sheer lucidity of his numerical apparatus (reminiscent of Dante's or Wittgenstein's systematic structures) for centuries after guaranteed harmony in the Sangha.

* * *

It was while standing at the Buddha's back fanning him and following his discourse to the wanderer Dīghanakha, that Sāriputta claimed to have become a *Paṭisambhidapatto*. 'A monk who is liberated,' the Buddha summed up, 'sides with none, disputes with none and can confidently converse in everyday colloquial speech.' What Sāriputta glimpsed was the need for direct, personal participation and perception. An insight possessed him: 'The Blessed One speaks of abandoning *all* mental states, having once examined and exposed them'; and in that flash 'his mind was liberated'.⁵² As he later recalled:

'It was half a month after my ordination, friends, that I grasped, to their minutest detail, the analytical knowledge of language (*nirutti*), the analytical knowledge of meaning (*aṭṭha*), the analytical knowledge of the text (*dhamma*) and the analytical knowledge of rhetoric (*paṭibhāna*). These I've since expounded in many ways, taught and propagated, explained and clarified. If anyone still

entertains any uncertainties on this score, I shall be glad to enlighten him.’⁵³

It was as if listening to the Buddha, and personally checking the discourse against his own experience, that Sāriputta simultaneously leapt to a spiritual and textual illumination. Leapt because the instant of perception was, by definition, devoid of any hint of self-aggrandizement. On another occasion, privately sharing a trance experience with Ānanda, he emphasized: ‘No thoughts struck me such as “I’m entering the *jhāna*! I’ve entered it! I’m rising from it!”.’⁵⁴

The key to Sāriputta’s achievement was this coupling of absolute detachment and self-control, or (put another way) of absolute self-control and detachment. The two were as intimately linked as the radiance of his person and the lucidity of his thought. For all were grounded in his continuous absorption in *suññatā-vihāra* (‘abiding in voidness’). Even the Buddha, noticing Sāriputta’s dazzling features, once enquired after the cause.⁵⁵ Unlike Ānanda, that is, he was never absorbed by discourse – never impressed by the linguistic medium as an end in itself – being wholly absorbed (as he put it) in the awareness of ‘Nibbāna as the quenching of existence’ (*bhava-nirodho*).⁵⁶ Yet, like the Buddha, he was exceptionally fluent in exposition, able to debate for days on end, as the Buddha himself testified:

‘The essence of the Dhamma (*dharmadhātu*) has been so well penetrated by Sāriputta, bhikkhus, that if I were to

question him for one day in different words and phrases, Sāriputta would likewise reply for one day in different words and phrases; or if I were to question him for one night, or a day and a night, or two days and two nights, or as long as seven days and nights even, Sāriputta would still expound the matter for the same space in different words and phrases.⁵⁷

In his grief at Sāriputta's death, Ānanda lamented:

'How obliging he always was to his brothers in the holy life – advising, informing, instructing, urging, rousing and encouraging us! How tireless he was in proclaiming the Dhamma! Who can't recall how the Venerable Sāriputta nourished and enriched and helped him with the Dhamma?'⁵⁸

As the disciple of a teacher who left not one word on paper, Sāriputta resembles Plato. In some respects, also St. Paul. Except that Sāriputta left nothing on paper either. Akin to the Greek and the Jew – philosopher and proselytizer – however, he evolved (like them) into a 'system-building successor' who turned his master's utterances into a proliferating 'structure of thought, soon hardening into dogma'.⁵⁹

Those vast schematizations of his (like theirs), then, needed close watching. But Ānanda's role was altogether different. A 'rhapsode', in epic terms, he became the *performer* of his master's impromptu utterances. Illiterate as the Buddha (so far as we know), he would never have presumed to distort his master's legacy, except for mnemonic purposes. Why scratch

our heads, then, trying to unravel the contributions of one from the other? Oral transmission may well prove less hazardous than scribal emendation, or critical elaboration, or literary misinterpretation of a written text. The very oddity (for us) of classifying suttas into categories such as ‘duration-in-performance’ or ‘numerological features’ itself seems to verify the authenticity of their oral content. So that I, for one, feel unambiguously closer to the Buddha of the suttas than I have ever felt (as reader) to the Galilean Jesus of the Four Gospels, let alone to the Christ of Paul’s Epistles, or to the multifaceted and ironized Socrates of the Platonic dialogues.

Sāriputta, as we saw, was a self-declared *Paṭisambhidapatto*. But Ānanda was neither declared nor described as a *Paṭisambhidapatto*. Rightly so, since he did not attain enlightenment until after the Buddha’s death. Still remote – still a mirage – lay the most vexed, most tantalizing goal: a total voidness beyond names and concepts. He had not yet reached that ‘imperturbable absorption where words cannot penetrate’.⁶⁰ Which, in the long run, surely proved to our advantage. As his skimmed meditation practice turned out to our advantage. Just as his attachment to the extrinsic properties of verbal signs accrued to our quite exceptional advantage. Since the effort of mastering them inexorably entailed his mastery by them. As the Buddha’s exemplary attendant, he inevitably remained at the service of language. That

was the scholar's price he willingly paid – until it was almost too late.

For one last time, the Buddha warned him of his increasingly dithering ways:

‘So, Ānanda, live as an island unto yourself: with yourself, and no other, as refuge; with the Dhamma, and no other, as island refuge.’⁶¹

And, who knows, that time it may have worked. Unless it was the shock of the Buddha's loss. Only one thing is sure: to have been the verbal guardian of the Dhamma, while taking refuge *in* the Dhamma, had proved a contradiction in terms and a perpetual stumbling-block.

EPILOGUE*

Any writer on Buddhism faces a dilemma. It could be called the Buddhist catch-22. ‘Only because he is a *puthujjana* (unenlightened worldling),’ it will be deemed, ‘is he able to write; the truly enlightened neither write nor desire to write.’ In the Buddha’s own words:

‘When muffled as a broken gong
You don’t reverberate, you’ve reached
Nibbāna: self-aggrandizement
Becalmed – and now extinct in you.’¹

Or in Lao-tzu’s formulation: ‘Those who know, do not speak; those who speak, do not know.’ Or again: ‘When you are silent, “it” speaks; when you speak, “it” is silent.’²

The intractable paradox of language, treated in the first chapter, again and again returned to

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haunt the Buddhist imagination. What the Buddha designated a ‘broken gong’ became the central crux – or ‘gateless gate’ in an apt oxymoron – on the path to enlightenment. ‘But tell me – does the sound come to the ear, or does the ear go to the sound?’ asked Wu-men, the Zen master, in a teasing aside. ‘And if you have transcended sound and silence, what do you say at such a point?’³

To confront that question I turn now to a single strand, more than one and a half millennia later, of the Buddhist tradition: the Chinese and Japanese attempt to escape the language trap by evolving an oblique, or lateral, style of discourse on the most abruptly challenging terms. Here, breaking the temporal constraints of this study, I too shall engage those terms aslant.

* * *

A Roman once approached Epictetus with his son to hear him talk. So the philosopher lectured for a while and then stopped. ‘This’, he said, ‘is the method of teaching.’ When the other asked him to go on, he replied: ‘Every art seems tedious, when it is delivered to a person ignorant and unskilful in it.’⁴ We all know what he meant. It is an impasse, as every musician or writer or artist recognizes. Fats Waller summed up the matter most cogently in a put-down (sometimes attributed to Louis Armstrong) of a British lady, a Mrs. Crutchley visiting cousins in Leonia, New Jersey. ‘Mr. Waller’, she had asked, ‘what is swing?’ To which Waller replied:

‘Look, lady, if you gotta ask, you ain’t got it.’ Or as Wu-men, making a similar point, more tactfully advised: ‘Don’t offer a poem unless you meet a poet.’⁵

For truth, as in the West Kierkegaard was the first to acknowledge, cannot be taught: truth not as a set of values, that is, but as ‘inward’ knowledge, something ‘existential’ by which one is prepared to live. It follows that it must, by its very nature, be paradoxical and only a leap of some kind may induce the unexpected tumble into enlightenment. ‘Can someone else be a man’s teacher in this?’ Wittgenstein wondered in *Philosophical Investigations*. ‘Certainly. From time to time he gives him the right tip ... What one acquires here is not technique; one learns correct judgements.’⁶ That sounds very Zen; and he seems even more like a Zen master in 1949 at Cornell, when bemoaning to Oets Bouwsma that within professional philosophy his teaching had done more harm than good: ‘Do you understand?’ ‘Oh, yes. They had found a formula.’ ‘Exactly.’ As Hui-neng, the Sixth Patriarch of Chinese Ch’an Buddhism, had laid down centuries earlier: ‘Self-enlightenment and practice do not consist in argument.’

In the Mahayāna tradition of Tibet, they make a distinction between *togpa* (ratiocination) and *togs pa* (understanding). As a lama in eastern Tibet once explained to Alexandra David-Neel:

‘Study [*togpa*] is of no use in gaining true knowledge [*togs pa*]; it is rather an obstacle. All that we learn in that way is vain. In fact, one only *knows* one’s own ideas and one’s own visions. As for the real causes that have generated

these ideas, they remain inaccessible to us. When we try to grasp them we only seize the ideas that we, ourselves, have elaborated about these causes.⁷

All knowledge, in this analogy, is like language which may discriminate and articulate and categorize experience; it may even be claimed as a substitute for – or at least an equivalent to – experience; yet it can never itself replace experience. Just as a map cannot replace a territory; or the word ‘water’ is never itself drinkable. ‘Fine words butter no parsnips’, runs an English proverb. Dependence on words is like trying to hit the moon with a stick (Wu-men warns), or scratching your shoes when your feet itch. As one young intellectual, Hsiang-yen, had to learn the hard way: ‘A cake drawn on paper can never satisfy hunger.’

Furthermore, as the lama implies, whatever is known (or named or delineated) by us is at once entangled in that very knowledge (or naming or delineation). This is precisely the teasing slippage in which so much of Wallace Stevens’s poetry is implicated. ‘We live in the description of a place’, he sighed in a letter, ‘and not in the place itself.’ Or in the *Adagia*: ‘Things seen are things as seen.’ Howard Nemerov, with comic brio, put it this way:

‘I may identify a certain tree by as many characteristics as the handbook affords me, but it will never up and say, “You guessed it. I am indeed a box elder”. What we know is never the object, but only our knowledge.’⁸

So when David-Neel one day asked her lama what

was the Supreme Deliverance (*tharpa*), he answered logically enough: 'It is the absence of all views and all imagination, the cessation of that mental activity which creates illusions.'

* * *

Zen art never aspires to monumentality but rather, like footprints on sea-sand, embodies evanescence – the drift of mist, the flicker of shadow, the gleam of moonlight:

'Bamboo shadows sweep the stairs
But no dust is stirred.
Moonlight reaches to the bottom of the pond
But no trace is left in the water.'⁹

'Wherever I walk', wrote Hsiang-yen after his enlightenment, 'no traces are left.' Not even truth itself – the Dhamma – should be clung to. 'The Dhamma is like a raft,' the Buddha concluded, 'designed for a particular, practical purpose, not for retention as an unwieldy keepsake.'¹⁰ This abandoning even of the Dhamma or unconditioned truth (as a concept) is, I repeat, one of the most astounding features of Buddhism. Language itself, as a system of abstractions and categorizations, must finally be abandoned for an aesthetic of silence, of emptiness, of absence. The Sixth Patriarch of Zen, an illiterate woodcutter, tore up the suttas to show his uncompromising preference for first-hand experience. Why 'get involved with the tongue of a predecessor?'

asks Wu-men. Why this infatuation for quotations? (Case 24). ‘What good is recording my words’, Yün-men mocked his students, ‘and tying up your tongues?’

‘Te-shan brought his notes on the *Diamond Sutra* before the Dharma Hall and held up a torch, saying, “Even though you have exhausted the abstruse doctrines, it is like placing a hair in vast space. Even though you have learned all the secrets of the world, it is like letting a single drop of water fall into an enormous valley.” And he burned up all his notes.’ (Case 28)

Ta-hui burned the printing-blocks of *The Blue Cliff Record* ‘because he observed that the enthusiasm for the beauty and eloquence of expression was hindering people from directly experiencing enlightenment on their own’.¹¹

‘Words do not convey the fact;
Language is not an expedient.
Attached to words, your life is lost;
Blocked by phrases, you are bewildered.’ (Case 37)

Zen delights in the pregnant phrase (‘just give me one phrase!’), yet will immediately repudiate that phrase: ‘No leaning on words and letters’; ‘point straight at man’s mind’. It’s like our first swimming-lesson or learning to ride a bike. Each one of us must practise speaking or swimming or bicycling on our own. We must simultaneously both sink into the water and yet not sink; both delve into speech and not delve; both say and not say.¹² ‘If you open your mouth, you are lost. If you cannot speak, then it seems you are

stumped' (Case 25). 'If you do not answer, you evade your responsibility. If you do answer, you lose your life' (Case 5). Again and again, at the end of a *kōan*, Wu-men hustles the poor student into the same trap: 'You cannot use words. You cannot not use words. Speak quickly! Speak quickly!' (Case 43). The trick, a non-swimmer must think, is to breathe in a different way. The trick, the poor student must think, is to 'say something with your lips and throat closed.' For the ultimate ideal is to transcend both speech and silence; to reach a state of perception, beautifully suggested by Wallace Stevens in 'The Creations of Sound':

'Tell X that speech is not dirty silence
Clarified. It is silence made still dirtier.'

It all began with the great Bodhidharma, the bearded missionary who arrived from India at the court of the Chinese emperor in c. 520 CE. The emperor devoutly enquired: 'What is the first principle of the holy teaching?' 'Vast emptiness, nothing holy', came back the uncompromising reply. 'Who is this confronting me?' the startled emperor asked. 'I don't know', Bodhidharma replied. The emperor was nonplussed, as well he might be. However profound the answers, they inaugurated a peculiarly monkish intransigence in the face of worldly power. From this initial encounter, it could be argued, springs the whole close-lipped, foxy tradition of Zen rhetoric. 'Not knowing', as one monk once remarked to another, 'is most intimate.' The so-called Four Principles of Bodhidharma (though not formulated by him) are:

‘A special transmission outside the scriptures;
 No dependence on words or phrases;
 Directly pointing to the human mind;
 Seeing into one’s own nature and attaining Buddhahood.’¹³

Wu-men (Japanese: Mumon, 1183-1260) lived some four to five centuries after the T’ang masters whom he was annotating. His postscript is dated in the year 1228, when he was age forty-five. His book consists of a compilation of forty-eight kōans to each of which he contributes a gnomic comment and appends an epigrammatic verse. It is thus a Sung commentary, by a master of the Lin-chi (Japanese Rinzai) school, devoted to classics of the golden age of Chinese Buddhism.

Yet it seems extravagant to call Wu-men’s sparse comments a commentary exactly. They create a kind of dialogue across the centuries, engaging with the original ‘Case’ in an edgy, crackling, indirect way. If anyone has mastered the art of speaking with ‘lips and throat closed’, it is surely Wu-men. He disdains to teach. He will introduce us personally to the Ancestral Teachers. Not merely introduce, but shove us face to face with them. He promises a forehead-to-forehead encounter in which the hair of our eyebrows will become entangled until we see with the same eyes, hear with the same ears. There is no escaping such a man. ‘For your sake,’ he writes, ‘I have removed the lid of my skull and bulged out my eyeballs. Please take hold of the matter directly, and do not preoccupy yourself otherwise.’ He employs all the shock tactics at his command. He’s abrupt, rude, scathing, pushy,

teasing, wacky by turns. His is a most premeditated kind of spontaneity, like clouting your best friend who has hiccups on the back.

A good example of Zen shock therapy is Case 3. I shall first quote the whole case:

‘Whenever Chüh-chih was asked a question, he simply raised a finger. One day a visitor asked Chüh-chih’s attendant what his master preached. The boy raised a finger. Hearing of this, Chüh-chih cut off the boy’s finger with a knife. As he ran from the room, screaming with pain, Chüh-chih called to him. When he turned his head, Chüh-chih raised a finger. The boy was suddenly enlightened.

When Chüh-chih was about to die, he said to his assembled monks: “I received this one-finger Zen from T’ien-lung. I used it all my life but never used it up.” With this, he entered into his eternal rest.’

Why one finger? For a start, it’s available, visible and so skirts the pitfalls of language. It can be used as a warning talisman on every conceivable occasion. But used for what? To induce the direct perception of a single reality: not ‘this’ finger or ‘that’ finger; not ‘my’ finger or ‘your’ finger; not ‘have’ and ‘have not’; not ‘you do’ and ‘I don’t’; not ‘ignorance’ and ‘knowledge’; not ‘attainment’ and ‘non-attainment’. Reason endlessly spawns such dualities. But

“The Way is not subject to knowing or not knowing. Knowing is delusion; not knowing is blankness. If you truly reach the genuine Way, you will find it as vast and

boundless as outer space. How can this be discussed at the level of affirmation and negation?"

With these words, Chao-chou had sudden realization.¹⁴

There is a comical incident in which two monks visit a house to pay their condolences. One rapped on the coffin and asked: 'Living or dead?' The other at once tumbled to his game and clammed up. 'I won't say living; I won't say dead', came the guarded reply. 'Why won't you say?' his wily friend insisted. But the other just kept on muttering obstinately: 'I won't say! I won't say!'¹⁵ This suggests something of the scarcely veiled belligerence, the rapier-thrust quality, of Zen discourse. Quick as a flash the monk recognized the risks of knowing, while only too well aware that 'not knowing is blankness'. So he blocked. He resolutely declined being caught out either way, in affirmation or negation, however dumb it made him look. Despite his quandary, he had to avoid both the evidence of his senses and the simplest modes of rational operation. Indeed, that was his quandary.

But then why did Chüh-chih cut off his servant's finger? Hadn't that boy well and truly learned his lesson? Couldn't he raise just one finger? The answer is 'no'. He had learned nothing. He was merely showing off. He was simply a mimic, a bit of a joker. What he had yet to learn, in Lin-chi's words, was that:

'Your mind is always running after the objects that present themselves and cannot restrain itself. An old teacher called this "seeking to place another head over your own". If you

turn your light within and reflect intimately there and stop seeking external things, you will realize that your own mind and those of the Buddhas and Founding Teachers do not differ from one another.’¹⁶

This ‘seeking to place another head over your own’ is really the Unpardonable Sin of Zen practice. A master once put it this way in addressing his assembly: ‘I have one matter to ask you about. If you say, “Yes, that’s right”, you are putting another head above your own. If you say, “No, that’s not right”, you are looking for life by cutting off your head.’¹⁷ The same old quandary! But now at least this much should be clear. Only when violently deprived of his own forefinger, could the boy experience the impact of his master’s one raised finger. Only then could he realize that it was ‘simply a matter of not choosing’ (in Chao-chou’s repeated phrase): neither *this* finger nor *that* finger. Slyness or jokiness in themselves can never be enough, as Wu-men remarks (Case 12): ‘If you still cling to understanding, you’re in trouble. If you try to imitate Jui-yen, your discernment is altogether that of a fox.’

Such violence may seem to us excessive. It may seem too high a price to pay for deconstructing our binary, verbal and rationalized self-consciousness. Yet this thinking against thinking, this need to float buoyantly upstream against the current, is Buddhism’s fundamental paradox. It is the very starting point of Wu-men’s commentary (Case 1): ‘if you do not cut off the mind road, then you are a ghost clinging to bushes and grasses.’ Chüh-chih was deliberately cutting off

‘the mind road’ by amputating his attendant’s power of imitation.

Extreme shock therapy, if not commonplace, is not altogether uncommon in the Zen tradition. Take the extraordinary events of Case 14:

‘The priest Nan-ch’üan found monks of the eastern and western halls arguing about a cat. He held up the cat and said, “Listen, everyone! If you can say something, I will spare this cat. If you can’t say anything, I will cut off its head.” No one could say a word, so Nan-ch’üan cut the cat into two.

That evening, Chao-chou returned from outside and Nan-ch’üan told him what happened. Chao-chou removed a sandal from his foot, put it on his head, and walked out.

Nan-ch’üan said, “If you had been there, the cat would have been spared.”

Again a duality (either saying or not-saying) creates a logjam of expectations: ‘No one could say a word.’ The artist Sengai, in a drawing of this incident, showed Nan-ch’üan holding the cat up in one hand and brandishing a knife with the other before two bewildered monks. Above he added the words:

‘Cut one, cut all –
Why just the cat?’

It is not the wilful cruelty that should obsess us here. It is rather the madcap knockabout routines that Zen has to improvise to induce these mental somersaults at all. Since Zen cannot operate by argument, it must have recourse to a limited number of other devices. I make

them some nine in number (though these categories are by no means exclusive), divided into two groups of non-verbal and verbal responses:

1. Non-verbal teaching by:

- i. Physical abuse, shading into;
- ii. Impromptu mime of all kinds, shading into;
- iii. Silence.

2. Verbal teaching by:

- i. Onomatopoeic or nonsense syllables;
- ii. Carroll-like non-sequiturs;
- iii. Paradoxical riddles, shading into;
- iv. Seemingly illogical sets of exclusive contraries;
- v. Scatological metaphor;
- vi. Topsy-turvy inversion, or a 'via negative'.

Let me exemplify these techniques one by one.

1.i. Te-shan, whom we last met burning his notes on the *Diamond Sutra*, was notorious for fierce, physically abusive teaching. 'If you speak, you get thirty blows,' he would roar, laying about him with his staff. 'If you do not speak, you get thirty blows.' As one of his pupils remarked: 'It was as though I were a bucket whose bottom suddenly dropped out.' But Te-shan was not the only one to play the role of an irascible Mr. Punch; his Zen version of a Marx Brothers farce was not unique. Think of Chüh-chih chopping off his attendant's finger. Crusty old Mu-chou, by slamming his gate, actually managed to break a visitor's leg.

1.ii. As a young monk, Te-shan was the beneficiary of a rather gentler approach. Once visiting an older

master, he continued his questioning far into the night. It grew so late that finally the old monk asked him to retire. Te-shan apologetically made his bows but, on lifting the blinds, was surprised to see how dark it had become and turned back.

‘It’s dark outside’, he said. The old monk lit a paper candle and was on the point of handing it over, and Te-shan was just reaching over to take it, when the old man blew it out. Startled by the extinction, ‘Te-shan had sudden realization ...’ (Case 28). It was the extinction of light, paradoxically, that illuminated his transition from mere intellectual darkness to absolute and unblinkerred darkness. It was a lesson Te-shan was never to forget.

Impromptu charades of this kind can take many mysterious forms. Return to the case of the cat. Chao-chou, on hearing what had occurred in his absence, ‘removed a sandal from his foot, put it on his head, and walked out’. What did this mean? Putting a sandal on the head was a sign of mourning in old China. Here it looks more like a sign of a world turned upside down, where Zen monks argue about what? The possession of a cat? The characteristics of a cat? Or whether a cat has Buddha nature or not? Chao-chou’s charade simply cuts through the cackle.

As does the monastic cook in Case 40. His abbot needed to choose a teacher for a new foundation:

‘He invited all his monks to make a presentation, saying, “The outstanding one will be sent.” Then he took a water bottle and set it on the floor, and said, “Don’t call this a

water bottle. What would you call it?"

The head monk said, "It can't be called a wooden stump."

The abbot then asked the cook for his opinion. The cook kicked over the water bottle and walked out.

The abbot laughed, saying, "The head monk loses." The cook thereupon was made the founding teacher at Mount Ta-kuei.'

What was so special about the cook? Wasn't it churlish of him to make off like that? Not at all. At one stroke he shattered the complication of the water bottle: its whole separate existence and what to call it. Nominalism? Realism? Just give it a kick. Like Alexander the Great confronting the Gordian Knot, the cook simply slices through the conundrum.

Often these scenes explode into violence. For Zen is poised permanently on the brink of an abyss, at the very edge of the precipice. No time here for mere dithering or contemplative chatter. Zen represents the radical, catastrophe-prone wing of Buddhism, continually consumed by its own nervous energy. As in this story of two young monks strolling under the full moon. One said: 'Everybody could enjoy this, but they don't use it.' The other replied: 'How true! Won't you please use it?' The first prevaricated: 'How would you use it?' The second seized him by the lapels of his robe, threw him to the ground and trampled on him. When the first had scrambled back on to his feet and dusted himself off, he said: 'What a tiger you are!'

1.iii. From unspoken mime the next move inevitably leads to strategies of silence: the silence of a Buddha

image; the silence of the teacher endlessly frustrating an anxious pupil. It is silence, above all, that speaks with ‘lips and throat closed’. Wu-men comments (Case 27):

‘No-words truly have an effect;
Though the great ocean becomes a field,
It cannot be communicated to you.’

2.i. By extension, ‘no-words’, of course, may also be taken to indicate natural sounds. These, too, may ‘truly have an effect’.

‘One *tock!* and knowledge is forgotten;
What kind of sound is that?’

asked Sengai at the head of his drawing of a monk standing below a nodding bamboo shoot with a broom. That monk was Hsiang-yen (of the illusory cake) who, after his enlightenment, wrote this poem:

‘One *tock!* has made me forget all my previous knowledge.
No artificial discipline is needed at all.
In every movement, I uphold the ancient Way
And never fall into the rut of mere quietism.
Wherever I walk, no traces are left,
And my senses are not fettered by rules of conduct.’

His story was this. A rather too studious and intellectually inturnd young monk, he had been stymied by a famous kōan (attributed to the Sixth Patriarch) which had been set him: ‘Let me have your view as to your own being before your parents were born.’ Finally, burning all his notes in frustration, he

applied for the job of caretaker at a much revered, ancestral tomb. There he built himself a hut and spent his days cleaning the grounds, absorbed in his kōan. One day, while sweeping leaves, his bamboo broom caught a small pebble which, flicked into the air, struck a stem of bamboo: *tock!* With that *tock!* he was enlightened. How? Why? One might well ask without expecting a rational answer. But, like the sound of an arrow striking its target, that *tock!* may have marked the moment when object and subject, matter and man in the act of perception, became one. It is rather, as Eugen Herrigel explained after years of practising Japanese archery, that through a kind of disciplined inattention, ‘bow, arrow, goal and ego, all melt into one another, so that I can no longer separate them. And even the need to separate has gone.’¹⁸

Such was Hsiang-yen’s moment of enlightenment; and much the same might be said about another monosyllable, the kernel of what is possibly the most famous of all kōans and the opening case of the *Mumonkan*:

‘A monk asked Chao-chou, “Has the dog Buddha nature or not?”

Chao-chou said, “Mu.”’

Here is not the place to go into this most elusive of syllables on which Zen acolytes may work for years. Wu-men himself worked hard on the kōan for six years. In everyday usage, Japanese *Mu* (Chinese *Wu*) means ‘no’, ‘does not have’. But Wu-men specifically warns:

‘Don’t consider it to be nothingness. Don’t think in terms of “has” and “has not”.’ For if you do, the answer is simply: ‘No. A dog does not have Buddha nature.’ So no Zen. Listen instead to what resonates around the connotation ‘empty’: literally, that is, a dog may seem empty of Buddha nature yet still have it in that very emptiness, as we humans realize our Buddha nature only in bailing, or emptying, ourselves out. The long open vowel pulses with ambiguities. *Mu*, not unlike *tock!*, operates by jamming reason, jamming mere talk, in an act of perception where ‘have’ and ‘have not’, subject and object, merge into one.

2.ii. How foolish, Wu-men had warned, ‘are those who depend upon words and seek understanding by their intellect!’ But, as a teacher himself, he cannot just sit there and *mu*.

His own language, when he attempts a gloss on this passage, bravely resorts to the hyperbole of folklore and the wit of Mother Goose: ‘They try to hit the moon with a stick. They scratch their shoes when their feet itch.’ A touch of childish grotesque and burlesque, reminiscent of Lewis Carroll and Edward Lear, affects a number of these anecdotes. Take this scene:

‘Passing by the bathroom, Nan-ch’üan saw the monk in charge of heating the bath and asked, “What are you doing?”

The monk said, “Heating the bath.”

Nan-ch’üan said, “Don’t forget to call the cow for its bath.”

That evening, the monk came to Nan-ch’üan’s room. Nan-ch’üan asked, “What are you doing here?”

The monk said, “I’m here to tell the cow the bath is ready.”

Nan-ch’üan asked, “Did you bring the reins?”¹⁹

2.iii. Such illogical logic is transformed readily into paradoxical riddles, of which Case 20 is just one of countless examples:

‘The priest Sung-yüan asked, “Why can’t the person of great strength lift up a leg?” Again he said, “It is not with the tongue that you speak.”’

On which Wu-men sarcastically comments: ‘Lifting my leg, I kick the Scented Ocean upside down.’

2.iv. Paradoxical riddles, in their turn, shade into nonsensical-sounding, self-cancelling propositions, as seen in Case 44:

‘The priest Pa-chiao said to his assembly: “If you have a staff, I shall give you a staff. If you have no staff, I shall take a staff from you.”’

Pa-chiao (Japanese Basho) was a Korean monk who had settled in China. The staff, which he used to dramatize his point, was that which every Zen master carries; about seven feet long, it is the outward token of his status. But what was the point exactly? Another variant on *mu*, I think, but now reenacted as a spiritual transaction common to all higher religions. For ‘salvation’ (or in this case ‘enlightenment’) can never be spelled out in the binary terminology of ‘have’ and ‘have not’. As Jesus put it: ‘Unto every one which hath shall be given; and from him that hath not, even that he hath shall be taken away from him’ (Luke 19:26). And even this proposition can be inverted, as Ta-wei Mu-ch’i attested:

‘As for myself, I differ from him. When you have a staff, I shall take it away from you; and when you have none, I shall give you one.’

That inversion, too, Jesus could accommodate: ‘He that findeth his life shall lose it; and he that loseth his life for my sake shall find it’ (Matthew 10:37). For here Zen and Christianity converge to a single vanishing-point. It is paradoxical devices such as these, rather than their precise formulation, which constitute a password through the Gateless Gate.

2.v. In all this there is an element of shock. But the ultimate shocker, in a transcendental context, is the toilet: not the duality of copulation, but the privacy of excretion; not sex, but shit. The pithiest exchange in the whole *Mumonkan* must be that of Case 21:

MONK: ‘What is Buddha?’

YÜN-MEN: ‘Dried shitstick.’

In other words, ‘a shit-scraper’. I remember hearing Buddhādāsa at Suan Mokkh, in southern Thailand, say, ‘Even if there is a little *bhava* [becoming, existence], there will be a stink’, and was struck by the folksy colloquialism. It was only later that I came across this passage in the suttas: ‘Monks, as even a trifling bit of excrement has an evil smell, I do not praise even the most trifling spell of existence, though no longer than a snap of the fingers.’²⁰ Yün-men’s definition of Buddhism merely paraphrased the Buddha himself.

2.vi. A final technique is the way of negation. When a monk asks Nan-ch’üan (now out of his bath), ‘What is

the fundamental truth that has never been expounded for people?’ and we hear the reply, ‘It is not mind; it is not Buddha; it is not beings’ (Case 27), it’s as if we’re sent skidding out of control. Brakes screech. We jerk to a dead halt. The intellect, revving over and over, throbs furiously in frustration. Skip to Case 30. When the question is raised, ‘What is Buddha?’ it is definitively answered: ‘This very mind is Buddha.’ Skip to Case 33. When the very same question is again raised, that answer is flatly contradicted: ‘Not mind, not Buddha.’ Where is one to find a point of equilibrium on this see-saw? Can each and every proposition be stood on its head? Is topsy-turvydom endemic in Zen?

By this time the answer should occasion no surprise. Zen revels in these sudden shifts of perspective that realign language, invert paradox and expose overlapping strata of comprehension to instant chaos:

‘With realization, all things are one family;
without realization, all things are disconnected,’

as Wu-men comments in Case 16. So far so good. This merely restates an aspect of what Aldous Huxley called ‘the perennial philosophy’. But now for the flipside! Wu-men continues:

‘Without realization, all things are one family;
with realization, all things are disconnected.’

The bottom of the bucket is suddenly kicked out. The second set of propositions does not merely block, or contradict, the first. Rather, it scatters its linguistic

components; and it is this simultaneous awareness of the combined truth of *both* couplets that Zen illumines.

* * *

Wittgenstein, writing a letter, once put it like this: 'if only you do not try to utter what is unutterable then *nothing* gets lost. But the unutterable will be – unutterably – *contained* in what has been uttered!'²¹ That is very close to Zen without opting for Zen's zanier antics, those clowning aspects, while attractive to some, invariably upset others. Much the same could be said of that famous final sentence of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*: 'Wovon man nicht sprechen kann, darüber muss man schweigen.' ('Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.') On which Ray Monk comments: 'The nonsense that results from trying to say what can only be shown is not only logically untenable, but ethically undesirable.'²² That is wholly in the Zen spirit, though again rather too sanely expressed for some tastes. Many continue to this day 'trying to say' it, charging at Wu-men's barrier: 'You cannot use words. You cannot not use words' (Case 43). Chuang-tzu, millennia earlier, had already probed this paradox:

'The purpose of words is to convey ideas;
When the ideas are grasped, the words are forgotten.
Where can I find a man who has forgotten words?
He is the man I would like to talk to.'²³

Was there ever such a man in the West who had ‘forgotten words’? Or a woman we would ‘like to talk to’? Rilke, of the Eighth *Duino Elegy*, perhaps, is one likely candidate. Another is Wittgenstein, so much attuned to the Zen spirit that once, in conversation at Cornell, he unwittingly uttered this lovely haiku:

‘And if there were only
The moon there would be
No reading and writing.’²⁴

Another, ever alert to the comic potential of this bleak predicament, must be Samuel Beckett.²⁵ Yet another is surely Wallace Stevens, endlessly probing and circling the inexpressible, as in these wonderfully rapt, serene, detached, disenchanted lines from ‘The Snow Man’:

‘ ... the listener, who listens in the snow,
And, nothing himself, beholds
Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.’





BIBLIOGRAPHY

Since no previous attempt has been made at enquiring into the function of art and language in the Buddha's teaching, no bibliography in the usual sense is possible. The few titles which I found relevant, or useful, on conceiving this literary study, such as K. N. Jayatilleke, *Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1963) and Bhikkhu Ñāṇananda, *Concept and Reality in Early Buddhist Thought* (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1971), for Chapter 1, or T. W. Rhys Davids, *Buddhist India* (London, 1903, current edition c/o Kessinger Publications), for Chapter 6, are recorded separately in the Notes. To which should be added Richard Gombrich, *How Buddhism Began: The Conditioned Genesis of the Early Teachings* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 1996).

The suttas themselves provided the major impetus and source material. The key original collections (or *Nikāyās*) are:

The *Dīgha Nikāya*, 'The Long Discourses of the Buddha';
The *Majjhima Nikāya*, 'The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha';

The *Saṃyutta Nikāya*, ‘The Connected Discourses of the Buddha’;

The *Aṅguttara Nikāya*, ‘The Numerical Discourses of the Buddha’.

To these was later added a fifth, or ‘lesser’, collection, the *Khuddaka Nikāya*, from which the *Dhammapada* (an anthology of gnomic excerpts or versified quotations from the Buddha’s teaching) is most relevant in this context. These five collections, of which the *Khuddaka Nikāya* eventually grew to be the most voluminous, completed the sutta-basket (or *Sutta-piṭaka*) of the threefold basket (or *Tripiṭaka*) – including the *Vinaya* (or Code of Discipline) and *Abhidhamma* (or ‘Higher Dhamma’) – which constitute the Buddhist scriptures. Rather than abbreviate individual titles, I have everywhere given the name of each sutta and the collection from which it derives in full in order to familiarize readers with the documentary evidence.

The translations, in all cases, are my own since no available translation, I found, lent itself easily to quotation. Either too literal, or clumsy, or unrhythmical, or poetic, or archaic, or repetitive (a marked feature of the Pali original), or awkwardly syncopated, almost nothing reads with the assured clarity and intensity and fluidity which are their most marked, original features. Almost nothing, that is, reads like the founding document of a great religion.

But my own efforts (tested at length in Chapters 10 and 11), of course, parallel and supersede previous translations. I had hoped, for example, to make wholesale use of the late Maurice Walshe's versions of the *Sāmaññaphala Sutta* and *Pāyāsi Sutta* (both from the *Dīgha Nikāya*) but, in the event, found them intractable. The Notes refer to the most commonly available translated sources (often in selection only), and otherwise to the standard Pali edition in the Pali Text Society (Text Series) editions of the Theravada Canon ('PTS', in short). The earliest Victorian and Edwardian translations by T. W. Rhys Davids and others accompanying that series still make a valuable historical resource, but with their Swinburnian lilt and biblical resonance remain of antiquarian interest only.

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GLOSSARY

PALI TERMS OCCASIONALLY LEFT UNTRANSLATED IN THE TEXT

- Arahant:* (Sanskrit, *Arhat*) Literally ‘worthy one’, cleansed of defilement (*kilesa*) and released from the wheel of rebirth (*saṃsāra*).
- Ariyasacca:* In full, *cattāri ariyasaccāni*, or ‘Four Noble Truths’.
- Atta:* The self.
- Bhikkhu:* From the root *bhik*, ‘to beg’: common term for a Buddhist ‘sharesman’, or monk.
- Brahman:* (Sanskrit, *Brāhmaṇa*) Member of the second Hindu caste (or *vaṇṇa*, literally ‘colour’) during the Buddha’s lifetime, versed in sacred knowledge (the Vedas) and eligible to perform priestly ceremonies and sacrifices.
- Buddha:* One who knows; who is ‘awakened’.
- Deva:* Literally ‘a shining one’, angel or divine spirit: the impermanent inhabitant of one of the lower heavens.

- Dhamma*: An often confusing, because fluctuating, concept denoting both the Law of Nature and ‘instruction in the Law’: that is, both ‘living according to the ultimate nature of things’ and a ‘religious discourse’ on the virtuous life (including any canonical text), as well as non-material processes such as senses, feelings, perceptions, volitions, memories and mental states; even (in the plural) just ‘things’ generally.
- Dukkha*: Dissatisfaction, anguish; literally the ‘unendurable’.
- Jhāna*: ‘Trance’ or absorption.
- Kamma*: (Sanskrit, *karma*) Any intentional action (of body, speech or mind) arising from wholesome (*kusala*) and unwholesome (*akusala*) volitions. *Kamma* has nothing to do with fate or luck; nor does it mean the result of actions (*vipāka*).
- Khattiya*: Warriors and noblemen, members of the highest Hindu caste during the Buddha’s lifetime.
- Kilesa*: Mental ‘stains’ or defilements whose three main categories are greed or lust (*lobha*, *rāga*), hatred or anger (*dosa*, *kodha*) and delusion or blindness to the Dhamma (*moha*).

- Māra*: Literally the ‘killer’, personification of the passions; so, ultimately, of the self, of evil, of *dukkha* and death.
- Nāma-rūpa*: ‘Name-and-Form’, or ‘Naming-and-Form’: that is, the mind-body duality which, in all its activity, needs no further ‘being’ or ‘self’ (*attā*).
- Nibbāna*: (Sanskrit, *nirvāna*) Literally ‘a ceasing (*nī*) to blow (*vā*)’ the bellows on a smith’s fire; so a ‘cooling’ (of the fires of *kilesa*) and quenching (of *dukkha*), freed from egoistic attachment.
- Paññā*: Wisdom.
- Paribbājaka*: Homeless wanderer.
- Parinibbāna*: Complete, or final, *nibbāna* on the death of an Arahant – especially of the Buddha.
- Pāṭimokkha*: The 227 rules for monks, codified from the *Vinaya* and reaffirmed before their abbot each night of the new, half-full and full moon (*Uposatha*)*.

* The presence of an abbot is not a factor for such a recitation, nor does it have to occur at night. A recitation of the *Pāṭimokkha* is an obligation when four or more bhikkhus are in the same territory on the *Uposatha* day. There is also a *Bhikkhuni-Pāṭimokkha* whose method of observance is the same. (Ed.)

- Rājā:* 'King', but also an elected chief like the Buddha's father, Suddhodana.
- Samādhi:* 'Concentration', especially in meditation.
- Samaṇa:* Literally 'peaceful one' – one who has calmed himself: a renunciate, that is, who has gone forth from home to homelessness (not necessarily a Buddhist).
- Samāsāra:* The infinite round of births and deaths kept spinning by ignorance (*avijjā*), desire (*taṇhā*), attachment (*upādāna*) and pollution (*kilesa*).
- Sangha:* 'Community' of those who practise according to the Dhamma as taught by the Buddha.
- Sīla:* 'Restraint', and so right conduct.
- Tathāgata:* 'Thus come' (*tathā āgato*) by the aspiration for enlightenment; 'thus gone' (*tathā gato*) by the way of the former Buddhas.
- Thera:* Elder monk of more than ten years' standing.
- Vipassanā:* Insight meditation.

GUIDE TO PRONUNCIATION

ā as in ‘father’

ī as in ‘machine’

ū as in ‘rude’

a as in ‘fun’

o and e (unless before two consonants) always carry a stress: viz. ‘King Pasénadi of Kósala’

g as in ‘girl’

j as in ‘judge’

y as in ‘yes’

ṁ as in ‘sing’: viz. more a mark of nasalization, as in ‘*Saṃyutta Nikaya*’, or ‘*saṃsara*’

ñ as in ‘onion’

ṣ or ś as in ‘shine’

c as in ‘church’

t, d, n, l spoken with tongue tapping the front teeth

ṭ, ḍ, ṇ, ḷ spoken with tongue curled back along the palate; double consonants (e.g. ‘dd’ or ‘gg’) require double percussion as in ‘mad dog’ or ‘biggun’

h is always given a separate value

bh, ch, dh, gh, kh, ph, th are unitary consonants (represented by one letter in Pali), but pronounced with a puff of breath as in ‘abhorrence’, ‘whch house?’, ‘red-hot’, ‘pig-headed’, ‘blockhead’, ‘upholstery’ and ‘hot-house’

EDITOR'S NOTES

In accordance with his academic training, Harold was keen on citing source texts to authorize his line of thought in *The Broken Gong*, and he frequently refers to the texts of the Pali Canon. At the time when he wrote this book, the English translations of that Canon were for the most part in the editions of the Pali Text Society – and often lacking in fluency and accessibility to the average reader. Harold replaced many of these translations with his own, prioritizing accessibility over academic accuracy. Although he always captures the gist of the text, I have notified the reader in those instances where I feel that he has deviated from an accurate rendition.

Harold also referred to other translations, notably those of the Buddhist Publication Society of Kandy, Sri Lanka, who produced selections from the *Saṃyutta* and *Aṅguttara Nikāyas*. Since then the four major *Nikāyas* of the Pali Canon have been re-translated into English and published by Wisdom Publications of Boston, USA.

The system that Harold used in his citations was that favoured by academics: to refer to the volume and page of the original Pali text as produced by the PTS. I have replaced that system with one that refers to the English version produced by Wisdom, as I feel that most readers who wish to verify the quote or refer to the source text will be going to this version of those *Nikāyas*.

In terms of the *Sutta-piṭaka*, I cite the name of the *Nikāya*, and the number of the sutta, along with the section and/or paragraph number, in the *Dīgha* and *Majjhima Nikāyas*. To assist the reader in the more complex organisation of the *Saṃyutta Nikāya*, I have added the volume of the PTS English version, the name of the book (*vagga*) and the number of the sutta within that book. For the sake of simplicity, I have omitted the name of the chapter in the book. Hence *Saṃyutta Nikāya* (the *Nikāya*); IV [Saḷāyatana-vagga] (number and name of the book); 42: (number of the chapter); 7 (number of the sutta within that chapter). In this case, if you follow this schema, you should arrive at ‘The Simile of the Field’. In the case of the *Aṅguttara Nikāya*, I have referred to the relevant book and sutta; so 5:1 is the first sutta of the Book of the Fives, for example. *Itivuttaka* and *Udāna* references are to the chapters and suttas in those works (an English translation is available both through the PTS and the Buddhist Publication Society of Kandy, Sri Lanka). *Dhammapada* references are to the verse, and *Jātaka* references are to the number of the story. There are many translations of these

works available online; and www.accesstoinight.org and www.suttacentral.net are both excellent sources.

The *Vinaya-piṭaka* citations were made more problematic by the PTS' rearrangement of the English translation so that its volumes do not correspond to the order of the books in the Pali. Here I have adopted a system of referring to the name of the Pali book, followed in the case of the narrative books by the chapter and section number, or in the *Suttavibhanga*, to the rule in those books. For a cross reference, I have added a reference to the PTS English version with the page number of the Pali text, which is currently embedded in the English text.

Another ancient Pali text that Harold referenced is the *Milindapañha*, which is available in English as the PTS translation 'The Questions of King Milinda' and also as a more recent version, 'The Debate of King Milinda' by Bhikkhu Pesala (Inward Path, PO Box 1034, 10830 Penang, Malaysia; also available at www.aimwell.org/milinda.html).

As this aspect of *The Broken Gong* hadn't received Harold's detailed attention at the time of his death, I have on occasion had to make an educated estimate as to which particular passage he was referencing. I hope that this doesn't detract from the reader's use of these notes to deepen his or her understanding.

NOTES

AUTHOR'S PREFACE

1. 'compiling a "Life" of the Buddha': Attempts (in English) include: W. W. Rockhill, *Life of the Buddha* (2nd ed. London, 1907); E. H. Brewster, *The Life of Gotama Buddha: Compiled Exclusively from the Pali Canon* (London, 1926); E. J. Thomas, *Life of the Buddha as Legend and History* (London, 1927); Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli, *The Life of the Buddha According to the Pali Canon* (Kandy, Sri Lanka, 1972); the Venerable H. Saddhātissa, *Life of the Buddha* (London, 1976); H. W. Schumann, *The Historical Buddha*, trans. Maurice Walshe (London, 1988); Phra Khantipālo, *The Splendour of Enlightenment: A Life of the Buddha*, 2 vols. (Bangkok, 1990).

2. 'establishing a monastic order': From well over 100 miles south-east of Vārāṇasī (modern Benares) to well over 100 miles to the north-west; that is, from Rājagaha, capital of Magadha (now roughly the state of Bihar), where the Buddha was based for the last twenty years of his life, to Sāvattthī, capital of Kosala, where he spent some twenty-five Rainy Seasons and delivered 871 of the discourses recorded in the *Sutta-piṭaka*.

3. 'an independently verifiable event': See the prologue of the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta*, for example: 'Now just then King Ajātasattu Vedehiputta of Magadha planned to attack the Vajjī princes' (*Dīgha Nikāya* 16:1.1); or of the *Sangīti Sutta*: 'Just at that time a new meeting-hall of the Mallas of Pāvā ... had recently been built' (*Dīgha Nikāya* 33:1.2). Even locations in space differ widely in different versions and were never regarded as *Buddhavacana*: that is, canonical.

4. 'to adapt three titles by Robert Alter, Frank Kermode and Northrop Frye': Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York, 1981); Robert Alter and Frank Kermode (eds.), *The Literary Guide to the Bible* (Harvard University Press, 1987); Northrop Frye, *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (New York, 1982).

5. 'as Kafka ... concluded a problematic reading': Of one of his own parables – that of the door-keeper in *The Trial* (1925), trans. Douglas Scott and Chris Waller (London, 1988), ch. 9, 'In the Cathedral'.

6. 'a land-bird disorientated when released at sea': *Dīgha Nikāya*, *Kevaddha Sutta* (11:85).
7. 'statements about personality must be speculative': Ajahn Sucitto, 'A Personal Tradition', *Forest Sangha Newsletter*, no. 44 (April 1998). *Citta*, in Pali, is the subjective core of the personality, dependently formed, in a constant ferment of adaptation.
8. 'in Bultmann's terms': R. Bultmann, *Die Geschichte der synoptischen Tradition* (1931), pp. 179-222.
9. 'if the parables are taken as a whole': Their 'realism is remarkable', giving 'probably a more complete picture of *petit-bourgeois* and peasant life than we possess for any other province of the Roman Empire except Egypt, where papyri come to our aid', C. H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom* (1935), revised ed. 1961, p. 20. See also Dodd, *The Authority of the Bible* (1929), revised ed. 1960, pp. 144-148.
10. 'the *ars intelligendi* and the *ars explicandi*': *Interpretatio* implied a clear understanding of a speaker's meaning; while *applicatio* implied the ability to make that meaning significant for a particular audience. Both are essential: the Buddha singled out 'wrong interpretation' and 'wrong expression' as especially prone to undermining the Dhamma (*Āṅguttara Nikāya* 2:20).
11. 'and if you fail to grasp the meaning of any statement': *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Goṭamukha Sutta* (94:4).
12. 'in debate with a wealthy Jain': *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Upāli Sutta* (56:10).
13. 'analysed before being answered': *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Mahākammavibhanga Sutta* (136:4).
14. 'if you mean "x"... if you say "y"': *Dīgha Nikāya*, *Pāsādika Sutta* (29:18). Cf. also *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Kinti Sutta* (103) on problems of meaning and phrasing.
15. 'the complexities of ... narrative time': For theoretical work, see, for example, A. J. Greimas, Tzvetan Todorov and especially Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago, 1961) and Gerard Genette, *Narrative Discourse* (Paris, 1972), translated by Jane E. Lewin (Oxford, 1980).
16. 'perennial ages ... common to all Aryan peoples': Familiar from Hesiod, but equally found in the *Avesta* of the Buddha's close contemporary, Zarathustra.
17. 'that Land of Cockaigne': 'In the shadow of Mount Neru/ Where lovely Northern Kuru lies ...': *Dīgha Nikāya*, *Āṭṇāṭṭiya Sutta* (32:7), sung as protective verses against *yakkhas* (ogres or fairies).

18. ‘Some “Ariyan wheel-turning monarch”’: *Dīgha Nikāya*, *Cakkavatti-Sihanāda Sutta* (26:4); for those fabled ‘revolutions’, see 26:9-21. *Dīgha Nikāya*, *Aggañña Sutta* (27:13-19), ascribes the whole caste system to the original sins of greed and lust, just as Plato, in *The Republic*, institutes a class system (of guardians, auxiliaries, farmers and workers) by matching each rank with a metallic admixture, then condemning any genetic mismatch as miscegenation.

19. ‘our contracting and expanding universe’: *Dīgha Nikāya*, *Brahmajāla Sutta* (1:2.2) and *Aggañña Sutta* (27:10).

20. ‘waters everywhere surged’: *Dīgha Nikāya*, *Aggañña Sutta* (27:11-12). For a full account, see R.F. Gombrich, ‘The Buddha’s Book of Genesis?’ *Indo-Iranian Journal*, vol. 35 (1992), pp. 159-178.

21. ‘And the earth was without form ...’: *Genesis* i, 2-10.

22. ‘his screw-compass or dividers’: An image that goes back at least to the thirteenth century. See Anthony Blunt, *The Art of William Blake* (Columbia University Press, 1959), Plates 24 a and b.

23. ‘The Buddha rarely uses images’: Roberto Calasso, *Ka* (Milan, 1996), translated from the Italian by Tim Parks (London, 1998), pp. 357-358 and 367 (with one adjustment).

24. ‘a recent edition of the *Majjhima Nikāya*’: *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*, translated by Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli, edited and revised by Bhikkhu Bodhi (Boston, 1995), ‘Index of Similes’, pp. 1407-1409.

25. ‘What do you think about me?’: *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Kinti Sutta* (103). The Buddha goes on to explain how monks should resolve their differences about the Four Foundations of Mindfulness, and the Five Faculties, and the Seven Factors of Enlightenment, and the Noble Eightfold Path, etc.

26. ‘marks of the Great Man’: *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Brahmāyu Sutta* (91).

1. THE LANGUAGE CONUNDRUM

1. ‘free of patchwork’: Pali, *chinna-pilotika*, literally ‘devoid of the characteristics of a rag with loose, or cut off, threads,’ *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Alagaddūpama Sutta* (22:42).

2. ‘lovely in its beginning’: *Sāmyutta Nikāya* IV [Saḷāyatanavagga] 42:7. ‘Spirit’ might also be translated as ‘meaning’; ‘letter’, in a syllabic script, as ‘syllable’.

3. 'Brahmajāla, the Net of Perfect Wisdom': *Dīgha Nikāya, Brahmajāla Sutta* (1), conclusion.
4. 'When a skilful fisherman or his apprentice': *Dīgha Nikāya, Brahmajāla Sutta* (1:3.72).
5. 'the Net of his Knowledge ... the Net of Great Compassion': *Dhammapada Commentary* i. 319-322 and iii. 170-176; and *Dīgha Nikāya Commentary* i. 45-48.
6. 'the deliverance of mind that is signless': *Majjhima Nikāya, Mahāvedalla Sutta* (43:34). Cf. Moggallāna in *Saṃyutta Nikāya* IV [Saḷāyatanavagga] 40:9.
7. 'hard to trace as that of birds': *Dhammapada* 92.
8. 'declared "Undeclared"': *Dhammapada* 218.
9. 'If the terms are incorrect': *The Analects of Confucius*, book 13, ch. 3, modifying the translation by Simon Leys (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997).
10. 'the coarse debarring the mental, the mental debarring the formless': *Dīgha Nikāya, Potṭhapāda Sutta* (9:428-440), on the arising of three forms of *Attabhāva*.
11. 'That monk might still use words like "I"': *Saṃyutta Nikāya* I [Sagāthāvagga] 1:25.
12. 'Who in the rainbow can draw the line': Herman Melville, *Billy Budd, Sailor*, ch. 21.
13. 'From the cow we get fresh milk': *Dīgha Nikāya, Potṭhapāda Sutta* (9:52-53). Citta was the son of a mahout, or elephant trainer, converted by this sutta to request admission into the Buddhist order. 'Tathāgata' (literally 'thus come' by the aspiration for enlightenment, 'thus gone' by the way of the former Buddhas) was the Buddha's favourite third-person locution in referring to himself.
14. 'In the most complex of his expositions': *Majjhima Nikāya, Mūlapariyāya Sutta* (1).
15. 'Those who live by names and concepts': *Saṃyutta Nikāya* I [Sagāthāvagga] 1:20. *Nāma-rūpa*, Pali for 'name-and-form', should rather be 'naming-and-form'; for *nāma* (which rarely occurs independently) here has the active connotation of 'namer' or 'mind'. The compound is as indissoluble as two sides of a coin, or the two aspects of the sign which Saussure called *signifiant* and *signifié* (the acoustic 'signifier' arbitrarily linked to the conceptually 'signified').

16. 'anxious to avoid disputes': K. N. Jayatilleke, *Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1963), ch. 6, p. 313.

17. 'Don't cling to vernacular usage': *Majjhima Nikāya, Araṇavibhaṅga Sutta* (139:12).

18. 'If this fire in front of you were to blow out': *Majjhima Nikāya, Aggivaṇṇasutta Sutta* (72:18).

19. 'two-horned question': Literally 'an iron water-chestnut' (*trapa bicornis*), an edible nut with a tough two-horned shell, like a miniature bull's head: *Majjhima Nikāya, Abhayarājakumāra Sutta* (58:4).

20. 'no outright answer to that, Prince': *Majjhima Nikāya, Abhayarājakumāra Sutta* (58:8).

21. 'the flame of a candle ... after the candle is blown out': Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, ch. 'Down the Rabbit-Hole'.

22. 'the implications of our symbolism': Ludwig Wittgenstein, *The Blue and Brown Books* (Oxford, 1958), p. 108. See also George Pitcher, 'Wittgenstein, Nonsense, and Lewis Carroll', *The Massachusetts Review* VI (1965), pp. 591-611.

23. 'linguistic conventions': In Pali, there were three distinct uses, or functions, of the verb 'to be': *ahosi* (it has been), *atthi* (it exists) and *bhavissati* (it will be). *Saṃyutta Nikāya* III [Khandhavagga] 22:62 emphasizes the need to keep 'these three linguistic conventions' apart without confusing them.

24. 'the meanings are different as well as the words': *Majjhima Nikāya, Mahāvedalla Sutta* (43:30).

25. 'dissimilar meanings ... dissimilar etymology': See Jayatilleke, *Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge*, ch. 6, p. 315. Cf. *Majjhima Nikāya, Mahāvedalla Sutta* (43:30) and *Saṃyutta Nikāya* IV [Saḷāyatanavagga] 41:7. Which may also suggest why the Buddha nowhere discussed dissimilar meanings derived from a shared etymology (e.g. in English, 'stationary'/'stationery').

26. 'brazenly distorted the etymology': See *Dhammapada* 388 and *Saṃyutta Nikāya* III [Khandhavagga] 22:78. See ch. 7, pp. 176-177.

27. 'his Chinese close contemporary': The Taoist sage, Chuang-tzu (c. fourth century BCE). A more literal translation, within its full context, reads:

*'Nets are for fish: catch the fish and forget the net;
Snares are for rabbits: catch the rabbit and forget the snare;
Words are for ideas: catch the idea and forget the words.
Oh, where can I find somebody to talk with who has forgotten the words?'*

28. 'For all symbols are fluxional': Emerson, 'The Poet' (Essays, *Second Series*), 1844.

29. 'how the Dhamma is like a raft': *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Alagaddūpama Sutta* (22:13).

30. 'Just as the great ocean has only one taste': *Aṅguttara Nikāya* 8:19. Cf. *Cullavagga* 9:1 and *Udāna* 5:5. 'Freedom' here, as usual, implies 'liberation' or 'deliverance'.

31. 'The "divine chariot" ... also called "car" of the Dhamma': 'Its axle, meditation; energy, its wheels;/ Mind's equilibrium, its even shaft ...' *Samyutta Nikāya* V [Mahāvagga] 45:4. See also ch. 6, p. 173.

32. 'Builder, you've been seen!': *Dhammapada* 154.

33. 'a snarled skein of yarn': *Dīgha Nikāya*, *Mahānidāna Sutta* (15:95). Cf. *Samyutta Nikāya* II [Nidānavagga] 12:60.

34. 'a bag with a hole at each end': *Dīgha Nikāya*, *Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna Sutta* (22:5). Cf. *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* (10) and *Bodhirājakumāra Sutta* (85).

35. 'a skilful butcher ... having slaughtered a cow': *Dīgha Nikāya*, *Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna Sutta* (22:6).

36. 'A grammarian is not a kind of scientist': R. G. Collingwood, *The Principles of Art* (Oxford University Press, 1938), p. 257.

37. 'Name has soiled everything': *Samyutta Nikāya* I [Sagāthāvagga] 1:61. 'Overwhelmed' may be a better reading.

38. 'in this very fathom-long body': *Aṅguttara Nikāya* 4:45. Cf. *Samyutta Nikāya* I [Sagāthāvagga] 2:26.

39. 'the Parable of the Watersnake': *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Alagaddūpama Sutta* (22).

40. 'any pathway for verbal expression': *Dīgha Nikāya*, *Mahānidāna Sutta* (14:22). More literally, through this mutual conditioning of consciousness (*viññāṇa*) and name-and-form (*nāma-rūpa*), there arises: 1. the basis (*patha*) for arbitrary nomenclature (*adhivacana* or 'name without specific meaning'); 2. the basis for specific denotation (*nirutti*); 3. the basis for honorific appellation (*paññatti*); 4. the sphere of the intellect; and 5. the cycle of existences. Again and again, the Buddha reiterates: 'Consciousness is dependent on name-and-form; name-and-form is dependent on

consciousness' (*Dīgha Nikāya, Mahāpadāna Sutta* [14:2.19]); 'from the arising of name-and-form arises consciousness; from the ceasing of name-and-form consciousness ceases' (*Saṃyutta Nikāya III* [Khandhavagga] 22:57).

41. 'What is it that soils everything?': *Saṃyutta Nikāya I* [Sagāthāvagga] 1:61. Lao-tzu also called name 'the mother of all things'; in the words of the *Tao-te-Ching*:

'The nameless is the origin of heaven and earth;
Naming is the mother of ten thousand things.'

42. 'Even *viññāṇa* ... is illusion': Cf. 'The Kinsman of the Sun [the Buddha] has compared ... consciousness to an illusion', *Saṃyutta Nikāya III* [Khandhavagga] 22:95.

43. 'two bundles of reeds ... one supporting the other': *Saṃyutta Nikāya II* [Nidānavagga] 12:67.

44. 'infinite regress in thought': Bhikkhu Ñāṇananda, *Concept and Reality in Early Buddhist Thought* (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1971), ch. 1, p. 93.

45. 'Some nine centuries later Buddhaghosa': Buddhaghosa travelled to Sri Lanka around c. 430 CE 'because in India the *aṭṭhakathā* [commentaries] had been lost', *Mahāvamsa*, xxxvii.

46. 'Two truths the Buddha (best of all who speak) declared': Buddhaghosa's gloss on *Majjhima Nikāya, Anangaṇa Sutta* (5): that is, conventional speech (*sammuti-kathā*) operates in terms of conventional or relative truth (*sammuti-sacca* or *vohāra-sacca*); absolutely true speech (*paramattha-kathā*) operates in terms of ultimate or absolute truth (*paramattha-sacca*).

47. 'the whole later exposition of his teaching': In the seven books of the *Abhidhamma*.

48. The *muni* is silent not only when he does not speak': Ñāṇananda, *Concept and Reality in Early Buddhist Thought*, p. 38. Cf. *Sutta Nipāta* 787. See also ch. 7, p. 175.

49. 'Monks, I do not dispute with the world': *Saṃyutta Nikāya III* [Khandhavagga] 22:94.

50. 'Where consciousness is signless ...': *Dīgha Nikāya, Kevaddha Sutta* (11:85), conclusion.

51. 'the Parable of the Relays': *Majjhima Nikāya, Rathavinīta Sutta* (24).

2. A DIALECTICAL FREE-FOR-ALL

1. 'I am one who answers after analysing': *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Subha Sutta* (99:4).

2. 'How do you conceive this, bhikkhus': *Saṃyutta Nikāya* III [Khandhavagga] 22:59. *Bhikkhu*, usually translated as 'monk', came to mean 'sharesman': that is, one sharing common wealth or public resources. Only the Buddhist order perpetuated the older political form of republican *sanghas* (independent patrician assemblies) in a new spiritual guise. In his eightieth year, the Buddha still praised the Vajjian republican system, recommending comparable rules for the Sangha: cf. the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta* and *Aṅguttara Nikāya* 7:20. Despite Chinese and Tibetan traditions, *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Gopakamoggallāna Sutta* (108), explicitly states that the Buddhist Sangha had no recognized head.

3. 'Lord, have you seen a woman about': *Vinaya-piṭaka*: *Mahāvagga* 1:14 [PTS vol. 4, 23].

4. 'which is greater, this speck of dust or this mighty earth?': *Saṃyutta Nikāya* V [Mahāvagga] 56:61.

5. "gathering up a handful" of fallen leaves': *Saṃyutta Nikāya* V [Mahāvagga] 56:31. Cf. the 'small stone' and 'Himalaya, the king of mountains' in *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Bālappaṇḍita Sutta* (129:9 and 47).

6. 'the seven-year-old Rāhula had washed his feet': *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Ambalaṭṭhikā Rāhulovāda Sutta* (61:2-6).

7. 'they'd conspire on a common questionnaire': King Pasenadi of Kosala speaking in *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Dhammacetiya Sutta* (89); cf. also *Cūḷahatthipadopama Sutta* (27:4) and *Abhayarājakumāra Sutta* (58:4).

8. 'would a Tathāgata utter such a speech': *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Abhayarājakumāra Sutta* (58:4).

9. 'which of the venerable ones is more a dweller in happiness': *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Cūḷadukkhakkhandha Sutta* (14:20-21).

10. 'the answer would occur to me immediately': *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Abhayarāja-kumāra Sutta* (58:10).

11. 'the art of wielding a goad while riding an elephant': *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Bodhirājakumāra Sutta* (85:57).

12. 'popularly regarded as a valid ready-reckoner': Ñāṇananda, *Concept and Reality in Early Buddhist Thought*, p. 17. See *Dīgha Nikāya*, *Poṭṭhapāda*

Sutta (9:25-30) and *Saṃyutta Nikāya* V [Mahāvagga] 45:141-148. Cf. also the various approaches to the Buddha by the wandering ascetic Uttiya (*Aṅguttara Nikāya* 10:95), the Venerable Mālunḱyāputta and Vacchagotta the wanderer (*Majjhima Nikāya*, *Cūḷamālunḱya Sutta* [63] and *Aggivaḱchagotta Sutta* [72]).

13. 'This is not what I shall teach you': *Dīgha Nikāya*, *Poṭṭhapāda Sutta* (9:25-30). A few days later – when the ascetic Poṭṭhapāda returned with Citta, the mahout – the Buddha again insisted that such matters were useless; only the *Aryasacca* (Four Noble Truths) were directly beneficial for the religious life.

14. 'If by the past is meant what is true': *Dīgha Nikāya*, *Pāsādika Sutta* (29:28).

15. 'By their fruits ye shall know them': Matthew vii, 20.

16. 'Whereof one may not [usefully] speak': 'Wovon man nicht sprechen kann, darüber muss man schweigen': final proposition of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1922).

17. 'lead only to insanity and distress': *Aṅguttara Nikāya* 2:80.

18. 'a good deal that the human brain cannot grasp': John R. Searle, *The Rediscovery of the Mind* (Boston: MIT Press, 1992).

19. 'the way a goldsmith analyses gold': *Tattvasaṃgraha* 3588 as well as the Tibetan version of the *Jñānasamuccayasāra*.

20. 'as if the Buddha stood on the edge of the shore': Not unlike Newton's humble (scientific) admission that he felt himself to have been 'only like a boy playing on the seashore ... whilst the great ocean of truth lay all undiscovered before me'.

21. 'that handful of fallen sisu leaves': from the *śisapā* (Dalbergia sisu), also known as the Aśoka tree.

22. 'by an arrow thickly smeared with poison': *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Cūḷamālunḱya Sutta* (63:5) ff.

23. 'the *Paribbājaka* (itinerant sages)': literally 'going forth' in homelessness and celibacy, renouncing status and caste.

24. 'Why did the *Nigaṇṭha* enter an empty house': *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Sandaka Sutta* (76:21).

25. 'their mothers' dead sons': *ibid.* (76:61).

26. 'nor scope for deliberate self-defilement': *ibid.* (76:13).

27. 'that foolish man Makkhali': *Aṅguttara Nikāya* 1:33.

28. 'Sākyaputtīya samaṇas': *Samaṇa* literally means 'one who is peaceful'. In Japan, the Buddha is still known as *Sākyamuni*, the Sākya sage.

29. 'A noble warrior, a serpent, a fire and a bhikkhu': *Saṃyutta Nikāya* I [Sagāthāvagga] 3:1. The six contemporaries of the Buddha, questioned by King Pasenadi, are most succinctly characterized in *Dīgha Nikāya*, *Sāmaññaphala Sutta* (2:16-33). Purāṇa Kassapa was an extreme amoralist whose doctrine of *Akiriya* argued against any possible moral effect of any action: 'Even if one were to mince everyone on this earth with a circular saw into steak tartare, no evil would result.' Makkhali Gosāla, as we have seen, was an extreme determinist. Ajita Kesakambalin was an extreme materialist, whose doctrine was based on the four elements: 'The pallbearers' footfall can be heard as far as the cemetery. All alms-giving ends in ashes; the bare bones lie greying like pigeons.' Pakudha Kaccāyana was an extreme vitalist, whose doctrine of seven elements added pleasure, pain and the life-principle (*jīva*, or *élan vital*) to earth, air, fire and water: 'When one chops off a man's head with a sword, it is not so much depriving someone of life as inserting a blade into the intercalary space between these seven bodies.' Saṃjaya Belaṭṭhiputta was an extreme agnostic, or possibly eel-wriggling sceptic: 'I don't say it's like this. And I don't say it's like that. And I don't say it's otherwise. And I don't say it's not so. And I don't say it's not not so.' (q.v. *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Sandaka Sutta* [76:30]).

The teaching most nearly resembling the Buddha's was that of his Jain rival, Nigaṇṭha Nātaputta (also known as Mahāvīra). He was born about a generation before Siddhattha Gotama in what is now the Indian state of Bihar; yet the two men seem never to have met. Despite superficial similarities in their doctrines of self-discipline, the extreme asceticism of the Jains was opposed to the Buddha's Middle Way; and they found his doctrine of *anattā* positively pernicious. 'Ford-finders' (*tīrthaṃkaras*) were among the official titles of Mahāvīra's supposed twenty-three predecessors, implying that they helped others cross the turbulent ocean of phenomenal existence in their aspiration for *moksha*, liberation from cycles of rebirth.

30. 'a renowned and famous ford-maker': *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Mahāsakuludāyī Sutta* (77:6).

31. 'the monk Gotama, the son of the Sakyans': *Majjhima Nikāya, Cankā Sutta* (95:5).
32. 'shattering ... the speculation of others': *Dīgha Nikāya, Brahmajāla Sutta* (1).
33. 'wanderer would call on wanderer': *Majjhima Nikāya, Dīghanakha Sutta* (74) and *Sutta Nipāta* 99.
34. 'schismatic cousin Devadatta': The Buddha appears to have had five first cousins among his disciples: Ānanda, his loyal attendant; Devadatta, his competitive alter ego (Yasodharā's brother); the brothers Mahānāma and Anuruddha; and Tissa. For the *Gotamakā*, see Rhys Davids, *Dialogues of the Buddha* 1, pp. 71 and 221.
35. 'as a hair-splitting marksman knows archery': a phrase used by the wanderer Pilotika in *Majjhima Nikāya, Cūlahatthipadopama Sutta* (27:4-7); cf. King Pasedani, in *Dhammacetiya Sutta* (89:14).
36. 'facing a Jain opponent': *Majjhima Nikāya, Upāli Sutta* (56:10).
37. 'If you agree with any statement of mine': *Majjhima Nikāya, Ghoṭamukha Sutta* (94:4).
38. 'this misguided man Samiddhi': *Majjhima Nikāya, Mahākammavibhanga Sutta* (136:4-5).
39. 'while they abuse ... and rail at the tenets of others': *Aṅguttara Nikāya* 3:65.
40. 'Even a dumb post, tackled by me': *Majjhima Nikāya, Cūlasaccaka Sutta* (35:2).
41. 'washing the monk Gotama': *Majjhima Nikāya, Upāli Sutta* (56:7).
42. 'Sir, don't put that point to Purāṇa Kassapa': *Majjhima Nikāya, Mahāsakuludāyī Sutta* (77:6).
43. 'Try wriggling out of that if you can': See *Dīgha Nikāya, Brahmajāla Sutta* (1:1.18), repeated verbatim in *Sāmaññaphala Sutta* (2); again in *Saṃyutta Nikāya* V [Mahāvagga] 56:9; and again here in the Wanderers' Park at Rājagaha.
44. 'The *Udāna* relates a notorious affair': *Udāna* 4:8. Cf. 'The Murder of Sundāri' in the *Dhammapada Commentary* (Buddhist Legends, PTS III, 189).
45. 'If that's what the monk Gotama asserts': *Majjhima Nikāya, Cūlasaccaka Sutta* (35:4).

46. ‘Sandaka in his cave’: *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Sandaka Sutta* (76:4). Both suttas 76 and 77 give the same roll call of conversational topics. Cf. also *Dīgha Nikāya*, *Poṭṭhapāda Sutta* (9:3) and *Udumbarika-Sīhanāda Sutta* (25:2).

47. ‘we’d roll him over like an empty pot!’: *Dīgha Nikāya*, *Udumbarika-Sīhanāda Sutta* (25:5 and 20).

48. ‘Since I am not a nihilist’: *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Alagaddūpama Sutta* (22:37).

49. “All-knowing” and “All-seeing”: *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Cūlasakuludāyi Sutta* (79:8) and *Devadaha Sutta* (101:10).

50. ‘Genuine Triple Knowledge’: a phrase by which Brahmins would have understood the Three Vedas, *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Tevijjavacchagotta Sutta* (71:6).

51. ‘blindly ignorant of health’: *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Māgandiya Sutta* (75:27).

52. ‘how to roar an authentic Lion’s Roar’: By the four monks the Buddha indicated the four stages of penetration into the Dhamma as ‘Stream-winner’ (Sotāpanna), ‘Once-returner’ (Sakadāgāmi), ‘Non-returner’ (Anāgāmi) and Arahant (literally ‘worthy one’), *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Cūlasīhanāda Sutta* (11:2).

53. ‘We won’t renounce our teacher’s claims for that!’: Bhikkhu Bodhi proposes, ‘We are lost!’, as if disciples of the wanderer Sakuludayin felt slighted by this claim to a higher plane of consciousness than the third *jhāna*, *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Cūlasakuludāyi Sutta* (79:26).

54. ‘the Kassapa-Sīhanāda Sutta’: *Dīgha Nikāya*, *Mahāsīhanāda Sutta* (8:22).

55. ‘The “Greater Lion’s Roar” (*Mahāsīhanāda Sutta*)’: *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Mahāsīhanāda Sutta* (12).

56. ‘Master your faculties in harmony. Make that your aim’: *Anguttara Nikāya* 6:55. Cf. *Vinaya-piṭaka: Mahāvagga* 5:1 [PTS vol. 4, 183].

57. ‘a weakness of will or want of self-control’: For Socrates, see especially *Laches*, *Protagoras* and *Gorgias* among the Platonic dialogues. Angulimāla (literally ‘he with the finger garland’), a notorious bandit who cut a finger from each of his victims to hang round his neck, was converted by the Buddha: *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Angulimāla Sutta* (86).

58. ‘Video meliora, proboque’: Ovid, *Metamorphoses* vii, 20.

59. ‘sadistic pleasure in inflicting harassment or pain’: for a list of some twenty-six contemporary tortures, see *Majjhima Nikāya*,

Mahādukkhakkhandha Sutta (13:14) and *Bālappaṇḍita Sutta* (129:4). For the Buddha's recognition of sadistic and masochistic practices, see *Kandaraka Sutta* (51:5): 'Pessa, there are four kinds of persons to be found existing in the world. What four? Here a person torments himself, being interested in self-torture. Here a person torments others, being interested in torturing others. Here a person both torments himself and torments others. Here a person neither torments himself nor torments others.' For the Buddha's own masochistic practices in his fakir days – using a mattress of spikes, feeding on his own excrement and urine – see *Mahāsihanāda Sutta* (12:45–51).

60. Edgar Allan Poe: 'The Imp of the Perverse', 1845. Cf. also 'The Man in the Crowd', 1840.

61. 'the Socratic *ἐλέγχος*': Or *elenchos*, by whose means Socrates was committed to showing up the obtuse, or bigoted, or self-contradictory notions of his fellow citizens.

62. 'Virtue was the art of making oneself happy': See Terence Irwin, *Plato's Moral Theory: The Early and Middle Dialogues* (Oxford University Press, 1977) and *Plato's Ethics* (Oxford University Press, 1996).

63. 'five basic precepts': known as the *Pañca Sila*.

64. 'for the sake of its reflection, sir': *Paccavekkhanattho*, literally 'looking to see any blemishes in the face', *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Ambalaṭṭhika Rāhulovāda Sutta* (61:8).

65. 'without resentment, forgiving the faults of all': Cf. 'Even should bandits savagely sever limb from limb with a two-handled saw, he who harboured hate in his heart on that account would not be carrying out my teaching,' *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Kakacūpama Sutta* (21:25).

66. 'No evil can befall a good man': Plato, *Apology* 40d.

67. 'wisdom and virtue ... in a life correctly lived': The impact a 'philosopher' made on others was measured as much by his daily conduct as by his teaching; or, depending on his auditors, as much by his doctrine as his life. For philosophy was still inseparable from a way of life; it meant not only having a system but living in conformity with it. To imitate Socrates (or the Buddha), therefore, was less a matter of resolving intricate problems than of recreating oneself. Both Socrates and the Buddha ultimately taught, not knowledge exactly, but a realization that – knowing nothing – the main thing for us to learn is how to take care of ourselves.

Cf. Alexander Nehamas, *The Art of Living: Socratic Reflections from Plato to Foucault* (University of California Press, 1999).

68. 'Plato's Theory of Forms ... and his belief in the pre-existence of the soul': for the doctrine of recollection (ἀνάμνησις), see the *Meno* and *Phaedo*; for the interdependence of the Theory of Forms and transmigration of souls, see *Phaedo* 76e.

69. 'the Buddha and ... Socrates shared much common ground': Even physically and socially, they had something in common: both husbands and fathers; both tough, wandering about barefoot, indifferent to cold or heat; both open to public engagement with anyone they met.

70. 'What you said earlier does not tally with what you said later': *Majjhima Nikāya, Cūḷasaccaka Sutta* (35:17).

71. 'On spotting broad hoof-tracks': *Majjhima Nikāya, Cūḷahatthipadopama Sutta* (27:12).

72. 'though badly argued, may still be factually correct': *Majjhima Nikāya, Cankī Sutta* (95:14-15).

73. 'You may be puzzled, Kālāmas': *Aṅguttara Nikāya* 3:65.

74. 'Suppose a man came here brandishing a sword': *Majjhima Nikāya, Upāli Sutta* (56:13).

75. 'Only natural, ordinary impulses': 'Socrates fait mouvoir son ame d'un mouvement naturel et commun. Ainsi dict un païsan, ainsi dict une femme. Il n'a jamais en la bouche que cochers, menuisiers, savetiers et maçons. Ce sont inductions et similitudes tirées des plus vulgaires et cogneues actions des hommes: chacun l'entend. Sous une si vile forme nous n'eussions jamais choisi la noblesse et splendeur de ses conceptions admirables ...' Montaigne, *Essais*, Book III, 12, 'On Physiognomy'.

76. 'Suppose, Anuruddha, a man set out on a journey': *Majjhima Nikāya, Upakkilesa Sutta* (128:20-24).

77. 'Imagine a man blind from birth': *Majjhima Nikāya, Subha Sutta* (99:12); cf. also *Māgandiya Sutta* (75:27-29) and *Dīgha Nikāya, Pāyāsi Sutta* (23:11).

78. 'abstains from dancing, singing, music': *Majjhima Nikāya, Kandarakka Sutta* (51:16).

79. 'nothing but hymns to the gods and encomia for the good': Plato, *Republic* X. Further hints can be gleaned from more scattered remarks.

The Guards' musical education, it seems, also included some dancing, the singing of lyric poetry at symposia, as well as of new songs in general (as long as they were composed in traditional styles). Resident poets would be responsible for sacred hymns (at festivals, sacrifices, wedding ceremonies, etc.) as well as poems for distinguished citizens. Epic poetry, unlike the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, would have to consist of entirely unvarnished, undramatized, third-person narrative. See M. F. Burnyeat, 'Culture and Society in Plato's "Republic"', *Tanner Lectures on Human Values*, vol. XX (Harvard University Press, 1998).

80. 'no understanding of what is, only of what appears': Plato, *Republic* X.

81. 'no earthly bard has ever yet sung': Plato, *Phaedrus*.

82. 'volitional acts to a banana-stem': Literally 'plantain-stem', shedding frond from frond without a central trunk or core, *Saṃyutta Nikāya* III [Khandhavagga] 22:95.

83. 'the germ of a man who is to become a philosopher, or aesthete': Plato, *Phaedrus*.

84. 'True philosophers make dying their profession': In Montaigne's paraphrase: 'Que philosopher, c'est apprendre à mourir' (1580).

85. 'apart from yogic self-discipline': Siddhattha Gotama, as *samaṇa*, had two yogis as masters: Ālārā Kālāma, who reached the Sphere of Nothingness, and Uddaka Rāmaputta, who reached the sphere of Neither Perception nor Non-Perception in the Formless World.

86. 'in part a decoy, a dissimulation': *simulatio* is the Latin for 'irony'.

87. 'in the world Arahant and Fully Enlightened': *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Vatthūpama Sutta* (7:6), *Cūḷahatthipadopama Sutta* (27:13) and *Dantabhūmi Sutta* (125:13).

88. 'the leper ... scratching the scabs off his sores': *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Māgandiya Sutta* (75:18-22).

89. 'the unquenchable flames of the Fire Sermon': Given at Gayāsīsa, as spiritual confirmation of three fire-worshipping ascetics and their numerous disciples who had tossed their coiled braids into the river Nerañjarā as a sign of conversion, *Mahāvagga* 1:7-21 and *Saṃyutta Nikāya* IV [Saḷāyatanavagga] 35:28.

90. 'the Parable of the Malūva': *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Cūḷadhammasamādāna Sutta* (45:4). See ch. 5, pp. 130-132.

91. 'all else is "vulgar lechery": *Majjhima Nikāya, Dantabhūmi Sutta* (125:16).
92. 'Relying on craving, one should abandon craving': *Aṅguttara Nikāya* 4:145.
93. 'no forms, sounds, odours, flavours': *Majjhima Nikāya, Naggavindeyya Sutta* (150:6).
94. 'a tree-root, a rock, a ravine': *Majjhima Nikāya, Kandaraka Sutta* (51:18).
95. 'quiet and undisturbed by voices ... secluded in retreat': *Majjhima Nikāya, Dhammacetiya Sutta* (89:4).
96. 'puppies ... pulling to pieces whatever happened to be near them': Plato, *Republic*.
97. 'breaking up families and obliterating the clans': *Vinaya-piṭaka: Mahāvagga* 1:23 [PTS vol. 4, 43].
98. 'without their parents' consent': *Vinaya-piṭaka: Mahāvagga* 1:54 [PTS vol. 4, 83].
99. 'at a wedding-feast, transformed by death into a soaring swan': Diogenes Laertius, in *Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers*, quotes a lost biography of Hermippus as his authority for Plato's death at a wedding-feast for his great-nephew and heir, Adeimantus. Olympiodorus relates Plato's dream of himself as a swan in flight three nights before his death. Pausanias, visiting his grave in the garden of the Academy, saw the swan carved on his tombstone.

3. THE MENACE OF ART

1. 'the Dasārahas owned a summoning-drum': *Saṃyutta Nikāya* II [Nidāna-saṃyutta] 20:7. The second paragraph, on the inevitable degeneracy of the Sangha, is repeated word for word in *Aṅguttara Nikāya* 3:107. This is probably the sutta on 'Future Dangers' mentioned by the Emperor Aśoka in his Bhabra Edict.
2. 'an "eminently structured object": 'Image fréquente: celle du vaisseau Argo (lumineux et blanc), dont les Argonautes remplaçaient peu à peu chaque pièce, en sorte qu'ils eurent pour finir un vaisseau entièrement nouveau, sans avoir à en changer le nom ni la forme. Ce vaisseau Argo est bien utile: il fournit l'allégorie d'un objet éminemment structural ... Argo est un objet sans autre cause que son nom, sans autre identité que sa forme,' Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes (Paris, Editions du Seuil, 1975), p. 50.

3. 'the Japanese Sun Goddess ... at Ise': 'l'antico é ciò the perpetua il suo disegno attraverso il continuo distruggersi e rinnovarsi degli elementi perituri ...; così i versi d'una poesia si tramandano nel tempo mentre la carta delle pagine su cui saranno via via trascritti va in polvere', Italo Calvino, *Collezione di Sabbia* (Rome, 1984), p. 171 ff.

4. 'the imperceptible and constant ... wearing away of all things': Such as a carpenter's tools by his finger and thumb-prints, or a ship's rigging by sunshine and rain, see *Saṃyutta Nikāya* III [Khandhavagga] 22:101.

5. 'a thunder-wielding spirit, with an iron bolt through its head': *Majjhima Nikāya, Cūlasaccaka Sutta* (35:14).

6. 'The Blessed One saw the thunder-spirit and so did Saccaka': Just as, in a parallel irruption, both the Buddha and a conceited young Brahman could see a fiery *yakkha*. For Ambaṭṭha was emotionally blocked in much the same way as Saccaka, except this time the crux being excessive ancestral pride. Again, the same warning was sounded:

'Whoever ... doesn't answer a basic question put to him by a Tathāgata at the third time of asking has his head split into seven pieces':

'And at that moment Vajirapāṇi the *Yakkha*, wielding a huge iron club that blazed into the sky above Ambaṭṭha's head, echoed: "If this youth Ambaṭṭha doesn't answer a fair question put to him by the Blessed Lord at the third time of asking, I'll split his skull into seven pieces!" The Lord saw Vajirapāṇi and so did Ambaṭṭha, who was so shattered by this apparition that his hair stood on end and, crouching close to the Lord, he whispered: "What did the Reverend Gotama say? May the Reverend Gotama repeat what he said!"' (*Dīgha Nikāya, Ambaṭṭha Sutta* [3:1.20-1.21]).

And so capitulates by admitting what had, for so long, been obstinately repressed.

7. 'The goddess standing behind Peleus' son': Homer, *Iliad*, book 1, lines 197-200 and 219-222, translated by Richmond Lattimore (University of Chicago Press, 1951).

8. 'trivialized the *Dhammaniyāna*': Or Law of Nature, *Aṅguttara Nikāya, Uppāda Sutta* (3:136).

9. 'Suppose someone in search of heartwood': *Majjhima Nikāya, Cūlasaccaka Sutta* (35:22).

10. 'whatever it was this good man had to make with heartwood': *Majjhima Nikāya, Cūlasāropama Sutta* (30:3-7).

11. 'this discourse of Master Gotama, divested of branches and foliage': *Majjhima Nikāya, Aggivaṇṇasutta Sutta* (72:20).

12. 'There is no virtue even in many thousands of stanzas': *Dhammapada Commentary* ii, 216; *Udāna* 8-9.

13. 'then Dhamma-teaching does occur to the Tathāgata': *Aṅguttara Nikāya* 10:154-155.

14. 'neither flattered nor berated that audience': *Majjhima Nikāya, Brahmāyu Sutta* (91:21).

15. 'distinct, intelligible, melodious ... sonorous': Cf. the Sanskrit *Mahāvastu*, i. 315,

*'Penetrating and flowing is his speech,
In the high, the low and the middle tone,
Correct in measure and in sound, and pure;
Such is this perfect eloquence.'*

16. 'that same sign for concentration in which I constantly abide': *Majjhima Nikāya, Mahāsaccaka Sutta* (36:45). For 'sign for concentration' (*samādhinimittā*), see also *Mahāsuññata Sutta* (122). In the *Cūḷavedalla Sutta* (44:12), it is defined as the 'four foundations of mindfulness'.

17. 'Elation arose in me': *Majjhima Nikāya, Upakkilesa Sutta* (128:21).

18. 'Let us render the words of the Buddha into classical metre': *Cullavagga* 5:33.

19, 20 & 21. 'capped six stanzas ... played variations ... a soliloquized rebuke': *Majjhima Nikāya, Vāseṭṭha Sutta* (98:7), *Vatthūpama Sutta* (7:27) and *Upakkilesa Sutta* (128:7). See ch. 7, pp. 247, 277, 278.

22. 'Of four different kinds of poets': 'What four? The imaginative, the didactic, the extempore and the traditional', *Aṅguttara Nikāya* 4:231.

23. 'the unities of Truth and of Right are not broken by the disguise': Emerson, 'Illusions', *The Conduct of Life* (1860).

24. 'The imagination, bhikkhus, is a disease': *Saṃyutta Nikāya* [Saḷāyatanavagga], *Vepacitti Sutta*, 35:248. *Maññita* derives from the root *man*, 'to think'; so *Maññanā*, 'thinking in terms of sense-data', or 'imagining'.

25. 'the "Honey-Ball", or "Sweetmeat" Sutta': *Majjhima Nikāya, Madhupiṇḍaka Sutta* (18:22). The Buddha accepted the compliment, surely, because it was Mahā-Kaccāna whom Ānanda was really praising. Mahā-

Kaccāna's explication of a single phrase of the Buddha's ('the evaluation of diversifying perceptions') forms the main body of the text.

26. "conceptual proliferation": *papañca* is the divisive, splintering effect of all perception and thinking: 'What a man feels, that he perceives. What he perceives, that he thinks about. What he thinks about, that he diversifies ... When the phenomenon of perceiving lapses, the phenomenon of thinking too becomes untenable. When the phenomenon of thinking lapses, the sense of being beset by an ever-branching, evaluative multiplication of conceptions at once becomes untenable as well.' (*Majjhima Nikāya, Madhupiṇḍaka Sutta* 18:16 and 18.)

27. 'In the seen, there will just be the seen': The Buddha's exhortation to Bāhiya Dārucīriya, *Udāna, Bodhivagga*.

28. 'Just as a skilled joiner ... might knock out and extract a blunt peg': *Majjhima Nikāya, Vitakkasaṇṭhāna Sutta* (20:3).

29. 'so readily duplicated by conscious displacements': Until the vagaries of an alert imagination are under such tight control that a monk will at all times 'think the thoughts that he wishes, and will not think the thoughts that he does not wish', *ibid.* (20:8).

30. 'a sustained deconceptualization of the mind': See Bhikkhu Ñāṇananda, *Concept and Reality*, pp. 27-28, quoting *Dīgha Nikāya, Potṭhapāda Sutta* (9).

31. 'No games, no gaming, no sport': *Dīgha Nikāya, Brahmajāla Sutta* (1:1.13-1.14). The list has been somewhat trimmed. Ball-games were played, apparently, with an iron ball. Not only cocks, bulls and elephants were set up for public fights, but also buffalo, horses, goats, rams and quail. Monks were expressly forbidden to play brass instruments or join in military tattoos.

32. 'dancing, singing, music and theatrical shows': *Majjhima Nikāya, Kandaraka Sutta* (51:16).

33. 'Devotion to the sign of beauty': *Aṅguttara Nikāya* 10:72.

34. 'Have you ever seen an elaborate painting?': *Saṃyutta Nikāya* III [Khandhavagga] 22:100.

35. 'complexity of mind in its creative urge': All this, and more, is implied in the syncretic term *saṅkhāra*: the constructive, formative, determinant mental activity.

36. 'Even our appearance ... is the product of our imagination': The Pali word '*bimba*', meaning an 'image' or 'reflection', is primarily associated with the human form. See *Saṃyutta Nikāya* I [Sagāthāvagga] 5:9.

37. 'forms of self-infatuation and self-entrapment': Cf. the dialogue between the Venerable Rādhā and the Buddha: *Saṃyutta Nikāya* III [Khandhavagga] 23:2. See ch. 7, pp. 177-178.

38. 'a king ... who has never heard the sound of a lute': *Saṃyutta Nikāya* IV [Saḷāyatanavagga] 35:246.

39. 'Once upon a time, a trumpeter visited a frontier district': One of thirteen parables in the extended dialogue between Prince Pāyāsi and the Venerable Kumāra Kassapa on the question of life after death, *Dīgha Nikāya*, *Pāyāsi Sutta* (23:19). The trumpet (*sanka*) was, literally, a 'conch-shell'.

40. 'a skilled potter ... were to produce ... whatever shape of pot': *Dīgha Nikāya*, *Sāmaññaphala Sutta* (2:87), *Sampasādaniya Sutta* (28:18) and *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Mahāsakuludāyī Sutta* (77:31).

41. 'that degree of psychic power ... Great is the psychic power': *Vinaya-piṭaka*: *Cullavagga* 7:1-2 [PTS vol. 5, 183, 185].

42. 'Owing to special attainments': *Itivuttaka* 85-87. Cf. the Buddha's rebuke to Pindola for showing off his psychic powers, 'Just as a prostitute displays her underwear', *Cullavagga* 5 (111-112).

43. 'fifty Nālandas ... to ashes with one mental act of hate': *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Upāli Sutta* (56:8 and 13).

44. 'the magical arts called respectively "Gandhāra" and "Maṇikā"': *Dīgha Nikāya*, *Kevaddha Sutta* (11:5).

4. THE FORCE OF IMAGERY

1. 'a Brahman household with its food-offerings': See *Aṅguttara Nikāya* 6:42.

2. 'local worthies "arriving in state-coaches"': Eminent Licchavis, *Aṅguttara Nikāya* 10:72.

3. 'a thorn to meditation': *Saṃyutta Nikāya* III [Khandhavagga] 22:80.

4. 'the figures of the seedling and the young calf': *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Cātumā Sutta* (67:7-11).

5. 'Can it be done, Lord, with a simile?': Of 'aeons passed and gone by', *Saṃyutta Nikāya* II [Nidānavagga] 15:8.

6. 'A simile occurs to me': *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Cūlasaccaka Sutta* (35:10 and 27).
7. and 8. 'Now there came to me spontaneously ...': *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Mahāsihanāda Sutta* (12:50), *Mahāsaccaka Sutta* (36:17), *Bodhirājakumāra Sutta* (85:15) and *Saṅgarava Sutta* (100:14).
9. 'How should these two similes occur to me?': *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Dantabhūmi Sutta* (125:11). Cf. *Bhūmija Sutta* (126:19).
10. 'known as Vulture Peak Rock': 'On one occasion I was living at Rājagaha on the Vulture Peak Rock', *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Cūladukkhakkhandha Sutta* (14:15).
11. 'with the help of a simile intelligent people': *Aṅguttara Nikāya* 10:95. This explanatory clause is an oral filler repeated, for example, in *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Mahāvedalla Sutta* (43:22) and *Sandaka Sutta* (76:60).
12. 'repeated verbatim by Sāriputta: *Dīgha Nikāya*, *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta* (16:1.17) and *Sampasādaniya Sutta* (28:2); also *Saṃyutta Nikāya* V [Mahāvagga] 47:12.
13. 'As Nāgasena declared': To King Milinda: 'If any man shall ask me a question involving Readiness in Speaking, to him I shall explain one exposition by another exposition ...' *Milindapañha* V, 'A Question Solved by Inference' [PTS 339]. The 'Questions of Milinda' is a non-canonical collection of (probably imaginary) dialogues between Menander, King of Bactria (c. 150-110 BCE), and the sage Nāgasena. If conducted in Greek, the debate must have been later translated into Pali.
14. 'The Great Khan deciphered the signs': Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities* (1972), translated by William Weaver (London: Secker & Warburg, 1974), part 1, conclusion and part 2, conclusion.
15. 'Wat Pah Nanachat': near Ubon Rajathani in northeast Thailand.
16. 'cut off at the root, like a palm-tree stump': *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Aggivaṃṇasagotta Sutta* (72:19); *Aṅguttara Nikāya* 4:36.
17. 'an odd protuberance from the cranium': It was the Gandhāra sculptors, familiar with Greek deities in human form, who invented the Buddha-image: often moustached, with protuberant top-knot, elongated earlobes and an occasional suggestion of a Third Eye. Usually standing, their figures are draped in a roman toga and shod in African sandals planted on acanthus leaves. Excavations at Taxila, east of the Khyber Pass, in the 1920s proved that this Hellenized Bactrian and Scythian school lasted from

the first century BCE, through the Kushan period, to the fifth century CE. See John Boardman, *The Diffusion of Classical Art in Antiquity* (Thames and Hudson, 1994).

18. 'Thirty-two ... "Marks of a Great Man"': See *Dīgha Nikāya Ambaṭṭha Sutta* (3:1.3-1.5), *Mahāpadāna Sutta* (14:1.32) and *Lakkhaṇa Sutta* (30, *passim*).

19. 'his tongue ... could lick both ear-holes': 'Then the Blessed One extended his tongue and repeatedly touched both ear-holes, both nostrils, and covered the whole of his forehead with his tongue', *Majjhima Nikāya, Brahmāyu Sutta* (91:7 and 30) and *Sela Sutta* (92:14).

20. 'wheels with a thousand spokes': *Majjhima Nikāya, Brahmāyu Sutta* (91:9) and *Aṅguttara Nikāya* 4:36.

21. 'Even his male member': The Brahman student Uttara and his master saw 'what should be hidden by a cloth enclosed in a sheath' (*Majjhima Nikāya, Brahmāyu Sutta* [91]); the Brahman Seta too saw 'the male organ enclosed by a sheath' (*Majjhima Nikāya, Sela Sutta* [92]); as did the youth Ambaṭṭha and his Brahman master (*Dīgha Nikāya, Ambaṭṭha Sutta* [3:2.11-2.12 and 2.18-2.19]). Naturally this roused curiosity in later generations and the subject was resuscitated in the *Milindapañha* IV, 'The Dilemmas', 3.3 [PTS 167-168].

22. 'the "memoria technical" of the Renaissance': Derived from Greek and Roman precedents. See Frances A. Yates, *Theatre of the World* (1969).

23. 'Chariot-according-to-the-Dhamma': *Saṃyutta Nikāya* V [Mahāvagga] 4:36. See ch. 1, note 31.

24. 'elevenfold characteristics of a good herdsman': *Majjhima Nikāya, Mahāgopālaka Sutta* (3:15).

25. 'how do barley reapers reap the barley?': *Milindapañha* II, 'Distinguishing Marks' 8 [PTS 33].

26. 'a black and a white ox bound together by one rope': *Saṃyutta Nikāya* IV [Saḷāyatanavagga] 35:232.

27. 'as utterly pure and polished as a conch-shell': e.g. *Majjhima Nikāya, Mahāsaccaka Sutta* (36:12 and 100) and *Saṅgārava Sutta* (100:9).

28. 'the Fire Sermon, preached at Gayā Scarp': Where Kassapa of Uruvēla, Kassapa of the River and Kassapa of Gaya, with their thousand followers, tossed their coiled braids and 'implements for fire-worship' into the River Nerañjarā. See ch. 2, note 90.

29. 'Just as the great ocean has only one taste': *Āṅuttara Nikāya* 8:19-20. See ch. 1, note 30.
30. 'coming across honeycake': *Āṅuttara Nikāya* 5:194. The Buddha himself had allowed the *Madhupiṇḍaka Sutta* (*Majjhima Nikāya*, *Madhupiṇḍika Sutta* [18]) to be entitled the 'Honey-Ball' or 'Sweetmeat' *Sutta*. See ch. 3, note 25.
31. 'a fast walker': *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Vitakkasaṇṭhāna Sutta* (20:6).
32. 'a herdsman must tap and poke his cows': *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Dvedhāvittakka Sutta* (19:7).
33. 'a banyan overrun by creepers': 'Moisture-born and self-begotten ... like the Māluvā-creeper entwining the forest', *Saṃyutta Nikāya* I [Sagāthāvagga] 10:3.
34. 'a farmer with a large plough': *Saṃyutta Nikāya* III [Khandhavagga] 22:102.
35. 'Master Gotama praised meditation in many a figure': *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Gopakamoggallāna Sutta* (108:25).
36. 'as the seed, so the fruit': 'Yādisam vapate bījaṃ/ Tādisaṃ labhate phalaṃ', *Saṃyutta Nikāya* I [Sagāthāvagga] 11:10.
37. 'a margosa seed ... a sugar-cane seed': *Āṅuttara Nikāya* 1:32.
38. 'His body was as big as a boat': *Saṃyutta Nikāya* I [Sagāthāvagga] 4:6.
39. 'as the cartwheel follows the ox's hoof': Linked inextricably step by step, *Dhammapada* 1-2.
40. 'hot coals ... freshly squeezed milk': *Dhammapada* 71.
41. 'Just as a carpenter's adze ... or sea-going boat': *Saṃyutta Nikāya* III [Khandhavagga] 22:101. See ch. 3, note 4. Cf. the metamorphosis of milk, ch. 1, pp. 4-5.
42. 'Remove one sheaf and the other will fall': To suggest the interdependence of consciousness (*viññāṇa*) supporting *nāma-rūpa* and *nāma-rūpa* supporting consciousness, *Saṃyutta Nikāya* [Nidānavagga] 12:67. See ch. 1, p. 19.
43. 'the leper "with sores and abscesses"': *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Māgandiya Sutta* (75:18-22). See ch. 2, p. 57.
44. 'Coleridge labelled "esemplastic"': Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, ch. 13, 'On the imagination, or esemplastic power' (1817).

45. 'like the moon appearing from behind a cloud': *Dhammapada* 172.
46. 'a sick man not returning to his vomit': *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Sunakkhatta Sutta* (105:11, 13, 15 and 17).
47. 'As the rafters of a house ... lead up to the ridge-pole': *Milindapañha* II, 'Distinguishing Marks', 13.
48. 'Just as the beams of a sloping roof all rise': *Saṃyutta Nikāya* II [Nidānavagga] 20:1.
49. 'Builder, you've been seen!': *Dhammapada* 154. See ch. 1, pp. 14-15.
50. 'For countless births I wandered': *Dhammapada* 153.
51. 'Just as an old worn-out cart': *Dīgha Nikāya*, *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta* (16:2.25).
52. 'positive freedom ... and negative freedom': Isaiah Berlin's dichotomy from 'Two Concepts of Liberty', Inaugural Lecture at the University of Oxford, 31 October 1958.
53. 'Suppose a man borrowed a loan': *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Mahā-Assapura Sutta* (39:14). See also *Dīgha Nikāya*, *Sāmaññaphala Sutta* (2:69-73), addressed to King Ajātasattu of Magadha.
54. 'Therefore let yourself ... be your refuge': *Dīgha Nikāya*, *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta* (16:2.26).
55. 'The ocean! The ocean!': *Saṃyutta* IV [Saḷāyatanavagga] 35:232.
56. 'how many wonders do the Asuras': Like the Greek Titans, the Asuras were engaged in constant battle with the gods (or devas). They dwelt in the ocean with the *nāgas* (dragons or sea-serpents), *Aṅguttara Nikāya* 8:19.
57. 'a widespread fascination with cryptic meanings': Such as the interpretation of dreams, deciphered in the same doctrinal manner, *Aṅguttara Nikāya* 5:196.

5. ALLEGORY AND PARABLE

1. 'Self-sufficient they lurk ... within the very reality': 'A Symbol ... always partakes of the Reality which it renders intelligible; and while it enunciates the whole, abides itself as a living part in that Unity, of which it is the representative': Coleridge, *Lay Sermons: The Statesman's Manual* (1816).
2. 'aesthetic presentation framed "almost at will"': See Hannah Arendt, Introduction to Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* (London: Cape, 1970), p. 13.

3. 'its pervasive dualism of "meaning and reality"': Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, translated by John Osborne (London: New Left Books, 1977), p. 194. See 'Allegory and Trauerspiel', pp. 159-235, passim.
4. 'like this insubstantial pageant faded': Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, Act IV, 155-156.
5. 'which cannot be stopped by a monk, or Brahman': *Vinaya-piṭaka: Mahāvagga* 1:6 [PTS vol. 4, 12]. See the sculptured reliefs from Amāvāṭi, now in the British Museum. Bharahut, Bodh Gayā and Sanchi are other early precincts especially rich in emblematic representations of the Buddha.
6. 'Just as a blue or red or white lotus': *Aṅguttara Nikāya* 4:36. For the padumam lotus, see also the *Sutta Nipāta*: 'Even as a drop of water besmeared neither lotus-leaf nor lotus-flower ...' (812); and 'even as the white lotus is sullied neither by water nor mud ...' (845).
7. 'the impossibility for the language of poetry to appropriate anything': Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust* (Yale University Press, 1980).
8. 'surgeon-physician': 'The "surgeon's probe" is a term for mindfulness [*sāti*]; his "knife", for Noble Wisdom [*paññā*] ... draining the wound of "pus" [or ignorance]', *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Sunakkhatta Sutta* (105:27).
9. 'pioneer "of the undiscovered way"': *Saṃyutta Nikāya* III [Khandhavagga] 22:58.
10. 'head of a caravan': 'Satthavāha', *Nidāna* I, 446.
11. 'a yokel directing travellers': *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Gaṇakamoggallāna Sutta* (107:14).
12. 'Take the right-hand fork': *Saṃyutta Nikāya* III [Khandhavagga] 22:84.
13. 'a forested range, home to a herd of deer': *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Dvedhāvitakka Sutta* (19:25).
14. 'a watchful *sāti* ... as keeper of the single gate': As Sāriputta concluded in the *Sampasādanīya Sutta* (*Dīgha Nikāya*, 28.2): 'In the same way, venerable sir, I have come to possess knowledge by inference from personal experience (*dhammanvaya ñāṇa*)'; or (at *Saṃyutta Nikāya* V [Mahāvagga] 47:12): 'So, too, Lord, a certainty about the Dhamma is known to me.' See ch. 4, note 13.

15. 'Zen masters ... the "Gateless Gate": The Wu-men Kuan, or *Mumonkan* in Japanese: a collection of 48 Tang kōans with a commentary by the Sung master Wu-men (1183-1260), *Mumon* in Japanese, edited and translated by Robert Aitken in *The Gateless Barrier* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1990).
16. 'With entire mindfulness he breathes in': *Dīgha Nikāya, Mahāsatipatṭhāna Sutta* (22:244).
17. 'True, mindfulness may occasionally lapse': *Saṃyutta Nikāya* IV [Saḷāyatanavagga] 35:244.
18. 'Great King! It's just as when ...': *Dīgha Nikāya, Sāmaññaphala Sutta* (2:75-98) (addressed to King Ajātasattu of Magadha). In Pali, the blue, red and white lotuses are the *uppala*, *paduma* and *puṇḍarika* varieties. Cf. also *Majjhima Nikāya, Mahā-Assapura Sutta* (39) and *Mahāsakuludāyi Sutta* (77).
19. 'one "bathed with the inner bathing": *Majjhima Nikāya, Vatthūpama Sutta* (7:25).
20. 'pleasure that has nothing to do with sensual desires': *Majjhima Nikāya, Bodhirājakumāra Sutta* (85:32). Cf. *Cūḷadukkhakkhandha Sutta* (14:5).
21. 'unremitting pleasure': *Majjhima Nikāya, Cūḷadukkhakkhandha Sutta* (14:23). Cf. *Cūḷasakuludāyi Sutta* (79:27).
22. 'one should not be afraid of such pleasure, I say': *Majjhima Nikāya, Laṭṭhikopama Sutta* (66:24). For a hedonistic calculus (maximizing pleasure and minimizing pain) based on a ready-reckoner of two, three, five, six, eighteen, thirty-six and one-hundred-and-eight different 'kinds of feeling', see *Majjhima Nikāya, Bahuvedanīya Sutta* (59:5).
23. 'Friends, it's like a soiled cloth': *Saṃyutta Nikāya* III [Khandhavagga] 22:89.
24. 'But their moral value remains mysterious': See Mahā-Moggallāna's 'Dhamma talk on the marvels of psychic power' given to the five hundred schismatic monks abducted by Devadatta: *Vinaya-piṭaka, Cullavagga* 7:4 [PTS vol. 5, 198-201].
25. 'the artistry of potters ... for psychic power': See ch. 3, pp. 74-76 [80-82 in original].
26. 'in the heat of the dry season a parched and exhausted traveller': *Majjhima Nikāya, Mahāsīhanāda Sutta* (12:42) and *Cūḷa-Assapura Sutta* (40:13).

27. 'the lesson of the five bowls of water': *Saṃyutta Nikāya* V [Mahāvagga] 45:55.

28. 'At sunrise, when the sun's rays ...': *Saṃyutta Nikāya* V [Mahāvagga] 48:42; cf. also II [Nidānavagga] 12:64.

29. 'a bull's hide ... freed from folds': *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Cūḷasuṇṇata Sutta* (121:5).

30. 'a king's chest ... so packed with gorgeous robes': *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Mahāgosinga Sutta* (32:9).

31. '*Alagaddūpama Sutta* ... *Potaliya Sutta*': *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Alagaddūpama Sutta* (22:3-8) and *Potaliya Sutta* (54:15-21).

32. 'kernels, or remnants, or memos, of familiar stories': See ch. 8, pp. 287-288.

33. 'the seventh ... as odd man out': The final three similes, I suspect, were later additions: the 'slaughterhouse' (number eight) echoes the 'bones' and 'lump of flesh'; the piercing 'palisade' (number nine) parallels the 'pit of burning coals'; the 'snake's head' (number ten) is a warning to tread warily.

For the association of sensuality with raw meat, compare the monk whom the Buddha saw loitering, on his alms-round, near a fig-tree in Benares. 'Bhikkhu! Bhikkhu!' he called, 'on him who is rotten and reeks with the stench of carrion the flies will surely settle ... they cannot fail to do so,' *Aṅguttara Nikāya* 3:128.

34. 'Imagine a tree blossoming': In another version, the tree 'abounds in fruit'. But risking life and limb for flowers seems even more reckless than plundering fruit.

35. 'that seeing they may see, and not perceive': Mark 4:12.

36. 'In the words of one Gnostic master': Monoimus quoted by his student Hippolytus, a Greek-speaking Christian in Rome (c. 225 CE). Hippolytus had heard of Brahman *gnosis*, 'through which the secret mysteries are perceived by the wise', perhaps from Buddhist missionaries proselytizing in Alexandria. See Edward Conze, 'Buddhism and Gnosis', in *Le Origini dello Gnosticismo* (Leiden: Brill, 1967).

37. 'According to the Gospel of Thomas': 45:29-33 and 50:28-30. Cf. the author of the Treatise on Resurrection to his student Rheginos: 'Do not think of resurrection as an illusion [φαντασίᾱ]. It is not an illusion, but truth ... Indeed, it is more accurate to call the world an illusion ... It is the

revelation of what is, and the transformation of things, and a transition into newness ... Why not consider yourself risen and [already] brought to this?' (47.18-49.24). Cf. also the opening claim of the *Apocryphon of John*, that it will reveal 'the mysteries (and the) things hidden in silence' (1:2-3), with the opening of the *Gospel of Thomas*: 'These are the secret words which the living Jesus spoke ...'

38. 'the ur-evangelist, Mark ... allegorizing a parable': The Parable of the Sower, 4:14-20.

39. 'the mystery of the kingdom of God': Mark 4:11-12.

40. 'two other allegorical interpretations ... by an evangelist': The Parable of the Tares and Parable of the Dragnet, both in Matthew 13.

41. 'a Hellenistic aberration': Just as allegorical interpretations of Olympian myths were Philo's model for his treatment of biblical stories.

42. 'parables ... as esoteric vehicles for mystification': See Frank Kermode: 'The whole passage about seeing and hearing comes from Isaiah (6:9-10), though Mark, in paraphrasing it, does not say so. What Matthew does is to quote Isaiah directly and with acknowledgement, so that the lines retain a trace of their original tone of slightly disgusted irony' (*The Genesis of Secrecy*, Harvard University Press, 1979, ch. 2, p. 30). Yet elsewhere Matthew, too, strikes a distinctly gnostic note. When asked by his disciples why he spoke only in parables, he replied: 'Because it is given unto you to know the mysteries [μυστηρία] of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it is not given' (13:11).

The Gnostic leader and poet Valentinus (c. 140 CE), who had travelled from Egypt to teach in Rome, claimed to have learned Paul's secret teachings ('unspeakable words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter', 2 Corinthians 12:4) from Theudas, one of Paul's disciples. See Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyon (c. 180 CE), in his *Libros Quinque Adversus Haereses*, a polemic for 'The Destruction and Overthrow of Falsely So-called Gnosis'.

43. 'no "teacher's closed fist"': In conversation with Ānanda, shortly before his death, *Dīgha Nikāya*, *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta* (16:2.25) and *Saṃyutta Nikāya* V [Mahāvagga] 47:9.

44. 'a stage for human craving ... rage ... and delusion': In Pali, the three categories of mental defilement are *lobha/rāga* (greed/lust), *dosa/kodha* (hatred/anger) and *moha* (delusion).

45. 'the Parable of the Talents': Matthew 25:14-30 and Luke 19:12-27. Other parables appearing in several, if not all three, of the Synoptic Gospels are located here by a single reference: The Unforgiving Servant, Matthew 18:23-35; The Unjust Steward, Luke 16:1-8; The Labourers in the Vineyard, Matthew 20:1-16; The Wicked Husbandmen, Mark 12:1-9; The Good Samaritan, Luke 10:30-37; The Ten Virgins, Matthew 25:1-13; The Prodigal Son, Luke 15:11-32.

46. 'Well, Prince, consider this parable': Kūmara-Kassapa to convince Prince Pāyāsi that there is life after death: *Dīgha Nikāya*, *Pāyāsi Sutta* (23:9), introducing a set of thirteen parables.

47. 'A parable, monks, I gave to you': *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Dvedhāvitaṅga Sutta* (19:26).

48. 'Hebrew *mashal*, meaning "riddle"': See Frank Kermode: 'Sometimes the Greek word is also used to translate *hidah*, meaning "riddle". Riddle and parable may be much the same', *The Genesis of Secrecy*, ch. 2, p. 23.

49. 'one single point of comparison': C. H. Dodd, in the wake of Adolph Julicher, Rudolf Bultmann and A. T. Cadoux, *The Parables of the Kingdom* (James Nisbet, 1935), p. 18.

50. 'entices the hearer to a judgment': C. H. Dodd, p. 21.

51. 'Go, and do thou likewise': Concluding the Parable of the Good Samaritan, Luke 10:37.

52. 'THOU ART THE MAN!': Denouncing David for his abduction of Bathsheba, 2 Samuel 12:7.

53. 'with a village headman': Called Asibandhakaputta. Nālandā, his village, was to become the site of the great future international Buddhist university (housing some 10,000 students at the height of its popularity), that flourished from at least the second to the seventh century CE, then gradually contracting until ravaged by an Afghan army in 1197. Yet even in 1235, at the time of a second Muslim onslaught, two monasteries with some seventy monks survived.

54. 'more fully to some than to others': *Sakkaccaṃ*, in Pali, meaning more 'carefully', and so more 'thoroughly', *Saṃyutta Nikāya* IV [Saḷāyatanavagga] 42:7.

55. 'my bhikkhus and bhikkhunis': My monks and nuns.

56. 'male and female lay-followers': Literally *ūpasakas* and *ūpasikās*; 'wandering recluses', literally *samaṇas*.
57. 'there went out a sower to sow': Mark 4:3-8. Cf. also Matthew 13:38 (with its explication, 13:18-23) and Luke 8:58 (with its explication, 8:9-15).
58. 'a notably clumsy and uncharacteristic gloss': Mark 4:14-20. The allegorization is clumsy in its apparent identification of hearers with the seed sown rather than (as in the Buddha's parable) with various types of soil and their potential crops.
59. 'the Tathāgata has two ways of teaching': *Aṅguttara Nikāya* 2:14.
60. 'aware of the right time': *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Abhayarājakumāra Sutta* (58:8).
61. 'Thus, Bāhiya, you should train yourself': *Dhammapada Commentary* ii, 209-10, 216 and *Udāna* 1:10. *Dārucīriya* literally means 'of the Bark Garment'.
62. 'the leper Suppabuddha': *Udāna* 5:3.
63. 'a relay of seven coaches': *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Rathavinīta Sutta* (24).
64. 'that the essence of nibbāna is attachment!': Literally 'he would have described what is still accompanied by clinging as nibbāna through not clinging', *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Rathavinīta Sutta* (24:12).
65. 'this clinging vine ... known in English as the "killer" creeper': See Kenneth Anderson, 'The Evil One of Umbalmeru', *The Call of the Man-Eater* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1961), pp. 58-59.
66. 'the least twinge of lust': *kāma*, 'sensual desire', in its root sense, denotes 'sexual pleasure'.
67. 'the "soft, tender, downy touch" of a female embrace': The Buddha had specifically warned his monks against wandering nuns with hair coiled up into top-knots; even from contemplating how pleasant it would be to feel 'a wandering woman's soft, tender, downy arms', *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Cūladhammasamādāna Sutta* (45:3). Cf. 'The touch of the woman-treasure is like that of a tuft of kapok or wad of cotton-wool. When it is cool, her limbs are warm; when it is warm, her limbs are cool ...' *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Bālappaṇḍita Sutta* (129:39).
68. 'a tall Sāl tree': *Shorea robusta*, yielding teak-like timber and dammar resin.
69. 'the hamadryad': In Greek and Roman mythology, a nymph who lives in a tree and dies when it dies.

6. FIGURES IN THE LANDSCAPE

1. 'an unrivalled picture of Hindu ... culture': Just as Jesus's parables present 'a singularly complete and convincing picture ... of life in a small provincial town – probably a more complete picture of *petit-bourgeois* and peasant life than we possess for any other province of the Roman Empire except Egypt, where papyri come to our aid', C. H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom*, ch. 1, p. 20. Cf. also Dodd, *The Authority of the Bible* (James Nisbet, 1929), for a mosaic of daily life in first century Galilee pieced together from the parables (part II, ch. 6, pp. 144–148).

2. 'suppose a baby was laid on its back': *Āṅguttara Nikāya* 5:7.

3. 'When Prince Abhaya was dandling a baby': *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Abhayarājakumāra Sutta* (58:10–11).

4. 'he identifies with ... In fact, he is the nurse': Cf. 'it was not the mere Nurse in *Romeo and Juliet* ... but it was this great & mighty Being changing himself into the Nurse ...', as Coleridge admiringly said of Shakespeare's protean imagination, *Lectures 1808–1819: On Literature*, edited by R. A. Foakes (Princeton 1987), vol. 1, p. 225.

5. 'Suppose someone were to chuck a stone ball ... to hurl a ball of string': *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Kāyagatāsati Sutta* (119:45 and 49).

6. "'Vanish earth! Vanish earth!": *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Kakacūpama Sutta* (21:13).

7. 'laid aside weapons ... abandoned sexual play': *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Kandaraka Sutta* (51:16) and *Dīgha Nikāya*, *Brahmajāla Sutta* (1:1.8–1.10).

8. 'the Nepali Terai': A small part of which is now Nepal's Chitwan National Park with its elephants, wild buffalo, gaur (wild cattle), fish-eating crocodiles and one-horned rhinoceros. ('Walk alone like a rhinoceros', the *Khaggavisana Sutta* advises.) But no Royal Bengal Tigers it seems. Two and a half thousand years ago few tigers had yet crossed the Himalayas from Manchuria and Siberia to displace – and ultimately exterminate – the native Asiatic lion.

9. 'it rapidly reswallowed towns and villages': Cf. 'It's just as if someone wandering through the jungle came across an ancient road and following it should find a royal city, inhabited by men of former times, with its ponds and groves and walls ...' *Saṃyutta Nikāya* II [Nidānavagga] 12:65.

10. 'a haunt for robbers and runaway slaves': see *Vinaya-piṭaka: Mahāvagga* 1:47 [PTS: vol. 4, 76].
11. 'a special force of uniformed police': *Saṃyutta Nikāya* IV [Saṃyatanavagga] 42:13.
12. 'elected (or possibly hereditary) headman': See Asibandhakaputta, Headman of Nālandā (ch. 5, note 53).
13. 'a bhikkhu's "patched robe"': *Vinaya-piṭaka: Mahāvagga* 8:12 [PTS: vol. 4, 287].
14. 'a single herdsman drove all the village cattle': Who knew each beast and was skilled at picking flies' eggs from their hides or lighting smoky fires to fend off gnats, 'expertly crossing at fords, stopping at watering-holes, choosing pasture, leaving milk in the cows' udders and respecting the leader of the herd', *Majjhima Nikāya, Mahāgopālaka Sutta* (33). Cf. *Aṅguttara Nikāya* 11:17 and *Jātaka* 413 [PTS: vol. 3, 401.]
15. 'Magadha ... reputedly had 80,000 villages': An infinite number, see *Vinaya-piṭaka: Mahāvagga* 5:1 [PTS: vol. 4, 180].
16. 'THE JUNGLE': Sanskrit, *jāṅgal*. Not every allusion is annotated, especially details derived from the *Dhammapada*.
17. 'hermits ... their retreats': Literally *rishis* (Sanskrit, *ṛṣi*; Pali, *ṛṣi*), often with a reputation for magic powers.
18. 'Every roaming deer ... even a peacock': 'I dwelt in such awe-inspiring abodes as orchard shrines, forest shrines and tree shrines, where every roaming deer would startle me ...' *Majjhima Nikāya, Bhayabherava Sutta* (4:20).
19. 'even chariots ... in the pursuit of boars': *Vinaya-piṭaka: Mahāvagga* 10:2 [PTS vol. 4, 346].
20. 'Angulimāla ... boasted about how he could outrace': *Majjhima Nikāya, Angulimāla Sutta* (86:5).
21. 'whirling their flickering arms ...': *Jātakamāla* xvi.
22. 'Reeds grew along the streams': *kaṣṭha*, a kind of bamboo.
23. 'the young Devadatta, aim his bow': *The Romantic Legend of Sakya Buddha*, trans. S. Beal (London, 1875), ch. xii, 1, pp. 72-73.
24. 'following the path of the sun': *Dhammapada* 91 and 175.

25. 'laboriously punted upstream': *'uddham-soto*, "he who goes upstream", against the current of passions and worldly life', *Dhammapada* 218.
26. 'a herdsman fording his cattle': 'He made the bulls, the fathers and leaders of the herd, cross over first, and they breasted the stream of the Ganges ...' *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Cūḷagopālaka Sutta* (34:4).
27. 'monsoons could devastate a sleeping village': *Dhammapada* 47 and 287.
28. 'a square pond ... a dyke round a great reservoir': *Vinaya-piṭaka: Cullavagga* 10.1 [PTS vol. 5, 253-256]. Cf. also *Āṅguttara Nikāya* 8:51.
29. 'a heated dispute between the Sakyans and the Koliyans': *Jātaka* 536 [PTS vol. 5, 412-414].
30. 'stooping to slice his sickle through grass': *Āṅguttara Nikāya* 5:7. Thatching-grass is to be distinguished from razor-sharp *kusa*-grass which, 'wrongly grasped, will cut one's hand' (*Dhammapada* 311), though it too could be woven into fabric (*Majjhima Nikāya*, *Mahāsihanāda Sutta* [12:45] and *Kandaraka Sutta* [51:8]).
31. 'a whole family in white surrounding the pyre': *Jātaka* 354 [PTS vol. 3, 163].
32. 'squat at the pits ... or even tumble into the cess': Cf. the anecdote in *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Laṭukikopama Sutta* (66:6) with the image of the damned in *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Mahāsihanāda Sutta* (12:38) and the parable in *Dīgha Nikāya*, *Pāyāsi Sutta* (23:9).
33. 'clumps of sugarcane': *Vinaya-piṭaka: Cullavagga* 10:1 [PTS vol. 5, 256]; *Āṅguttara Nikāya* 8:51.
34. 'their backs bent, their hair dishevelled ...': *The Romantic Legend of Sakya Buddha*, ch. xii, 2, pp. 73-74.
35. 'the father hoisting the plough': *Saṃyutta Nikāya* I [Sagāthāvagga] 4:19 (Māra in masquerade).
36. 'drove as far as the road was passable ...': *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Dhammacetiya Sutta* (89:6) and *Dīgha Nikāya*, *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta* (16:1.3, 2.14, etc).
37. 'commandeer all suitable village housing': 'And the inhabitants who had to evacuate ... watch from afar wondering, "When are they going to go?"' *Khuddaka-Pāṭha, Commentary* 232-235.
38. 'still dressed as robbers after spying ...': *Saṃyutta Nikāya* I [Sagāthāvagga] 3:11 and *Udāna* 6:2.

39. 'wandering lepers, like Suppabuddha': *Udāna* 5:3.
40. 'the odd Brahman with a carrying-pole': *Dīgha Nikāya*, *Ambaṭṭha Sutta* (3:2.3).
41. 'ragged beggars': The Buddha specifically prohibited his monks from begging: *Vinaya-piṭaka: Suttavibhanga*, *Sanghādisesa* 6 [PTS vol. 1, 145-148].
42. 'abuse or censure their opponents': *Āṅguttara Nikāya* 3:65.
43. 'cloaks of owl-feathers or "owls' wings"': *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Mahāsīhanāda Sutta* (12:45) and *Kandaraka Sutta* (51:8).
44. 'Some imitated dogs': *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Kukkuravatika Sutta* (57, *passim*) and *Dīgha Nikāya*, *Pāṭika Sutta* (24:1.7-1.10).
45. 'oxen tethered to the wheels': *Jātaka* 1 [PTS vol. 1, 98 ff.]. Cf. *Dīgha Nikāya*, *Pāyāsi Sutta* (23:23).
46. 'cottages, were thatched': Like the house of Ghaṭikāra, the potter (*Majjhima Nikāya*, *Ghaṭikāra Sutta* [81:21]). For outside ovens, see *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Sela Sutta* (92:4).
47. 'sparks from a ... careless lamp': *Milindapañha* II, 'Distinguishing Marks' 6 [PTS 47].
48. 'a barn ... once sheltered the Buddha during a thunderstorm': *Dīgha Nikāya*, *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta* (16:4.30) ff.
49. 'cattle in staked-out pens': *Sutta Nipāta* 36.
50. 'screened by hibiscus': also mentioned 'with its red glow' at *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Mahāsakuludāyi Sutta* (77:23).
51. 'especially prized for religious offerings': That is, ceremonial food for the devas. See *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Cūlasaccaka Sutta* (35:29).
52. 'horse-traders setting up their "market rings"': *Vinaya-piṭaka: Suttavibhanga*, *Pārājika* 1:2 [PTS vol. 1, 6].
53. 'Royal Annual Ploughing Festival': *Sutta Nipāta* 12-14. See *Jātaka Nidāna* for a city event with the king personally driving a gilded plough; his ministers, silver ploughs.
54. 'setting off ... to bathe': *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Ghaṭikāra Sutta* (81:7).
55. 'throwing mud-pies': *Saṃyutta Nikāya* III [Khandhavagga] 23:2.

56. 'catching crabs in the village pond': *Saṃyutta Nikāya* I [Sagāthāvagga] 4:24; *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Cūḷasaccaka Sutta* (35:27).

57. 'miniature ploughs ... model chariots': *Dīgha Nikāya*, *Brahmajāla Sutta* (1:1.14).

58. 'ubiquitous hawking and spitting': Expressly discouraged when the Buddha was teaching, *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Mahāsakuludāyī Sutta* (77:6).

59. 'shouts of "Crazy fool! Crazy fool!"': *Dhammapada Commentary* ii, 260-270.

60. 'And don't forget ... your kids!': *Jātaka* 536 [PTS vol. 5, 413].

61. 'menial black fellows': (Dravidians, that is) in a Brahman's scornful phrase addressing the Buddha, *Dīgha Nikāya*, *Ambaṭṭha Sutta* (3:1.10 and 2.5). But the Buddha disdained such caste attitudes. 'The Tathāgatha teaches Dhamma to the multitude, even when they are only fowlers ...', *Aṅguttara Nikāya* 3:120-121.

The Buddha not only abolished caste division but denied any racial differentiation between Aryans and non-Aryans and Aborigines. The family of man, he argued, is physically homogeneous, unlike the diversification of all other species: grass, trees, moths, butterflies, quadrupeds, snakes, fish, birds, etc. 'With men no differences of birth make a distinctive mark', *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Vāseṭṭha Sutta* (98:9, verse 14).

62. 'liquor, wine or fermented brew': *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Mahāsīhanāda Sutta* (12:45) and *Kandaraka Sutta* (51:8). For an image of brewers dragging a strainer through a water-tank, see *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Upāli Sutta* (56:7).

63. 'A village-treasurer's daughter ... a common labourer': *Aṅguttara Commentary* 249 ff.

64. 'favouring the lighter-skinned offspring': Thus the emphasis on the Buddha's 'golden hue'.

65. 'the sacrificial priesthood of brāhmaṇas': Guardians of the religious cult brought into India c. 1600 BCE, they not only conducted sacrifices but were learned in the three Vedas as well as initiatory mantras. For their claim to caste superiority, see *Dīgha Nikāya*, *Ambaṭṭha Sutta* (3:1.14) and the Buddha's counter-claim on behalf of the Khattiyas (3:1.24-1.28). See also *Dīgha Nikāya*, *Aggañña Sutta* (27:3).

66. 'those "of low birth" devoted to "low trades"': For the Buddha's impassioned plea that everyone should have equal access to worship, be

they of an outcast clan, or a trapper clan, or a rush-workers' clan, or a cartwrights' clan, or a scavengers' clan ...', see *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Esukāri Sutta* (96:16) and *Assalāyana Sutta* (93:11). Cf. *Kaṇṇakathala Sutta* (90:12).

67. 'The number of guilds': See *Vinaya-piṭaka: Cullavagga* 5:5 and 5:26 [PTS vol. 5, 109 and 132] and *Suttavibhanga, Nissaggiya* 30:1 and *Bhikkhuni Pācittiya* 9:1 [PTS vol. 2, 265 and 30]. In *Jātaka* 546 [PTS vol. 5, 427], only four guilds are named. See Mrs. Rhys Davids, the *Economic Journal* (1901) and *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* (1901). See also T. W. Rhys Davids, *Buddhist India* (London, 1903), ch. 6, pp. 88-97.

68. 'King Ajātasattu of Magadha ... remarking': *Dīgha Nikāya, Sāmaññaphala Sutta* (2:14). 'Secretaries' (trusted servants) literally are 'slaves' sons'.

69. 'fifteen or so miles a day': Less than two *yojanas*, that is; one *yojana* being the distance a pair of buffaloes, yoked to a cart, can pull without unyoking – say, eight to ten miles. Though the Buddha, in his aristocratic way, considered trade a minor undertaking 'involving a small amount of activity', *Majjhima Nikāya, Subha Sutta* (99:6).

70. 'a flat rooftop': Called the *upari-pāsāda-tala*. For kite-flying, visit Jaipur in Rajasthan to this day.

71. 'with gable-ends, plastered inside and out': *Ariguttara Nikāya* 3:35 and *Majjhima Nikāya, Mahāsakuludāyī Sutta* (77:9).

72. 'dyers (with their colouring vats)': Such as 'Master Redhand', *Majjhima Nikāya, Upāli Sutta* (56:27).

73. 'fletchers ... silversmiths ... blacksmiths ... carpenters': *Dhammapada* 33, 154, 156, 239, and 308.

74. 'holding up a pair of scales ... These are my sons': *Dhammapada* 268 and 62.

75. 'the *Inda-khīla*, or "locking-post": Hammered eight-to-ten feet into the ground, at the centre of the city-gateway's threshold, to hold fast the double gates; home of the city's guardian-spirit. Since it was buried to half its height in the earth, 'Firm as an Inda-post' became a proverbial saying. See *Dhammapada* 95; and *Dīgha Nikāya, Pāsādika Sutta* (29:26). For 'bejewelled', see *Mahāvastu* iii, 63-64.

76. 'resplendent, symmetrical ... with all manner of holy places': *Milindapañha* V, 'A Question Solved by Inference' [PTS 330].

77. 'perfumed dandies ... flourishing staves': *Dīgha Nikāya, Ambaṭṭha Sutta* (3:2.9-2.10).

78. 'reduced ... to just ten sounds': 'Ānanda, the royal city of Kusāvati was never silent by day and night ...' *Dīgha Nikāya, Mahāparinibbāna Sutta* (16:5.18).

79. 'cotton *dhotis* ... white muslin': Wholesale cotton and muslin manufacture was centred in Benares (Vārāṇāsī). Brahman cups and bowls were for their own exclusive use.

80. 'some noisy homecoming party': *Dhammapada* 219.

81. 'a household slave escorting a ... merchant': Such slaves attended to their master's physical needs, such as washing his feet.

82. 'gamblers ... tossing dice': *Jātaka* 545 [PTS vol. 6, 281]. Cf. also 62 [vol. 1, 290] and 327 [vol. 3, 91]. For various forms of cheating, see *Dīgha Nikāya, Pāyāsi Sutta* (23:27) and *Jātaka* 91 [vol. 1, 380].

83. 'a "lucky" or "unlucky" throw': *Āṅguttara Nikāya* 3:65. See ch. 7, notes 37 and 38.

84. 'Sirimā ... of Rājagaha, or Ambapali of Vesālī': *Dhammapada Commentary* iii, 104-109 and *Dīgha Nikāya, Mahāparinibbāna Sutta* (16:2.14-2.19).

85. 'relays of three four-hour shifts': Wooden blocks were struck for the beginning of the First Watch, that lasted from 6.00 p.m. to 10.00 p.m.; and again to mark the Middle Watch from 10.00 p.m. to 2.00 a.m.; and again to mark the Final Watch from 2.00 a.m. to 6.00 a.m.

86. 'the houses in this city ... nothing but holes': *Āṅguttara Commentary* 220-224.

87. 'the South Gate': Also known as the 'Cemetery Gate' (*sīvathika* or *āmaka-susāna*), *Dīgha Nikāya, Sāmaññaphala Sutta* (2:23); *Jātaka* 51, 398 and 537 [PTS vol. 1, 264, vol. 3, 330 and vol. 5, 458].

88. 'first the poor died ...': At Vesālī, *Khuddakapāṭha Commentary* 160-165.

89. 'to the loud beating of a single drum': *Vinaya-piṭaka: Mahāvagga* 10:2 [PTS vol. 4, 344].

90. 'beheaded ... impaled ... hacked': For 'lashing', see *Āṅguttara Commentary* 220-224; for beheading, *Dīgha Nikāya, Pāyāsi Sutta* (23:7); for impaling, *Jātaka* 444 [PTS vol. 4, 29] and 538 [vol. 6, 10]; for quartering, *Vinaya-piṭaka: Mahāvagga* 10:2 [PTS vol. 4, 344-345].

91. 'the "burning-ground"': *Jātaka* 166 [PTS vol. 2, 54-56].

92. 'a memorial mound ... or *stūpa*': *Vinaya-piṭaka: Suttavibhanga*, Bhikkhuni Pācittiya 52:1 [PTS vol. 3, 308].

93. 'King Pasenadi died, homeless as King Lear': From exposure, in the open rest-house.

The most loyal of the Buddha's royal supporters both came to a bad end; both usurped by their own sons. King Pasenadi (the Buddha's exact contemporary) was abandoned in Sakyan territory, where he was paying his last respects to the Buddha. King Seniya Bimbisāra, Pasenadi's brother-in-law, after voluntarily abdicating (*Vinaya-piṭaka: Cullavagga* 7:3 [PTS vol. 5, 191]), was imprisoned and starved to death at Rājagaha by his son, Ajātasattu Vedehiputta (reigned c. 491-459 BCE).

After these Machiavellian coups, the two cousins went to war: Pasenadi's son, Viḍūḍabha, overrunning the Sakyās and Koliyās; Ajātasattu conquering Vesālī, capital of the Vajjian confederacy. Whereupon he transferred his capital from Rājagaha to Pāṭaliputta (the modern Patna).

94. 'a vast, walled compound': A pattern maintained by Moghul courts, as can still be seen in Akbar's deserted city of Fatehpur Sikri.

95. 'Have you calculators enough ...?': Bhikkhuni Khemā, *Saṃyutta Nikāya* IV [Saḷāyatanavagga] 44:1.

96. 'the Hall of Justice': 'Every day ministers of justice took their seats in the place of litigation ...' *Jātaka* 151 [PTS vol. 2, 1-5].

97. 'scattered pavilions such as Suddhodana ... had built': *Aṅguttara Nikāya* 3:38 and *Mahāvastu* ii, 115-117 and 144.

98. 'the house-priest of the King': Purohitaṃ, the King's head-priest, a Brahman combining the roles of domestic chaplain and Prime Minister. See *Dīgha Nikāya, Kūṭadanta Sutta* (5:10) and *Aṅguttara Commentary*, 220 ff.

99. 'a warrior dazzling in his armour': *Dhammapada* 387.

100. 'from the magnificent bronze the gleam went/ dazzling': Homer, *Iliad* II, 457-458, trans. Richmond Lattimore (University of Chicago Press, 1951).

101. 'huge army elephants (inured to arrows)': *Dhammapada* 320.

102. 'Kesi, the horse-trainer': *Aṅguttara Nikāya* 4:111.

103. 'Channa ... who tended Kanthaka': On whose back Prince Siddhattha fled wife and child. Channa, the groom, returned with news of the Prince's renunciation to King Suddhodana; the white charger died on the spot of a broken heart: *Jātaka Nidāna* 65.

104. 'the royal painted chariot': *Dhammapada* 151 and 171. The four branches of the army, sometimes called the 'fourfold army', consisted of elephants, cavalry, chariots and infantry. See *Dīgha Nikāya*, *Kūṭadanta Sutta* (5:13) and *Mahāsudassana Sutta* (17:1.8).
105. 'storehouses and granaries': *Vinaya-piṭaka: Mahāvagga* 10:2 [PTS vol. 4, 342].
106. 'hunchbacks, dwarves ... dancing-girls in scarlet cloaks': *Dīgha Nikāya*, *Pāyāsi Sutta* (23:15) and *Mahāvastu* ii, 140.
107. 'what can be the point of renunciation ...': *Dīgha Nikāya*, *Sāmaññaphala Sutta* (2:14).
108. 'King Bimbisāra ... in his state coach': *Mahāvastu* iii, 437-440. Cf. the Brahmins and householders calling to King Mahāsudassana, as he set out for the park with his fourfold army: 'Pass slowly, Sire, that we may see you as long as possible!' (*Dīgha Nikāya*, *Mahāsudassana Sutta* [17:1.21]).
109. 'he praised the Vajjian republican system ...': *Dīgha Nikāya*, *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta* (16:1.4-1.6) and *Aṅguttara Nikāya* 7:20.
110. 'he rejected Devadatta's bid': To usurp the Sangha when he was seventy-two, in the thirty-seventh year after his Enlightenment.
111. 'What I have proclaimed as the Dhamma and the Vinaya': *Dīgha Nikāya*, *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta* (16:6.1).
112. 'the Buddhist Sangha ... no official head': *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Gopaka Moggallāna Sutta* (108, especially paras. 7 to 9).
113. 'the 220-man Sangha of the Licchavi Federation': Drawn from the 7707-strong warrior caste. Their elected head governed for a seven-month term.
114. 'news of the Buddha's imminent demise': *Dīgha Nikāya*, *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta* (16:5.20).
115. 'long lines of geese and quail': As can still be seen in the old palace at Kandy in Sri Lanka.
116. 'strips of ... cloth and swags of flowers': *Mahāvastu* ii, 115-117.
117. 'the preparation of a smooth ground': *Vinaya-piṭaka: Cullavagga* 11:1 [PTS vol. 5, 291].

118. “Wreath-work”, “Creeper-work” ...’: *Vinaya-piṭaka: Suttavibhanga, Bhikkhuni Pācittiya* 19 [PTS vol. 2, 47] and *Cullavagga* 5:14 [PTS vol. 5, 121].
- 119 “cittāgāra”, or “picture-gallery”: *Vinaya-piṭaka: Cullavagga* 6:3 [PTS vol. 5:151-2] and *Bhikkhuni Pācittiya* 41:1-2 [PTS vol. 3, 298].
120. ‘attended to pleasantly by his four wives’: *Aṅguttara Nikāya* 3:34.
121. ‘a canopied couch, draped by white, fleecy rugs’: *Majjhima Nikāya, Mahāsihanāda Sutta* (12:41).
122. ‘gilded and upholstered couches’: *Mahāvastu* ii, 115-117.
123. ‘the upper apartments of the Kokanada Palace’: *Majjhima Nikāya, Bodhirājakumāra Sutta* (85:3 to 9).
124. ‘doubtless the worthy Gotama can conjure’: *Aṅguttara Nikāya* 3:181-184.
125. ‘filled with so many multicoloured robes’: Sāriputta in the Gosinga Sāla Forest, *Majjhima Nikāya, Mahāgosinga Sutta* (32:9).
126. ‘Benares cotton ... radiant shades of blue’: *Majjhima Nikāya, Mahāsakuludāyī Sutta* (77:23).
127. ‘sliced off his top-knot with his sword’: *Jātaka Nidāna* 64.
128. ‘displayed his father’s turban and sword’: Which King Pasenadi had respectfully consigned to a trusted councillor on the Buddha’s porch, before knocking and entering. The minister returned post-haste to Sāvattthī with his trophies, leaving the aged King with just one horse and a serving-maid: *Majjhima Nikāya, Dhammacetiya Sutta* (89:8).
129. ‘special “umbrella cases”’: *Majjhima Nikāya, Bāhitika Sutta* (88:18).
130. ‘sandalled householders ... might hold a parasol’: Such as Potaliya in *Majjhima Nikāya, Potaliya Sutta* (54:3).
131. ‘hair sleek with oil ...’: *Theragāthā* 949 ff.
132. ‘painted his eyes with collyrium’: *Saṃyutta Nikāya* II [Nidānavagga] 21:8.
133. ‘tanks; or ... sweatbaths’: *Vinaya-piṭaka: Cullavagga* 5:14, 16 and 17; and [PTS vol. 5, 119-123]. See T. W. Rhys Davids, *Buddhist India*, p. 74.
134. ‘first the cleansing with bamboo scrapers ...’: *Dīgha Nikāya, Pāyāsi Sutta* (23:9).

135. 'rice from which the black grain had been sifted': *Mahāvastu* ii, 115-117. Cf. King Kikī of Kāsi, *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Ghaṭikāra Sutta* (81:16).
136. 'dancing, sing-songs, drum sessions': *Dīgha Nikāya*, *Brahmajāla Sutta* (1:1.13) ff, repeated verbatim in *Dīgha Nikāya*, *Sāmaññaphala Sutta* (2:43-62).
137. 'large-scale fresco decorations': The debated term, a *sobhanagarakam*, literally means 'shows from Sobha', the city of *gandhabbas*, or heavenly musicians. So perhaps the modern equivalent should rather be 'ballets' or 'pantomimes'. Just as plausibly, however, it has been taken to refer to frescoed galleries (*cittāgāra*), where human figures in motion predominated. See note 119.
138. 'scratched a memo of gifts on a palm-leaf': *Ariguttara Commentary*, 193 ff. Though it may well be that there was no writing at all yet in the Buddha's lifetime and the few allusions to it in the Pali Canon date from the third century BCE, or later. See Harry Falk, *Schrift im alten Indien* (India: Gunter Narr Verlag, 1993).
139. 'the youth, who delivered it': *Ariguttara Commentary* 251.
140. 'listening, pondering, memorizing': See *Saṃyutta Nikāya* II [Nidānavagga] 20:7.
141. 'the art of writing ... actively encouraged': *Vinaya-piṭaka: Suttavibhanga*, Bhikkhuni Pācittiya 49:2 [PTS vol. 3, 304].
142. 'the profession of scrivener': *Vinaya-piṭaka: Mahāvagga* 1:49 [PTS vol. 4, 77] and *Suttavibhanga*, Bhikkhuni Pācittiya 45:1 [PTS vol. 3, 128].
143. 'written up in the King's porch': *Vinaya-piṭaka: Mahāvagga* 1:43 [PTS vol. 4, 75].
144. 'a short, uncomplicated text': Cf. T. W. Rhys Davids, *Buddhist India*, chs. 7 and 8.
145. 'De la Grammatologie': (1967), trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore, 1976), though the opposition in *Phaedrus* is less between speaking and writing (broadly viewed) than between speech-writing (or rhetoric) and a wholly oral dialectic.
146. 'multitudinous chatter ... an oral set-piece': For the standardization of 'vulgar talk', see *Dīgha Nikāya*, *Brahmajāla Sutta* (1:1.17); *Poṭṭhapāda Sutta* (9:3); *Udumbarikasīhanāda Sutta* (25:2); *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Dīghanakha Sutta* (76:4); and *Mahāsakuludāyī Sutta* (77:4).

147. 'Jānussoni's all-white chariot': *Saṃyutta Nikāya* V [Mahāvagga], 45:4. See also ch. 1, p. 13.

148. 'Some were in blue, with blue make-up on ...': *Dīgha Nikāya*, *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta* (16:2.15-2.17).

149. 'Some notion of the Thirty-Three Gods!': Whose chief is Sakka. Like us, they live in the abodes of sense-desire (*Kāma-loka*), which are part of the ever-shifting cycle of rebirth.

150. 'my councillors interrupt me': *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Dhammacetiya Sutta* (89:13).

151. 'Mind games ... were popular': Mind-searching (*manesika*), as a guessing-game, not to be confused with telepathy (reading mental states). See *Dīgha Nikāya*, *Kevaddha Sutta* (11:6).

152. '108 Brahmins ... invited by King Suddhodana': *Jātaka Nidāna* (introduction to the *Commentary on the Jātakas*).

153. 'the ascetic Gotama': *Dīgha Nikāya*, *Brahmajāla Sutta* (1:1.21-1.27).

154. 'the Himalaya was his pillow': The Buddha dreamt this gargantuan dream while still a Bodhisattva, *Aṅguttara Nikāya* 5:196.

155. 'a lotus-pond with cool, transparent water': *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Mahāsīhanāda Sutta* (12:42).

156. 'the Venerable Sāriputta ... after nightfall': Welcoming five elders (including his younger brother, Revata), *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Mahāgosiniga Sutta* (32:4-8).

157. 'King Ajātasattu ... on his palace rooftop': On an October or November night at the end of the four-month rainy season. Literally it was 'the full-moon of the fourth month, called Komudi' (after the white water-lily, *kumuda*, which blooms then): *Dīgha Nikāya*, *Sāmaññaphala Sutta* (2:1).

158. 'King Pasenadi ... observing root-hollows': *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Dhammacetiya Sutta* (89:4).

159. 'Delightful, Ānanda, is Rājagaha ...': *Dīgha Nikāya*, *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta* (16:3.41-3.43).

160. 'ruined cities ... buried deep in the jungle': To be rediscovered by chance, just as the Buddha's Noble Eightfold Path was merely the retrieval of Dhamma taught by Buddhas long, long ago: *Saṃyutta Nikāya* II [Nidānavagga] 12:65. See note 9.

161. 'The Blessed One ... spotted a large log of wood': *Saṃyutta Nikāya* IV [Saḷāyatanavagga] 35:241. Cf. the pilot's trained eye in Mark Twain's *Life on the Mississippi* (1883).

162. 'There are no fixtures ... We live amid surfaces': Emerson, 'Circles' and 'Experience' (*Essays, First Series*, 1841, and *Second Series*, 1844).

163. 'from the charcoal furnace (of hell) ...': *Majjhima Nikāya* 12, *Mahāsihanāda Sutta*, paras. 37-42. Nibbāna derives from ni(r)-va, 'not-to-blow': viz. to cease blowing the bellows on a smith's fire; and so the cooling, and ultimately extinction, of fire. Cf. the image of the goldsmith preparing a furnace for his crucible and 'blowing on it from time to time', *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Dhātuvibhanga Sutta* (140:20).

164. 'And the pool was filled with water ...': T. S. Eliot, 'Burnt Norton' (1941), lines 35-37.

7. VERNACULAR HUMOUR

1. 'I'm Pokkharasāti's pupil': *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Vāseṭṭha Sutta* (98:7).

2. 'Of him who without *vana* leans/ to *vana*': *Dhammapada* 344. Pali poetics makes no use of rhyme, only of metrical pulses, alliteration and recurrent case endings. I have resolved this issue by translating throughout into unrhymed, four-line octosyllabics.

3. 'conflating "wood" with "would"': A pun proposed by the Venerable Ñāṇamoli Thera.

4. 'Cut down the "would" ... As long as "would" ...': *Dhammapada* 283-284.

5. 'As trees, though felled ...': *Dhammapada* 338.

6. 'whether in town ... Even forests ...': *Dhammapada* 98-99.

7. 'Taming himself in solitude': *Dhammapada* 305.

8. 'The tusked are tame ...': *Dhammapada* 321.

9. 'just as all features of the feet ...': *Saṃyutta Nikāya* V [Mahāvagga] 48:54.

10. "'*Dīpa*" ... denoting "island" as well as "lamp": From Sanskrit *dvīpa* (island) and *dīpa* (lamp).

11. 'By energetic mindfulness ...': *Dhammapada* 25.

12. 'Make an island of yourself': *Dhammapada* 236 and 238. Cf. also: 'Monks, be islands unto yourselves, be your own refuge, having no other. Let the Dhamma be a lamp and a refuge to you, having no other ...' *Saṃyutta Nikāya* III [Khandhavagga] 22:43.
13. 'Therefore, Ānanda, you should live as islands': *Dīgha Nikāya*, *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta* (16:2.26).
14. 'All those who are not free of stains ... But he who vomits forth his taints': *Dhammapada* 9-10. Cf. also *Dhammapada* 307.
15. 'kāśāva, a yellow stain or dye': Whose source, however, cannot be manioc, or cassava, which is of post-Columbian, American origin.
16. 'Neither by *mona a muni* ...': *Dhammapada* 268-269. Cf. *Dhammapada* 49. See also ch. 1, p. 19.
17. 'When muffled as a broken gong': *Dhammapada* 134. When striking a gong, it is not just a single note that sounds, but all the various tones and overtones of the harmonic series.
18. "'Obstructing evil" (*brāhmaṇo*):' *Dhammapada* 388. Not a 'brahman', in short, but a 'bar-man'! For *brāhmaṇo*, cf. also *Dhammapada* 142 and 383-423 (the *Brahmaṇavagga*); for *samaṇo*, cf. 264-265; for *pabbajito*, 302.
19. "'When I use a word," Humpty Dumpty said': Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking-Glass* (1871), ch. 6. See ch. 1, p. 19.
20. 'how is a bhikkhu a *Samaṇa*?': *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Mahā-Assapura Sutta* (39:23). *Sāmañña*, the religious life, stems from the Pali word for 'serene' or 'quiet'.
21. 'There is birth; there is decay ...': *Dīgha Nikāya*, *Mahāpadāna Sutta* (14:2.18). 'All men are "born" to be "borne" to a common "bourn"', might be an English equivalent: birth being the precondition of dying, and death a prelude for rebirth. Cf. 'With birth there is ageing and dying ...', *Saṃyutta Nikāya* II [Nidānavagga] 12:65.
22. 'going upstream (*uddham-soto*):' *Dhammapada* 218.
23. 'And why ... do you say *rūpa* [body]?': *Saṃyutta Nikāya* III [Khandhavagga] 22:79.
24. 'Just why, Sir, are we called a *satto*?': *Saṃyutta Nikāya* III [Khandhavagga] 23:2.

25. 'In a pun the component parts ...': Richard Ellmann, 'The Politics of Joyce', *The New York Review*, 9 June 1977.

26. "'Loka", they all keep repeating': *Saṃyutta Nikāya* IV [Saḷāyatanavagga] 35:84. A play on 'location' and 'dislocated', or 'place' and 'displaced'; also picks up aspects of the pun. In *Saṃyutta Nikāya* IV [Saḷāyatanavagga] 35:82, the pun is less convincingly given as: 'It is being worn away [*lujjati*], that is why it's called *loka*.'

27. 'the bandit Angulimāla': A bloodthirsty highwayman notorious for murdering wayfarers, even massacring parties up to forty strong, whose fingers (*anguli*) he cut off and strung into a garland (*māla*): *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Angulimāla Sutta* (86, especially 2-6).

28. 'like the young Brahman ... impromptu verse': This celebrated episode probably derives from an earlier ballad on the conversion of the mass-murderer, of which *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Angulimāla Sutta* (86) preserves twenty-one stanzas.

29. 'What's a mirror for ... Rāhula': *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Ambalaṭṭhikā Rāhulovāda Sutta* (61:8). The pun in Pali is on the gerundive *paccavekkhanattho* (looking in order to discover blemishes in the face) and the past participle *paccavekkhitvā* (having contemplated or considered). See also ch. 2, p. 43.

30. 'those madcap Licchavi youths': Their contemptuous nickname for Ambapālī conflates *amba* (mango) and *ambakā* (woman) into the portmanteau 'mango-woman'. Her real name means 'mango-guardian': *Dīgha Nikāya*, *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta* (16:2.16).

31. 'What ... is the reason for the Exalted One's smiling?': *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Ghaṭikāra Sutta* (81:2) and *Makhādeva Sutta* (83:2). The Buddha's replies are, in effect, displaced *Jātaka* tales with all their familiar formulas preserved.

32. 'But here I see monks smiling ...': *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Dhammacetiya Sutta* (89:12).

33. 'Suppose ... someone had been wounded by an arrow ...': *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Cūḷamālunkya Sutta* (63:5). See ch. 2, p. 28.

34. 'Swiftian "*saeva indignatio*"': '*ubi saeva indignatio ulterius cor lacerare requit*', Swift's own epitaph for himself, derived from Juvenal, *Satires* i, 79.

35. 'Tell them you are a *samaṇa* ... who has crossed over': *Mahāvastu* iii, 421-424.

36. 'the taste of soup': *Dhammapada* 64-65. For 'wisdom', literally read 'Dhamma'.

37. 'If there's no world beyond ...': *Aṅuttara Nikāya* 3:65.

38. 'But ... should another world be confirmed': See also *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Apaṇṇaka Sutta* (60:12). This is reminiscent of Pascal's wager: that it is prudent to bet on the Christian religion just in case it might be true. The Buddha's line, though, smacks more of the turf accountant; Pascal's, of an astute insurance salesman.

39. 'However well it be laid by ...': *Khuddaka-Pāṭha* [PTS XXXII, 8, verses 3-5].

40. 'Imagine ... a broody hen refusing to sit on her eggs': *Saṃyutta Nikāya* III [Khandhavagga] 22:101. *Āsava*, here translated as 'defilements', are literally 'eruptions', deeply implanted blemishes in our human nature.

41. 'Brahman, consider a hen with a clutch of ... eggs': *Vinaya-piṭaka*, *Suttavibhaṅga*, *Pārājika* 1:4 [PTS vol. 1, 2]. See also *Aṅuttara Nikāya* 8:11. A clutch of sound eggs, properly incubated, elsewhere becomes a metaphor for any monk's 'hatching' into enlightenment, *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Cetokhila Sutta* (16:27) and *Sekha Sutta* (53:19-22).

42. 'And the *devas* are grumbling, Ānanda': *Dīgha Nikāya*, *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta* (16:5.4-5.5). For 'leagues', the Pali text reads '*yojanas*'; to 'around this bend of the road leading to Kusinārā', it adds 'at the sāl-grove of the Malla princes'; 'towards dawn' translates as 'in the last watch'.

43. 'stripping "this great Earth" of earth': See ch. 6, p. 135.

44. 'in a spiritual context ... of maintaining loving-kindness': Implying here not only *mettā* ('good-will', 'benevolence', 'affectionate kindness'), but also the far more testing virtue of *upekkhā* or 'equanimity', 'forgiving the faults of all without resentment'.

45. 'their speech may ... be untimely, or false ...': *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Kakacūpama Sutta* (21:11-21).

46. 'four venomous snakes, a psychotic stalker': *Saṃyutta Nikāya* IV [Salāyatanavagga] 35:238. The 'terrorists' are literally 'village bandits'. The whole paranoid career is subsequently allegorized.

47. 'a bowl, brimming with oil': *Saṃyutta Nikāya* V [Mahāvagga] 47:20.

48. 'a huge mountain ... advancing and crushing': *Saṃyutta Nikāya* I [Sagāthavagga] 3:25.

49. ‘Mother and father having slain’: *Dhammapada* 294-295. The Commentary explicates the two verses as follows: for ‘mother’, read ‘craving’; for ‘father’, ‘self-conceit’; for the ‘two warrior kings’, ‘conflicting beliefs in eternity and annihilation’; for ‘a realm’, the ‘six sense-bases’ (eye, ear, etc.) and ‘six sense-objects’ (sight, sound, etc.); for ‘Brahmana’, an ‘Arahant’; for ‘a fearsome tiger’, ‘doubt’ or ‘uncertainty’. Of the five ‘hindrances’ (*nīvaranas*), the fifth is like a tiger-infested journey (*veyaggha* [tiger] + *pañcamam* [fifth]).

50. ‘Joyful to serve one’s mother here’: *Dhammapada* 332.

51. ‘Poṭṭhapāda, some ascetics and Brahmins’: *Dīgha Nikāya*, *Poṭṭhapāda Sutta* (9:34-36). Repeated in a debate on the ‘self’ as soul with the wanderer Udāyin, *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Cūḷasakuludāyi Sutta* (79:10). Cf. also *Dīgha Nikāya*, *Tevijja Sutta* (13:19).

52. ‘So, it seems form is not self ...’: *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Mahāpuṇṇama* (or ‘Full Moon’) *Sutta* (109:14). This discourse, then, was delivered on an *Uposatha* day when many lay people, as well as bhikkhus, still gather for a night-long session of meditation and listening to Dhamma.

53. “‘intention’ ... the very essence of *kamma*”: Also called *sañcetanā*. See *Aṅguttara Nikāya* 6:63: ‘*Centanā’ham bhikkhave kammaṃ vadāmi*.’

54. ‘the monk’s confused and paradoxical formulation’: The answer to his question, repressed here, remains crucial: that the very idea of ‘self’ – of an ‘I’ and ‘mine’ – is itself the cause and object of *kamma*. Where there is no concept of ‘self’, there can be no bad (*akusala*) deeds (*kamma*).

55. ‘too much bustle and chat’: See ch. 2, p. 77.

56. ‘stabbing with verbal daggers’: *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Kosambiya Sutta* (48:2) and *Upakkilesa Sutta* (128:2-5).

57. ‘muddle-headedness ... lucid rigour’: See ch. 2.

58. ‘I don’t even know the wanderer by sight’: *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Mahākammavibhanga Sutta* (136:4-6). The Venerable Udāyin’s too-eager intervention (‘Whatever is felt is suffering’), though inapposite here, is a direct quotation from the Buddha. Making it, therefore, peculiarly galling. See also ch. 2, p. 32.

59. ‘If river water could really wash away sin’: *Therīgāthā* 240-244. ‘Sin and suffering’ here translates as ‘evil *kamma*’.

60. 'thrusting a joint of meat on a penniless man': *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Esukāri Sutta* (96:4 and 11).

61. 'Imagine a file of blind men': *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Subha Sutta* (99:9); repeated, word for word, in the *Cankī Sutta* (*Majjhima Nikāya* [95:13]) to a sixteen-year-old Brahman student (Kāpaṭhika), who had contested the Buddha's authority by upholding the unique status of the Vedas – this time without triggering a backlash; again, without aggravation, to the young Brahman Vāseṭṭha (*Dīgha Nikāya*, *Tevijja Sutta* [13:15]). Cf. his teasing humiliation of the stuck-up Brahman lad Ambaṭṭha for being descended from a 'black' slave-girl, *Dīgha Nikāya*, *Ambaṭṭha Sutta* (3:1.16-1.17).

62. 'the blind leading the blind': Jesus, in similar vein, on the scribes and Pharisees: 'Let them alone: they be blind leaders of the blind. And if the blind lead the blind, both shall fall into the ditch.' Matthew xv, 14. Which directly inspired Breughel's painting.

63. 'Unless Sunakkhatta recants his slander': *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Mahāsīhanāda Sutta* (12:21, 28, 31, 34 and 43): the slander being that the Buddha was merely a rational and empirical thinker 'teaching a Dhamma hammered out by human thought, following his own line of enquiry as it occurred to him', *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Mahāsīhanāda Sutta* (12:12). Cf. also Ānanda to the wanderer Sandaka, *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Sandaka Sutta* (76:27).

64. 'Devadatta is a nefarious nihilist': *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Abhayarājakumāra Sutta* (58:3); 'all eternity' literally reads as 'an aeon'.

65. 'Devadatta ... attempting to murder': *Commentary on Dhammapada* 17.

66. 'Devadatta's father ... drunkenly obstructing': (known as Suppabuddha, the Sakyan) *Commentary on Dhammapada* 128.

67. 'Nandaka, the ogre': *Visuddhimagga* 380.

68. 'Ciñca, a Brahman woman': *Commentary on Dhammapada* 176.

69. 'Nanda, the Brahman youth': *Commentary on Dhammapada* 69.

70. 'a gut-wrenching crisis': Attracting a whole cluster of images: roaring ears (as of a smith's bellows), splitting headaches (as of a shattered skull or of a garrotting), severe cramps (as if butchered alive) and a fevered flush (as if roasting over a pit). This sequence was commonly associated with the throes of death. Cf. the Brahman Dhānañjāni on his deathbed (*Majjhima Nikāya*, *Dhānañjāni Sutta* [97:29]) and Anāthapiṇḍika on his (*Majjhima Nikāya*, *Anāthapiṇḍikovāda Sutta* [143:4]).

71. 'suppose I take less and less food': *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Mahāsaccaka Sutta* (36:28), *Bodhirājakumāra Sutta* (85:28) and *Saṅgārava Sutta* (100:25).

72. 'As long as my own excrement ... lasted': For such self-mortifications (*tapas*) of a 'filth-eater' addicted to cow-dung, cow-urine, ashes and clay, see *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Mahāsihanāda Sutta* (12:49-51).

8. FOLKLORE

1. 'one hand washes the other...': *Dīgha Nikāya*, *Soṇadaṇḍa Sutta* (4:21). 'If a man's reputation suffers ...': *Dīgha Nikāya*, *Soṇadaṇḍa Sutta* (4:8 and 26). 'A clean cloth ...': *Kūṭadanta Sutta* (5:29).

2. 'Wife, you are always seeing a crocodile': *Dhammapada Commentary* iii, 192 ff.

3. 'As a ship's oars and rudder on dry land': *Saṅyutta Nikāya* I [Sagāthavagga] 4:1.

4. 'as undisputing as milk with water': *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Upakkilesa Sutta* (128:11). Cf. *Cūḷagosinga Sutta* (31:6) and *Vinaya-piṭaka: Mahāvagga* 10:4 [PTS vol. 4, 350].

5. 'But here I see bhikkhus living in harmony': *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Dhammacetiya Sutta* (89:11).

6. 'as utterly pure and polished as a conch-shell': See *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Kandaraka Sutta* (51:13) and *Raṭṭhapāla Sutta* (82:7). See also ch.4 p. 144.

7. 'just as a well-trained archer ...': *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Mahāsihanāda Sutta* (12:62).

8. 'as swiftly as a strong man can flex his extended arm': *Dīgha Nikāya*, *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta* (16:1.33). Cf. *Udāna* 8:6 and *Vinaya-piṭaka: Mahāvagga* 6:28 [PTS vol. 4, 229]. Cf. also Brahmā Sahampati's departure from the Brahma-world, *Saṅyutta Nikāya* V [Mahāvagga] 47:18; *Vinaya-piṭaka, Mahāvagga* 1:5 [PTS vol. 4, 4].

9. 'what's this riff-raff doing here?': *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Cātumā Sutta* (67:3).

10. 'It beats fishermen landing a prize catch!': *Aṅguttara Nikāya* 3:341-342.

11. 'such a good-for-nothing gob of spittle': *Vinaya-piṭaka, Cullavagga* 7:3 [PTS vol. 5, 187].

12. 'Idiots, you've tried to split a rock': *Saṃyutta Nikāya* IV [Sagāthavagga] 4:25.

13. 'a mountain of solid rock ... the Himalayan range': *Saṃyutta Nikāya* II [Nidānavagga] 15:6; and *Itivuttaka* 24 [PTS 17]. A 'cycle of time', literally transliterated, is an 'aeon'; a 'league', a *yojana*; a 'silk handkerchief', a 'fine Kaasi cloth'; the 'Himalayan range', the 'mountains of the Vepulla range'.

14. 'suppose a blind turtle popped its head': *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Bālappaṇḍita Sutta* (129:24).

15. 'the Sakyan beauty, Janapadakalyāṇī': *Udāna* 3:2. Prince Nanda was the Buddha's half-brother. *Yakshas* are Buddhist nymphs, omnipresent among the carvings at Sanchi.

16. 'discussed in ch. 5': pp. 174-177.

17. 'Life is easy for ... a crow': *Dhammapada* 244.

18. 'Easy is the livelihood of the crow': *Jātakamāla* 16.

19. 'A crow there was who stalked around': *Saṃyutta Nikāya* IV [Sagāthavagga] 4:24 and *Sutta Nipāta* 3:2.

20. 'all men blind from birth ... before an elephant': *Udāna* 6:4.

21. 'a partridge, a monkey and an elephant': *Vinaya-piṭaka*, *Cullavagga* 6:6 [PTS vol. 5, 161-162]. The whole fable is a game of one-upmanship. But whether the partridge is yet another trickster-hero is left a moot point.

22. 'uncanonical *Jātaka* tale (37)': The *Tittira Jātaka* 37 [PTS vol. 1, 217-220]. From *jāti*, 'birth'.

23. 'the fable of the Falcon': *Saṃyutta Nikāya* V [Mahāvagga] 47:6 and *Jātaka* 168 [PTS vol. 2, 58-60], which openly quotes the *Saṃyutta Nikāya* as its source. In the *Jātaka* version, it is Devadatta who enacts the falcon's role.

24. 'the tale of the Wise and Foolish Caravan-Leader': *Dīgha Nikāya*, *Pāyāsi Sutta* (23:23) and *Jātaka* 1 [PTS vol. 1, 95-106].

25. 'the tale of the Poisoned Dice': *Dīgha Nikāya*, *Pāyāsi Sutta* (23:27) and *Jātaka* 91 [PTS vol. 1, 379-380].

26. 'the most arresting of all these parallels': Cf. also the Snake Charm (in *Vinaya-piṭaka*: *Cullavagga* 5:6 [PTS vol. 5, 109-110] and *Jātaka* 203 [PTS vol. 2, 145-148] and the Dragon Jewel-Neck (in *Vinaya-piṭaka*: *Suttavibhanga*,

Saṅghādisesa 6:1 [PTS vol. 1, 145-147] and *Jātaka* 253 [PTS vol. 2, 283-286] for further cross-pollination.

27. 'her ghastly revenge on Brer Elephant': *Jātaka* 357 [PTS vol. 3, 174-177].

28. 'Even the quail, that small bird': Used by the Buddha to defend his fellow-Sakyans against rebuke for the unparliamentary buffoonery and horseplay at their meeting-hall in Kapilavatthu: *Dīgha Nikāya*, *Ambaṭṭha Sutta* (3:1.14).

29. 'Reborn as a quail-cock': *Jātaka* 33 [PTS vol. 1, 208-210].

30. 'first relaxed her grip ... then dropped her guard': The Pali phrases *sake baleapatthaddhā* (literally 'not stiff or rigid') and *sake bale asaṃvadamānā* (suggesting disdain) seem to imply that the falcon, in her pride, was psychologically lulled into toying with the tiny quail.

31. 'the Parable of the Monkey appended to it': *Saṃyutta Nikāya* V [Mahāvagga] 47:7.

32. 'these six animals with different ... diets': *Saṃyutta Nikāya* IV [Saḷāyatanavagga] 35:247.

33. 'uniquely conscious of his reincarnations': Until aspects of the *Jātaka* became part of the commentary (*aṭṭhakathā*) on the *Dhammapada* added by Buddhaghosa in the fifth century C.E.

34. 'as King of the Parrots ... or as a timid fawn': The tale of the Parrot King, loyal to the withered fig-tree in which he roosted, was oddly inserted into the commentary on *Dhammapada* 32. The tale of Devadatta as hunter, craftily screened on a bamboo platform, forever violating the laws of nature (i.e. miscalculating the effects of *kamma*, misconstruing his cousin), appropriately became part of the commentary on *Dhammapada* 162.

35. 'typecasting monks ... by their postures': See commentary on *Dhammapada* 251.

36. 'the cautionary tale of Tissa': See commentary on *Dhammapada* 240.

37. 'feud between a housewife and her hen': See commentary on *Dhammapada* 291.

38. 'All those who are slaves of desire': The first half of *Dhammapada* 347.

39. 'Jonathan Edwards': God 'holds you over the pit of hell, much as one holds a spider ... by a slender thread', *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God* (1741).

40. 'a bestiary ... could be compiled': Cf. the even older Yoga (Sanskrit for 'union', or yoke) bestiary with its Fish, Locust, Cobra, Cat, Camel, etc. Indians say there are 84,000 (i.e. an infinite number of) permutations; only Shiva can do the lot.
41. 'miniatures by Mansur': Mughal artist who worked at the court of the Emperor Jahangir (1605-1628).
42. 'It's just like a beetle, feeding on dung': *Saṃyutta Nikāya* II [Nidānavagga] 17:5. Thus the Zen squelcher to the query: 'What is Buddha?' 'A shit-scraper'. See Epilogue.
43. 'A dung-beetle ... attracted by the smell of dung': *Jātaka* 227 [PTS vol. II, 211-212].
44. 'Steeped in lust all beings cower': *Dhammapada* 342.
45. 'Whoever would not lance the lust': *Dhammapada* 284. The pun on *vana* (meaning both 'forest' and 'lust') is echoed here by the auxiliary 'would'. See ch. 7, p. 173. The oppressive image of the milch-calf may, in other contexts, be transformed: like that 'tender calf ... urged on by his mother's lowing', who 'too breasted the stream of the Ganges and safely reached the further shore', *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Cūḷagopālaka Sutta* (34:4).
46. 'A lazy glutton drowsy from': *Dhammapada* 325.
47. 'The vigilant exert themselves': *Dhammapada* 91.
48. 'A man who has learnt but little': *Dhammapada* 152.
49. 'the equanimity of a water buffalo!': See Ajahn Chah, *A Still Forest Pool*, eds. Jack Kornfield and Paul Breitner (1985), pp. ix and 42.
50. 'Puṇṇa, the "ox-duty ascetic"': *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Kukkuravatika Sutta* (57:5).
51. 'Those who dissipated their youth': *Dhammapada* 155. For the 'thirty-six streams of desire', see *Dhammapada* 339.
52. 'that jackal howling ... towards dawn': *Saṃyutta Nikāya* II [Nidānavagga] 20:11.
53. 'Standing it suffered, running it suffered': Ajahn Chah, *A Taste of Freedom* (The Sangha, Wat Pah Nanachat, 1980), pp. 101-102.
54. 'a dog ... tied with a leash': *Saṃyutta Nikāya* III [Khandhavagga] 22:100.

55. 'the "naked dog-duty ascetic" Seniya': *Majjhima Nikāya, Kukkuravatika Sutta* (57:3).

56. 'Beware of the cobra': *Majjhima Nikāya, Alagaddūpama Sutta* (22:10).

57. 'What a queer thing ... called "pleasure"!': Plato, *Phaedo*, 60. As the Buddha is made to say some six hundred years later (by Asvaghosa in his *Buddhacarita*, or *Career of the Buddha*): 'The very conditions which mark pleasure also bring in turn pain. Heavy garments and fragrant aloe-wood are pleasant in the cold but an annoyance in the heat; and moonbeams and sandalwood are pleasant in the heat but a pain in the cold ...'

58. 'cobras (or *nāgas* in Sanskrit)': That is why the section of the *Dhammapada* devoted to the elephant, as supreme emblem, is entitled the *Nāgavagga* (XXIII); and why Arahants, in the Pali Canon, are sometimes addressed as *nāgas* (*Majjhima Nikāya, Rathavinā Sutta* [24:17] and *Sela Sutta* [92:28]). Which makes the Buddha, of course, the supreme *nāga*. In Thailand, to this day, the shaved candidate for ordination is called a *nak*.

59. 'a "crafty fowler"': Commentator's gloss on *Dhammapada* 252.

60. 'The world is indeed in darkness!': *Dhammapada* 174.

61. 'Just as his tracks could encompass ...': See *Majjhima Nikāya, Mahāhatthipadapoma Sutta* (28:2) and *Saṃyutta Nikāya V* [Mahāvagga] 48:54. The elephant's footprint, for the Buddha, represents that fundamental virtue encompassing all other virtues, *appamāda*: an alert moral response to everyday life in word and thought and deed. Cf. the wanderer Pilotika recognizing the distinctive 'footprint of a Tathāgata', *Majjhima Nikāya, Cūḷahatthipadapoma Sutta* (27:3 and 19-26).

62. 'Sir, I can drive an elephant to be trained': Pessa, the mahout's son, in *Majjhima Nikāya, Kandaraka Sutta* (51:4).

63. 'shifted neither his forehooves nor hindhooves': *Majjhima Nikāya, Dantabhūmi Sutta* (125:12).

64. 'Delight in watchfulness ...': *Dhammapada* 327.

65. 'They lead trained elephants to war': *Dhammapada* 321.

66. 'Too many folk lack self-control': *Dhammapada* 320.

67. 'Mourning for his native forest': *Dhammapada* 324. Held in luxurious captivity by a *rājā*, a story goes, Dhanapalaka yearned to take care of his

blind old mother. For another bull-elephant in musth, see *Dhammapada* 326.

68. 'If you can find no prudent friend': *Dhammapada* 329. Cf. the Buddha's soliloquy at Kosambi: 'If you can find no trusty friend ... walk like a tusker in the woods alone' (*Majjhima Nikāya*, *Upakkilesa Sutta* [128:6, final two stanzas]). Cf. also the rhinoceros of the *Khaggavisana Sutta* (Rhinoceros Discourse). Adult bull-elephants are solitary creatures, living away from the herd. Some young bulls, on reaching the age of eighteen or twenty, also prefer the solitary life, but may keep company with similar males. Such young bulls pay the herd only occasional visits.

69. 'Bull-elephants ... bursting in on ... his meditations': As, for example, in the Guarded Woodland Thicket, having been foiled by the disputatious Kosambi bhikkhus (*Vinaya-piṭaka: Mahāvagga* 10:4 [PTS vol. 4, 351-353]); also the instance of the bull-elephant, Nalagiri, a man-killer, maddened with alcohol (*Vinaya-piṭaka: Cullavagga* 7:3 [PTS vol. 5, 193-195]).

70. 'an elephant looking back': *Dīgha Nikāya*, *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta* (16:4.1). Which is turned to a point of etiquette by the author of the *Milindapañha* VII, 'Talk on Similes', 40 [PTS 398].

71. 'supreme mahout marshalling his forest bhikkhus': *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Dantabhūmi Sutta* (125:23).

72. 'As thoroughbreds from Sind ...': *Dhammapada* 322.

73. 'As a thoroughbred touched by the whip': *Dhammapada* 144.

74. 'Where on earth can be found a man': *Dhammapada* 143.

75. 'Watchful among the unwatchful': *Dhammapada* 29.

76. 'Just as a monkey ranging through a forest': *Saṃyutta Nikāya* II [Nidānavagga] 12:61.

77. 'Like a creeping-māluva, cravings': *Dhammapada* 334. Such is Buddhist usage. According to hunters like Jim Corbett and Kenneth Anderson, though, monkeys might equally be viewed as emblematic of vigilance (*sāti*). Grey langurs certainly cannot be accused of having 'monkey-minds'. Endangered by tigers and panthers, they post a watchman in a tall tree as a lookout for prowling felines. Alert, with beady black eyes scanning the jungle, he will neither feed nor let himself in any way be distracted until relieved as sentry. For alarm, the call 'Ha-aah! Har! Har!' is repeatedly barked until the tribe has scattered to safety.

78. 'Just as an owl on a branch ...': 'We are meditators! We are meditators!' phoney Brahmins mock virtuous bhikkhus, *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Māraṭajjanīya Sutta* (50:13).

79. 'If by practising *zazen* ...': Sengai's calligraphic inscription on his drawing 'Meditating Frog' (Idemitsu Art Gallery, Tokyo). *Zazen* (meditation in Soto Zen) is practised in the *zendō*, or meditation-hall: eyes open (like a frog), trying neither to think nor not to think.

80. 'Whoever withdraws his senses on all sides': *Bhagavad-gītā* ii, 58.

81. 'As a tortoise draws into his/ shell': Stanza extemporized in reply to a *deva*, *Saṃyutta Nikāya* IV [Saḷāyatanavagga] 35:240.

82. 'As a fish cast up on dry land': *Dhammapada* 34.

83. 'Let a sage call on a village': *Dhammapada* 49.

84. 'The vigilant exert themselves': *Dhammapada* 91.

85. 'Swans follow the path of the sun': *Dhammapada* 175.

86. 'called *sīhanāda* or "Lion's Roar"': See especially *Dīgha Nikāya*, *Kassapa-Sīhanāda Sutta* (8); *Udumbarika-Sīhanāda Sutta* (25); *Cakkavatti-Sīhanāda Sutta* (26); *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Cūḷasīhanāda Sutta* (11); and *Mahāsīhanāda Sutta* (12).

9. MORAL ITINERARIES

1. 'Purgatory ... a fairly recent annex': Thus the odd, if ingenious, fit between the opencast hollow of *Inferno* and the mount of *Purgatorio*.

2. 'Unknown before the end of the twelfth century': 'Un lieu innomé n'existe pas tout à fait ... Entre 1170 et 1200 le mot purgatoire – et donc le lieu – est né ... La naissance du Purgatoire est un phénomène du tournant du XIIe siècle au XIIIe siècle', Jacques Le Goff, *La Naissance du Purgatoire*, 1981 (trans. *The Birth of Purgatory*, 1984). Even after 1300, altarpieces insisted on the long-established iconography: the free fall of the damned en masse (on one side), and the single-minded climb of the sanctified (on the other) to where the Holy Family – God the Father, Mary and their Son – sat throned in triumph amid the angelic host.

3. 'the Buddhist afterworld ... divided into three parts': Known as the Thirty-One States or 'Abodes'. The lowest eleven zones (of the 'Realm of Sense-Desire') were reserved, from bottom up, for hell-sprites; Titans (*asuras*); Hungry Ghosts (*petas*); animals of all kinds; *devas* of the four Great

Kings (attended by heavenly musicians); the Thirty-Three Gods (whose chief is Sakka); Yāma *devas* (attending on Yāma, King of the Dead), and various other ranks of *devas* ('Radiant Ones'); Bodhisattvas; and 'once-returners'. The middle 'Realm of Form' contained a further sixteen untroubled zones for *devas*, Brahmās and 'non-returners' (those who had experienced the four lower *jhānas*, or 'absorptions'); the highest four zones (of the 'Formless Realm') were reserved for those who had experienced the four higher *jhānas*.

4. 'in the heavens there is no path': *Apadam* ('trackless'), *Dhammapada* 254-255.

5. 'foam of a wave': *Dhammapada* 46.

6. "withered gourds" ... in the autumn': *Dhammapada* 149.

7. "a mass of sores", "a nest of diseases": *Dhammapada* 147-148.

8. 'tortured by ... fever': *Dhammapada* 90.

9. 'Soon, soon, alas, this body here': *Dhammapada* 41.

10. 'enlightenment (or liberation)': 'Just as the great ocean has but one taste, the taste of salt, so too this teaching has but one taste, the taste of freedom', *Aṅguttara Nikāya* 8:19; *Udāna* 5:5; *Vinaya-piṭaka: Cullavagga* 9:1.4.

11. 'There is no fire like lust ...': *Dhammapada* 202 and 251.

12. 'Why so much laughter, why such joy?': *Dhammapada* 146.

13. 'Bhikkhus, all things are blazing': 'The Fire Sermon', *Saṃyutta Nikāya* IV [Saḷāyatanavagga] 35:28. For the traditional view of Hell, with bodies raked over glowing embers, pierced by red-hot iron stakes, plunged into metal cauldrons, see *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Bālappaṇḍita Sutta* (129:10-16) and *Devadūta Sutta* (130:10-27).

14. 'In every cry of every Man': William Blake, 'London', *Songs of Experience*, 1794.

15. 'the ten shackles (*saṃyojana*)': *Dhammapada* 370.

16. 'The bond of iron, wood or hemp': *Dhammapada* 345. See also 384, 397 and 398.

17. 'water with swirling currents': See *Dhammapada* 339 and 347.

18. 'bordered by couch-grass and jungle creepers': *Dhammapada* 162, 338, 340 and 356.

19. 'Dante's relay of sea-borne images': Beginning at *Inferno*, canto I, lines 22-24.
20. 'Those who delight in watchfulness': *Dhammapada* 31.
21. 'Irrigators guide the water': *Majjhima Nikāya*, Angulimāla's verse soliloquy (86:18).
22. 'an arrow-maker ... a carpenter ... a water-engineer': See *Dhammapada* 33, 80 and 145.
23. 'to train mules, rein in horses ...': See *Dhammapada* 94, 321, 322 and 380.
24. 'You, too, Kesi, are a professional': *Aṅguttara Nikāya* 2:112.
25. 'But, above all, faith': *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Bodhirājakumāra Sutta* (85:58-59).
26. 'multiplication tables for accountants': Dialogue with the accountant Moggallāna on 'progressive training', *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Gaṇaka Moggallāna Sutta* (107:2-3).
27. 'a pair of scales': *Dhammapada* 268.
28. 'a goldsmith after ... melting his grains': *Aṅguttara Nikāya* 3:100.
29. 'Letting Go (*paṭinissagga*)': Literally 'tossing back' or 'surrendering'; so 'letting go'.
30. 'just as the *vasika* jasmine': *Dhammapada* 377.
31. 'This boat, O bhikkhu, empty out': *Dhammapada* 369.
32. 'When with a mind at peace, a monk': *Dhammapada* 373.
33. 'the bracing tack (*uddhaṇi-soto*)': *Dhammapada* 218.
34. 'Attachment (*upādāna*)': Literally 'clinging' or 'clutching'.
35. 'Just think how little boys and girls play with mud-pies': *Saṃyutta Nikāya* III [Khandhavagga] 23:2.
36. 'Some children ... built sand-castles': *Yogācāra Bhūmi Sūtra*, ch. iv (c. 284 CE), *Takakusu* XV, 211.
37. 'well-nigh crushed and smothered under [their] load': Henry David Thoreau, *Walden, or Life in the Woods* (1854), ch. 1, 'Economy'.
38. '*Bhāradānaṃ dukkhaṃ loke*': *Saṃyutta Nikāya* III [Khandhavagga] 22:22.

39. 'It's as if we were carrying a heavy rock': Ajahn Chah, *Bodhinyāna* (Wat Pah Nanachat, 1982), pp. 67-68 (revised).
40. 'Even as a great rock ... a giant rock': *Dhammapada* 81.
41. 'a city-pillar ... a watchtower ... a frontier fortress': *Dhammapada* 95, 28 and 315.
42. 'a lotus leaf ... a mustard seed': *Dhammapada* 336, 401 and 407.
43. 'the translucent depths of a lake': *Dhammapada* 82 and 95.
44. 'the wise man makes an insular/ retreat': *Dhammapada* 25. See ch. 7, p. 250, and notes.
45. 'His self is refuge for himself': In Pali, '*attā hi attano natho*' ('self is self's refuge'), *Dhammapada* 160. See also 380.
46. 'One's own good one should never spurn': *Dhammapada* 166. To have really experienced the Dhamma for oneself – to have achieved enlightenment in this world – is not only a great good in itself, but the essential requisite for a constructive and enduring love of others.
47. 'Cherish yourself! But injure none!': *Saṃyutta Nikāya* I [Sagāthāvagga] 3:8.
48. 'Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself': Leviticus xix, 18 and Matthew xix, 19. Cf. Rabbi Hillel: 'If I am not for myself, who will be? If I am for myself alone, who am I?'
49. 'a bamboo-acrobat set up his pole': *Saṃyutta Nikāya* V [Mahāvagga] 47:19.
50. 'you must practise *satipaṭṭhāna*': The Four Foundations of Mindfulness: contemplation of the body (*kāya*), of the feelings (*vedanā*), of the mind (*citta*) and of the Dhamma.
51. 'Mr Daniell has observed': Charles Darwin, *Journal of Researches into the Geology and Natural History of the Various Countries Visited by H.M.S. Beagle* (1839), ch. 2.
52. 'The blue mountain is the father of the white cloud': Shunryu Suzuki, *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind* (1970), p. 31. Tōzan is the Japanese pronunciation of the Chinese name Tung-shan Liang-chieh (c. 807-869 CE).
53. 'In a little community like ours, my dear': Fagin in conversation with Morris Bolter, alias Noah Claypole; Dickens, *Oliver Twist* (1837-1839), ch. 43.

54. 'An Arahant is one who has removed the cross-bar': *Majjhima Nikāya, Alagaddūpama Sutta* (22:30).

55. 'Poṭṭhapāda, it's just as if someone were to build a ladder': *Dīgha Nikāya, Poṭṭhapāda Sutta* (9:37). Cf. *Dīgha Nikāya, Tevijja Sutta* (13:21).

56. 'suppose these ascetics and Brahmans were to challenge me': *Poṭṭhapāda Sutta* (9:43-46). Earlier in the same sutta (9:39-42), the Buddha had analysed this illusory 'acquired self' into its threefold manifestations: the 'coarse acquired self' (corresponding to our physical presence); the 'mind-constituted self' (created in meditation); and the 'formless acquired self' (created by consciousness). These three 'acquired selves' correspond to the three post-mortem realms of 'Sense Desire', 'Form' and 'Formlessness'. See ch. 1, p. 4.

57. 'eliminating stains (*kilesas*)': The mental defilements of lust (or greed), aversion (or anger) and delusion (or obtuse blindness).

58. 'To study the Buddha Way is to study oneself': The Sōtō Zen master, Dōgen-zenji, *Genjō Kōan*. These are his first two of five steps in meditation practice. Cf. also the famous tenfold sequence of 'Ox-herding Pictures' (of Zen Buddhism) that illustrate seeking the ox; tracking the ox; glimpsing the ox; capturing the ox; training the ox; and losing and forgetting the ox.

59. 'Having passed a particular step one does not hold on': *The Dhamma Teaching of Ācariya Mahā Boowa in London* (20 June 1974).

60. 'My propositions are elucidatory in this way': The penultimate proposition 6.54 of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921).

61. 'Let go contingency – Time Past': *Dhammapada* 348.

62. 'You who sit on top of a hundred-foot pole': Ch'ang-sha Ching-ts'en, *Shōyōroku*, Case 79 (trans. Yamada and Aitken, slightly amended).

63. 'So you've climbed to the top of a hundred-foot pole': Dōgen, *Shōbōgenzō Zuimonki* 111:1.

64. 'Even as on a rubbish tip': *Dhammapada* 58.

65. 'heedless ones ... now living heedfully': *Dhammapada* 172.

66. 'overcoming the evil ... with good': *Dhammapada* 173, *Theragātā* 872.

67. 'devoting themselves ... to the Buddha's teaching': Literally 'buddhasāsana', *Dhammapada* 382.

68. 'pure and bright, clear and serene': *Dhammapada* 413.
69. 'the moon follows "the star's path"': *Dhammapada* 208.
70. 'The sun is bright by day': *Dhammapada* 387. By 'Brahman' here is meant the enlightened Arahant.
72. 'What track can there be to trace those': *Dhammapada* 179-180.
73. 'Like a flight of swans ... they lift off': *Dhammapada* 91. See ch. 8, pp. 312-313.
74. 'to "follow the path of the sun"': *Dhammapada* 175.
75. "'fordfinders" ... to gain "the other side"': See *Dhammapada* 383-384. The imagery probably derives from the Jains. Mahāvira Nāthaputta and his twenty-three supposed predecessors were called *tīrthaṃkaras*, or 'ford-finders'.
76. 'the Parable of the Raft': *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Alagaddūpama Sutta* (22:13). Cf. a variant in the Parable of Headlong Flight, *Saṃyutta Nikāya* IV [Saḷāyatanavagga] 35:238. For an earlier reference, see ch. 1, p. 11.
77. 'loses its value – without ... its inherent truth': See K. N. Jayatilleke, *Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge* (1963), ch. 7, p. 358. For a parallel lesson in *paṭinissagga*, see the Parable of the Two Looters, *Dīgha Nikāya*, *Pāyāsi Sutta* (23:29).
78. 'the Buddha ... as a Magadhan herdsman': *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Cūḷagopālaka Sutta* (34).
79. 'People, eager to cross from shore to shore': *Dīgha Nikāya*, *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta* (16:1.33-34). See ch. 9, pp. 338-339. The 'wise' are the noble ones (*ariya*) who have crossed the wide river of craving (*taṇhā*), suspended on the bridge of Noble Insight (*ariyāmaggañāṇa*), leaving behind the marshlands of moral defilement.

10. A DIALOGUE ON SELFLESSNESS

1. 'wantonly starved to death': *Vinaya-piṭaka*: *Cullavagga* 7:3 [PTS vol. 5, 191].
2. 'born some time in the c. 560s BCE': By general consensus the Buddha's lifespan as celebrated in Southeast Asia, of c. 623-543 BCE (making him roughly a contemporary of Lao-tzu in China), is pitched too early. Throughout this study I have accepted c. 563 BCE as the probable date of his birth, making him roughly a contemporary of Zarathustra in Persia

and K'ung Fu-tse (Confucius in China). But even that may be premature. A case can be made for adjusting his life and times downward by yet another half-century to c. 523-443 BCE (making him roughly contemporary with Parmenides and Herodotus), or by a further generation later from c. 480-400 BCE. See Richard Gombrich, *The Middle Way*, vol. 70, no. 3 (November 1995).

3. 'the royal physician': Jīvaka Komārabhacca, to whom a sutta on meat-eating (*Majjhima Nikāya*, *Jīvaka Sutta* [55]) is addressed.

4. 'worn out by insomnia': The King was unable to sleep, the Pali commentary notes, until after this visit.

5. 'Transgression overcame me, Lord': *Dīgha Nikāya*, *Sāmaññaphala Sutta* (2:99).

6. 'such essential occupations as that of a domestic, or a farmer': See also ch. 6.

7. "'The Fruits of the Homeless Life'": Maurice Walshe's title for the *Sāmaññaphala Sutta* (*The Long Discourses of the Buddha*, Wisdom Publications, 1987), a translation to which I am indebted for most of the groundwork for my own version. A *samaṇa* is a 'holy recluse'.

8. 'Far from contrite, he went ... to war': Later, King Ajātasattu transferred his capital from Rājagaha to Pāṭaliputta (modern Patna). Though a principal supporter of Devadatta, he was patron of the First Great Council (c. 483 BCE) held within three months of the Buddha's death, in a cave near Rājagaha (modern Rajgir in the state of Bihar).

9. '*Sāmaññaphala Sutta*': Literally the fruits of the life of a *samaṇa*, or wandering ascetic.

10. 'On the fast-day called Komudi': The fortnightly Brahman fast-day (or *Upasatha*) in the fourth month (or *Kattika*), running roughly from mid-October to mid-November.

11. 'I visited Pūraṇa Kassapa': See ch. 2, note 30.

12. 'Makkhali Gosāla': See ch. 2, notes 26, 27 and 28.

13. 'Ajita Kesakambali': Literally 'Ajita of the Hairy Garment'; that is, he wore a blanket spun from human hair, as other ascetics might wear cast-off shrouds or rags from refuse dumps (*Dīgha Nikāya*, *Mahāsīhanāda Sutta* [8:14]).

14. 'Nigaṇṭha Nāṭaputta': Whose given name was Vardhamāna Mahāvira. The title 'Nigaṇṭha' literally means 'free from bonds'. Jain teaching here is ridiculed by a paradox: one 'free from restraints' being seemingly both restrained and absolved from all restraints.

15. 'an extended variant of the ten dilemmas': See ch. 2, p. 25. Cf. also *Dīgha Nikāya*, *Brahmajāla Sutta* (1:2.13-2.40).

16. 'in both spirit and letter': Exemplified by the *Brahmacariya*, or Noble Practice of morality (*sīla*), of concentration (*samādhi*) and of wisdom (*paññā*), as perfected by the Buddha and the *ariyas*.

17. 'And how ... is a monk perfected in his morality?': The paragraphs following (43-62), omitted here, were interpolated from *Dīgha Nikāya*, *Brahmajāla Sutta* (1:1.8-1.27). Often entitled the *Cūḷa Sīla* (Short Section on Morality), *Majjhima Sīla* (Middle Section on Morality) and *Mahā Sīla* (Large Section on Morality), they constitute a detailed catalogue of forbidden court ornaments, court entertainments, court luxuries, spells and predictions (examined in ch. 6, especially p. 136) which, though apt enough for King Ajātasattu, are too elaborate for, and clearly supernumerary in, this context.

11. A DIALOGUE ON THE AFTERLIFE

1. 'Elders such as Khemaka and Sāriputta': See ch. 2, p. 22.

2. 'its protagonist, known as Young Kassapa': To distinguish Kumāra-Kassapa from Mahā Kassapa.

3. 'Ajita Kesakambali': Cf. *Dīgha Nikāya*, *Sāmaññaphala Sutta* (2:23).

4. 'Yes, Kālāmas ... you may well doubt': *Aṅguttara Nikāya* 3:65. See ch. 2, p. 46.

5. 'seeing his soul escape': Here *jīva*, literally the 'life-principle'.

6. 'coarse, fringed clothing': Literally 'fringed with balls', to weigh the garment down.

7. 'in the company of the Four Great Kings': That is, one realm above the human world, with the reigning *devas* of the North, the South, the East and the West, attended by the heavenly musicians, or *gandhabbas*.

8. 'in the heavenly realm of the Thirty-Three Gods': Whose chief is Sakka and whose realm (one level higher than the four Kings) was once the abode of the Titans, or *asurās*.

9. 'the Venerable Gavampati': One of the Buddha's early converts.

12. TEMPORAL POWERS

1. 'Eighty-two thousand teachings': *Theraḡāthā* 1024.

2. 'this cipher ... a commonplace synonym for infinity': Especially popular in a folklore context such as the eighty-four thousand converts from the royal city of Bandhumatī who 'shaved off hair and beard and donned yellow robes' (*Dīgha Nikāya*, *Mahāpadāna Sutta* (14:2.16-2.17, 3.14-3.18, and 3.27); cf. *Dīgha Nikāya*, *Pāṭika Sutta* (24:2.13); or King Mahāsudassana's fabulous eighty-four thousand palaces, each with eighty-four thousand chambers and couches, as well as eighty-four thousand gabled halls, elephants, cities, carriages, jewels, wives, retainers, cows, bales of clothing, rice-offerings, etc. in the fairyland setting of Kusāvati (*Dīgha Nikāya*, *Mahāsudassana Sutta* [17:1.26-2.5 and 2.13-2.15]; cf. *Jātaka* 95).

For parallels, see the Buddha's exposition of 'meditation subjects suitable for eighty-four thousand temperaments' (*Khuddaka-Pāṭha*, *Commentary*, 232); or the conclusion of the Buddha's talk on the death of the courtesan Sirimā, at which 'eighty-four thousand beings attained realization of the Dhamma' (*Dhammapada Commentary*, iii, 104); or the Buddha's smile at Mithīla, in Makhādeva's Mango Grove, at which Ānanda asked: 'What, pray, is the cause of the Exalted One's smiling?' and the Buddha replied: 'Now, Ānanda, for eighty-four thousand years King Makhādeva diverted himself as a royal prince; for eighty-four thousand years acted as viceroy; for eighty-four thousand years was King; for eighty-four thousand years, in this very mango grove, led the life of a recluse ... And King Makhādeva's son, and his son, and his son, to the number of eighty-four thousand warrior princes descended from him, in this very mango grove shaved off hair and beard, donned yellow robes and retired from their homes to the homeless life' (*Majjhima Nikāya*, *Makhādeva Sutta* [83]); or the Buddha's challenge to Ubbirī, lamenting for his daughter: 'On this funeral-ground have been burned eighty-four thousand daughters of yours. For which one of these do you lament?' (*Theraḡāthā* 33, *Commentary*).

3. 'Trained Easterners often have an astonishing memory': Matthieu Ricard in *The Monk and the Philosopher* (1997), trans. John Canti (1998), pp. 21-22.

4. 'Ānanda, if only you knew': *Udāna* 3:3.

5. 'Ānanda served as the Buddha's secretary': Both Ānanda and Devadatta were first cousins of the Buddha. One might call them his good and his evil alter ego. Born the same day, Ānanda followed his cousin (it is said) 'like a shadow' (*Theraḡāthā* 1041-43). Gotama married Yasodharā, yet another of his many first cousins. Her brother Devadatta, therefore, was not only a

cousin but Gotama's brother-in-law. Three times (it is said) he attempted to assassinate the Buddha; and plotted usurping the Buddhist order thirty-seven years after his cousin's enlightenment (when Gotama was seventy-two). On the Buddha's death, however, he was decisively rejected as his cousin's successor in favour of a majority rule, with Mahā Kassapa (the Buddha's elder) as the duly elected head (*Vinaya-piṭaka: Cullavagga* 11:1 [PTS vol. 5, 285]).

6. 'warming his back in the evening sun': *Saṃyutta Nikāya* V [Mahāvagga] 48:41.

7. 'his own contract of employment': *Theraḡāthā* 1018-1050 and its *Commentary* iii, 112.

8. 'the Buddha ... disabled by racking pain': For this attack of rheumatism during the rainy season, see *Dīgha Nikāya, Mahāparinibbāna Sutta* (16:2.23-2.24) and *Saṃyutta Nikāya* V [Mahāvagga] 47:9.

9. 'the death of Sāriputta': *Saṃyutta Nikāya* V [Mahāvagga] 47:13.

10. 'was this well heard by me ...?': *Majjhima Nikāya, Cūlasuññata Sutta* (121:3).

11. 'I'm still a mere novice, alas': *Dīgha Nikāya, Mahāparinibbāna Sutta* (16:5.13).

12. 'you have made much merit, Ānanda': *Dīgha Nikāya, Mahāparinibbāna Sutta* (16:5.14).

13. 'Mahāpajāpatā Gotamī (the Buddha's stepmother and aunt)': *Cullavagga* 10:1, *Aṅguttara Nikāya* 8:51 and *Majjhima Nikāya, Dakkhiṇāvibhaṅga Sutta* (142:3).

14. 'a needle salesman ... in the presence of a manufacturer of needles': *Saṃyutta Nikāya* II [Nidāvagga] 16:10.

15. 'instituting sewing circles': *Majjhima Nikāya, Mahāsuññata Sutta* (122:2-4) and *Vinaya-piṭaka: Mahāvagga* 8:12 [PTS vol. 4, 287].

16. 'organizing group tours': Mahā Kassapa branded ('this youngster') Ānanda 'uncontrolled' and a 'destroyer of the corn', since thirty bhikkhus promptly disrobed and left the Sangha (*Saṃyutta Nikāya* II [Nidāvagga] 16:11).

17. 'Ānanda possesses four remarkable qualities': *Dīgha Nikāya, Mahāparinibbāna Sutta* (16:5.16).

18. 'seemingly spontaneous flow of queries': *Aṅguttara Nikāya* 3:79, 5:106 and 10:1.

19. 'friendship ... not half of the holy life': *Saṃyutta Nikāya* V [Mahāvagga] 45:2.

20. 'the doctrine of dependent origination': *Dīgha Nikāya*, *Mahānidāna Sutta* (15).

21. 'an explication ... of discourses in prose': *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Mahasuññata Sutta* (122:20).

22. 'He wanted everything on record': Including the post-mortem destinations – or rebirths – of innumerable lay-followers. For which he was roundly ticked off: 'But that you should come to the Tathāgata to ask the fate of each of those who have died, that is a weariness to him' (*Dīgha Nikāya*, *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta* [16:2.8]).

23. 'the Buddha explicitly favoured intuitive wisdom': *Atakkāvacaro*, what is 'beyond the sphere of logical thought', only to be realized by insight. See *Dīgha Nikāya*, *Mahāpadāna Sutta* (14:3.1).

24. 'According to the *Aṅguttara Nikāya*': 1:19.

25. 'a monk consolidates ... with the right phrasing': *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Mahāgosinga Sutta* (32:4).

26. 'expert in the traditions': *Dīgha Nikāya*, *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta* (16:4.9) and *Aṅguttara Nikāya* 4:180.

27. 'some rinsing water left in the latrines': *Aṅguttara Nikāya* 4:249, *Dhammapada Commentary* i, 5355 and *Vinaya-piṭaka*: *Mahāvagga* 10:1.

28. 'Having heard the Dhamma, memorize it': *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Cankī Sutta* (95:20).

29. 'Anyone claiming, "This is the Dhamma"': For these four criteria and Ānanda's (implicit) role, *Dīgha Nikāya*, *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta* (16:4.7-4.11); also *Aṅguttara Nikāya* 4:180.

30. 'I shall now interrogate Ānanda': *Cullavagga* 11:1 [PTS vol. 5, 287-291]. The *Brahmajāla Sutta* is the opening sutta of the *Dīgha Nikāya*.

31. 'rules ... division of labour ... preservation ... formulaic structure': The Second Great Council (held at Vesālī in c. 383 BCE), it is said, closed the Canon of the first four *Nikāyas* (*Dīgha*, *Majjhima*, *Aṅguttara* and *Saṃyutta*) and ratified the inauguration of a fifth. The *Aṅguttara Nikāya* conspicuously

adopted the oral device of grouping suttas not by length or subject matter only, but by numerical progressions as practised by Sāriputta in the *Sangiti* and *Dasuttara Suttas* (note 51). The Third Great Council (held at Pāṭaliputta under the Emperor Aśoka in c. 253 BCE) divided the canonical collections into three ‘baskets’ (*piṭakas*): the *Sutta-piṭaka*, the *Vinaya-piṭaka* and the *Abhidhamma-piṭaka*. This Pali *Tripiṭaka*, or *Tipiṭaka*, was first recorded (with Sinhalese commentaries) some four hundred years after the Buddha’s death.

32. ‘the ... *Analects of Confucius*’: So called by the missionary-scholar, James Legge, to suggest their true nature as ‘selected passages of discussion and commentary’ (1861). The first collection of the sayings of K’ung Fu-tse, like the *Tipiṭaka*, was recorded in the first century BCE.

33. ‘Demodokos among the Phaeacians’: *Odyssey* VIII 62-82, 266-366 and 485-520.

34. ‘Milman Parry and Albert Lord’: See Albert B. Lord, *The Singer of Tales* (Harvard University Press, 1960) as well as G. S. Kirk, *The Songs of Homer and Homer and the Oral Tradition* (Cambridge University Press, 1962 and 1977).

35. ‘the “singer” ... from the “rhapsode”’: See Gregory Nagy, *Poetry as Performance: Homer and Beyond* (Cambridge University Press, 1997).

36. ‘spontaneously in performance’: For which Greek poets, unlike the Buddha, invoked the Muses for ‘inspiration’.

37. ‘Knowing what comes first and later’: *Theragāthā* 1028-1029.

38. ‘skilful in the ways of language’: *Dhammapada* 352. Four distinct types of Arahant are mentioned in the suttas. The *Paṭisambhidapatto* apart, these are the ‘impassive’ (literally ‘dry-visioned’) *Sukkhavipassako* Arahants, liberated by insight (*vipassanā*) alone without acquiring psychic powers; and the *Tevijjo* and *Chalabhiñño*: Arahants with respectively threefold and sixfold psychic powers (recalling past lives, clairvoyance, clairsaudience, etc.). See ch. 3, pp. 75-76 and ch. 10, p. 355.

39. ‘What, great King, is the Jewel’: Nāgasena in debate with King Milinda (or Menander, the Hellenistic ruler of Bactria), *Milindapañha* V, ‘A Question Solved by Inference’ [PTS 339].

40. ‘Nirutti, roughly “grammar”’: From Sanskrit *nirukti*, or ‘etymology’. Every analytical tool was stamped with its own health warning: Always stay aware that these are only expedient means within a conventional system of signs. Never conceive grammatical inflections to be absolutes.

Never be deceived into mistaking them for labels, or clues, or blueprints of a hidden 'reality'. Especially the pronouns 'I'/'me' and the possessive adjective 'mine' should not be taken as proof of a controlling agent or independent object (*attā*).

It is the 'unskilled', 'undisciplined' worldling (*Puthujjana*) who 'conceives earth; conceives in earth; conceives from earth; conceives "earth is mine"; he delights in earth' (*Majjhima Nikāya* 1, *Mūlapariyāya Sutta*, or 'Discourse on the Root of Existence'). That is, he locates himself within the declension of a single noun, always appropriating it to himself and rotating himself through its various accusative, locative or ablative cases, etc. An expanded version might run: 'Having perceived earth as earth, he conceives *himself* as earth; he conceives *himself* in earth; he conceives *himself* apart from earth ...' So the ego intrudes into all grammatical inflections and cases, indiscriminately claiming its substance, location and sovereign rights. Cf. Bhikkhu Bodhi, 'The Discourse on the Root of Existence' (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1980), p. 12. See ch. 1, p. 6.

41. 'deconstructing its constituent signs': Both syntagmatic (*nirutti*) and paradigmatic.

42. 'gone to the Unconditioned': Literally 'liberated from the *saṅkhāras* (the compounded)', *Dhammapada* 154.

43. 'Mahā Koṭṭhita ... posing the questions': To Sāriputta, for example, in *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Mahāvedalla Sutta* (43) (the 'Greater Discourse on Explanations') and *Aṅguttara Nikāya* 4:173, on the limits of the explainable. See ch. 1, p. 2.

44. 'Brahman grammarians (*vaiyākaraṇas*)': Or *vaiyākaraṇas*, from Sanskrit *vyākaraṇa*: 'undoing' or 'unpicking' words, sentences and so any linguistic phenomenon.

45. 'the Unsurpassed Wheel of Dhamma': *Saṃyutta Nikāya* I [Sagāthāvagga] 8:7.

46. 'one who had heard Dhamma-Vinaya': *Vinaya-piṭaka*: *Cullavagga* 7:4 [PTS vol. 5, 200-201].

47. 'He analysed each *jhāna* ... in turn': *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Anupada Sutta* (111).

48. 'the *Niddesa* and *Paṭisambhidā Suttas*': *Khuddaka Nikāya*, books 11 and 12. The *Mahā Niddesa* is a commentary on the *Aṭṭhaka-vagga* of the *Sutta Nipāta* (*Khuddaka Nikāya*, book 5); the *Cūḷa Niddesa*, on the *Pārāyana-vagga* and *Khaggavisana Suttas*.

The *Paṭisambhidā Magga* further contains a mixed bag of treatises on mindfulness of breathing, *vipassanā*, etc.

The Buddha himself, as observed on several occasions, commented on the last two books of the *Sutta Nipāta*. Sāriputta's analytical commentary concentrates on lists of synonyms and a descriptive glossary of terms such as particles (*nirutti*); and an interpretation of the context (broadly *aṭṭha* and *dhamma*) supported by quotations from the Buddha (*paṭibhāṇa*).

49. 'legendary contributions to the *Abhidhamma*': Purportedly preached by the Buddha to his mother, Rani Siri Mahāmāyā, who had been reborn a *deva*. Every day, for three months, the Buddha returned to earth to give Sāriputta a sampling of the method (*naya*) of his ever-proliferating text.

50. 'one ancient commentator': *Aṭṭhasālini*, the commentary to the *Dhamma-saṅgaṇī*. The *Paṭṭhāna* is the seventh and last book of the *Abhidhamma*. Both the detailed analysis of *jhāna*-consciousness in the *Dhamma-saṅgaṇī* and its closing section (the *Atthuddhāra-kaṇḍa*, or 'synopsis') too were probably composed by Sāriputta.

51. 'analytical rigour ... in his own teaching': Cf. *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Sammādiṭṭhi Sutta* (9) (On Right Understanding); *Mahāhatthipadopama Sutta* (28) (The Greater Discourse on the Elephant Footprint); and *Mahāvedalla Sutta* (43) (the question-and-answer session with the Venerable Mahā Koṭṭhita). See especially the expanding numerical clusters ('In growing groups from one to ten I'll teach') of the *Saṅgīti Sutta* and *Dasuttara Sutta* (*Dīgha Nikāya* 33-34).

52. 'A monk who is liberated': *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Dīghanakha Sutta* (74:13-14).

53. 'It was half a month after my ordination': *Aṅguttara Nikāya* 4:172.

54. 'No thoughts struck me': *Saṃyutta Nikāya* III [Khandhavagga] 28:1-9.

55. 'Even the Buddha once enquired': *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Piṇḍapāta-pārisuddhi Sutta* (151:2).

56. 'wholly absorbed ... in ... *bhava-nirodho*': *Aṅguttara Nikāya* 10:7. Not 'existence' in a metaphysical sense, but rather the cessation of 'becoming' in a cycle of rebirth. Sāriputta continued: 'One perception of *nibbāna* arose and another ceased, just as from a log fire one flame arises and another ceases ...'

57. 'The essence of Dhamma ... so well penetrated by Sāriputta': *Saṃyutta Nikāya* II [Nidānavagga] 12:32.

58. 'How obliging ... to his brothers': *Saṃyutta Nikāya* V [Mahāvagga] 47:13.

59. 'a "system-building successor": Jasper Griffin, 'Plato's Grand Design', *New York Review*, vol. XLVI, no. 8 (May 6, 1999), p. 41.

60. 'absorption where words cannot penetrate': *Udāna* 3:3.

61. 'So, Ānanda, live as an island unto yourself: *Dīgha Nikāya, Mahāparinibbāna Sutta* (16:2.26), in (part) response to Ānanda's pathetic plea: 'Lord, my body tottered; everything grew dim and my head swam because of the Lord's sickness ...' (2.24).

EPILOGUE

1. 'When muffled as a broken gong': *Dhammapada* 134.

2. 'in Lao-tzu's formulation': From the *Tao Te Ching*, whose opening line, punning on Tao (which may mean both 'the way' and 'to speak'), runs: 'the Tao which can be spoken is not eternal Tao'.

3. 'But tell me – does the sound come to the ear': *The Gateless Barrier: The Wu-men Kuan (Mumonkan)*, translated with a commentary by Robert Aitken (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1990), Case 16, p. 107.

4. 'Every art seems tedious': Epictetus, *Discourses*, book 2, ch. 14.

5. 'Don't offer a poem': *The Gateless Barrier*, ed. Aitken, Case 33, p. 204.

6. 'Can someone else be a man's teacher ...': Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, II, p. 277.

7. 'Study [*togpa*] is of no use in gaining true knowledge [*togspa*]: The Gomchen of Sakyong, in Alexandra David-Neel, *With Mystics and Magicians in Tibet* (first English edition, 1931), ch. 2, p. 58.

8. 'What we know is never the object': Howard Nemerov, *Figures of Thought* (1975).

9. 'Bamboo shadows sweep the stairs': *Zenrin Kushū*. For an alternative translation, see *A Zen Forest* (1981), translated by Sōiku Shigematsu, no. 770.

10. 'The Dhamma is like a raft': *Majjhima Nikāya, Alagaddūpama Sutta* (22). See ch. 1, p. 12 and ch. 9, pp. 336-337.

11. 'beauty and eloquence ... directly experiencing enlightenment': Thomas Cleary and J. C. Cleary, *The Blue Cliff Record* (1977), vol. 1, p. xxii.

12. 'both sink into the water and yet not sink': Cf. the Buddha: 'If I stood still, I sank; if I struggled, I was carried away. Thus by neither standing still

nor struggling, I crossed the stream' (of life and death), *Saṃyutta Nikāya* I [Sagāthāvagga] 1:1.

13. 'A special transmission outside the scriptures': The Zen schools like to trace their lineage even further back to Mahā Kassapa who alone broke into a smile, it is said, when the Buddha twirled a flower before the assembly. So to him was entrusted this 'special transmission', they claim, not founded upon 'words or phrases'. See Case 6.

14. 'the Way is not subject to knowing or not knowing': *The Gateless Barrier*, ed. Aitken, Case 19, p. 126. Chao-chou is more generally known by his Japanese name Jōshū.

15. "'I won't say living; I won't say dead'": Recounted in *The Blue Cliff Record*, eds. Cleary and Cleary, vol. 2, p. 365.

16. 'Your mind is always running after the objects': D. T. Suzuki, *Essays in Zen Buddhism: Second Series* (1976), pp. 231-232.

17. 'If you say, "Yes" ... If you say, "No"': Thomas Cleary, *Book of Serenity* (1990), p. 176.

18. 'bow, arrow, goal and ego': Eugen Herrigel, *Zen in the Art of Archery* (1953), p. 70.

19. 'Passing by the bathroom ...': Yoel Hoffman, *Radical Zen: The Sayings of Jōshū* (1978), p. 17. Nan-ch'üan is more generally known by his Japanese name Nansen.

20. 'even a trifling bit of excrement': *Ariguttara Nikāya* 1:18, para. 13. See 'The Dung-Beetle', ch. 8, pp. 301-302.

21. 'what is unutterable ... – unutterably – contained': Wittgenstein, letter to Paul Engelmann, 9 April, 1917.

22. 'trying to say what can only be shown': Ray Monk, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius* (1990), p. 156. Cf. ch. 2, p. 70.

23. 'The purpose of words is to convey ideas': Quoted ch. 1, p. 12.

24. 'And if there were only/ the moon': Spoken to Oets Bouwsma at night, on the hill overlooking Cornell, in 1949; see *Wittgenstein: Conversations, 1949-1951*, p. 12.

25. 'ever alert to the comic potential of this bleak predicament': 'And preferring what?' Samuel Beckett was asked in the first of three dialogues with the editor of *Transition*, Georges Duthuit, published in 1949. He

answered: 'The expression that there is nothing to express, nothing with which to express, nothing from which to express, no power to express, no desire to express, together with the obligation to express' (*Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit*, 1965, p. 103).



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DRAWN FROM HIS DISCOURSES
HAROLD BEAVER

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WHEN, MUFFLED AS A BROKEN GONG,
YOU DON'T REVERBERATE,
YOU'VE REACHED NIBBĀNA:
RECRIMINATION'S TURMOIL FINALLY STILLED IN YOU.

Dhammapada 134