

Why the Buddha “Hesitated” To Teach

Events leading up to the First Discourse

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BRAHMĀ SAHAMPATI

1 Someone to show respect to

Ancient Indian teachers, especially the brahminical gurus, were generally reluctant to teach others. Where these ancient teachers did give their teachings, they would usually hold something back by way of the “teacher’s fist” (*ācariya.muṭṭhi*) (D 2:100 = S 5:153).¹ As such, it is natural for the Buddha not to immediately declare his newly-realized truth, as it were. He is merely keeping to the religious convention of his times.

The Gārava Sutta (or Uruvelā Sutta 1) (A 4.21) gives important insight into the Buddha’s “hesitation” to teach, revealing a humble and sensitive side of the Buddha. This event occurred during the fifth week after the Great Awakening while the Buddha is sitting under the Goatherd Banyan Tree, when this thought arises in the newly awakened Buddha: “One dwells in suffering if one is without reverence and deference. Now what ascetic or brahmin can I honour and respect and dwell in dependence on?”²

With this thought, the Buddha reflects to whom he should turn as teacher to fulfill any unfulfilled **virtue**, any unfulfilled **concentration**, any unfulfilled **wisdom**, any unfulfilled **liberation**, any unfulfilled **knowledge and vision of liberation**, but he found no one more accomplished in these qualities than he himself, and as such found no one to honour and respect.

Let me then honour and respect and dwell in dependence on this very Dharma to which I have fully awakened. (S 1:139 = A 2:20)³

The Aṅguttara version of the sutta closes with an interesting remark put into the Buddha’s mouth: “Moreover, monks, since the Sangha too has attained to greatness, I also have deep reverence for the Sangha” (A 4.21/2:21). Considering the fact that this event occurred only 5 weeks after the Great Awakening (before the Sangha was formed), it is likely that this last sentence was interpolated much later by redactors.

2 The Buddha’s decision to teach

2.1 Why the Buddha hesitated to teach

It is said that soon after his awakening, the Buddha hesitates to make known his newly-discovered Dharma, as it would be difficult for a world that is filled with lust and hate to understand. There are three reasons for the Buddha’s hesitation—the intellectual, the moral and the historical. The Dharma is deep and thus requires an extreme concentration of the mind before one can understand it. And since it insists upon the extinction of all desires, it therefore demands complete self-control.

¹ See **Mahā Parinibbāna S** (D 16.2.25a/2:100) = SD 9.

² A 4.21/2:20 f; AA 3:24; BA 13, 291; J 81. For a study, see Étienne Lamotte, “The Gārava-Sutta of the Saṃyutta-nikāya and its Mahāyānist Developments,” *Journal of the Pali Text Society* 9, 1981:127-144.

³ The **Arājaka S** (A 3.14/1:109 f) says that just as a world monarch rules with his “regent” (the Dharma or justice), so too the Buddha as “king of Dharma” shows respect to the Dharma (the liberating truth). On the 7 weeks after the Awakening, see SD 26.1(5).

An average person, when he is a victim of unceasing desires and untrained in mind, would find it extremely difficult to understand or follow the Dharma. The individualistic “intellectual” would find it beyond his capacity, and the morally weak worldling would be thoroughly discouraged. These sentiments are recorded in a number of places in the Pali Canon with these stanzas:

I have discovered the truth with difficulty:
Enough with declaring it!
For it will never be easily understood [be easily awakened to]
By those lost in lust and hate.

It goes against the current,
Profound, deep, hard to see, subtle—
Those dyed in lust will not see it, nor (will it be seen)
By those wrapped in massive darkness.⁴

Considering thus, monks, my mind inclined to inaction rather than to teaching the Dharma. (V 1:4 = M 1:169 = S 1:136; D 2:37 Vipassī Buddha; Mvst 3:315)

At this point, it is said that **the Brahmā Sahampati**, the seniormost of the High Gods,⁵ perceiving the Buddha’s thought, becomes alarmed and cries out, “The world is lost!” Fearing that the world might perish through not hearing the Dharma, he entreats the Buddha to teach the Dharma as there are

...beings with little dust in their eyes who are falling away because they do not hear the Dharma. There will be those who will understand the Dharma.

(V 1:5-7 = M 1:169 = S 1:138 f)

2.2 Past Buddhas too hesitated

Gotama Buddha is not alone in his hesitation to teach the newly found Dharma. According to **the Mahāpadāna Sutta** (D 14), the six past Buddhas before Gotama—Vipassī, Sikhī, Vessabhū, Kakusandha, Konāgamana and Kassapa—all hesitated to mull over this choice (D 14.3.1-7/ 2:35-40). Martin Wiltshire, in his unpublished paper, “The great hesitation,” stresses the clearly optional [supererogatory] nature of the Buddha’s decision to teach:

If he had taught automatically and without hesitation as the natural consequence of his awakening, then the act of teaching would not have been seen as *distinct achievement*. As it was, by representing a state of affairs in which it was possible to make a negative choice, the Buddha’s decision to teach would be seen as a definite act of compassion. (Wiltshire 1983:17, original emphasis)⁶

The Vinaya account of the period immediately following the great awakening says that the Buddha “surveys the world with the Buddha-eye out of compassion for beings” (V 1:6). This initial hesitation and subsequent decision by the Buddha to teach

can be seen as emblematic of the new scale of values introduced by Buddhism into the contemporary religious scene. It is a precedential action which establishes a new ideal of human perfection: mystical knowledge by itself is no longer enough but must henceforth be coupled with action inspired by a consciousness of moral good. By hesitation the Buddha signals his recognition of alternative conceptions of human good, and by his choice

⁴ V 1:4 = M 1:169 = S 1:136; D 2:37 Vipassī Buddha; Mvst 3:315.

⁵ “The seniormost of the High Gods,” *jeṭṭhā mahābrahmā* (DA 2:467).

⁶ Keown’s quote of Wiltshire’s unpublished paper.

his indicates his evaluation of one of them as superior. The reverberations of this paradigmatic choice were felt throughout the tradition, and the twin ideals of insight and teaching as a manifestation of moral concern seem to have been emulated by the Buddha's immediate disciples. (Keown 1992:42)

2.3 Waiting for Brahmā

2.3.1 THE BUDDHA'S "INNER CONFLICT"? Some modern scholars regard the story of the Brahmā Sahampati's entreaty to the Buddha to teach the Dharma for the benefit of the world as "**a symbolic and psychological description of the Buddha's inner conflict.**"⁷ The implication here, some scholars argue, is that Brahmā has to request the Buddha to teach because the Buddha is inclined towards not teaching the Dharma.

The Majjhima Commentary on the Ariya,pariyesanā Sutta stanzas raises the question why, when the Bodhisattva had long ago made an aspiration to reach Buddhahood in order to liberate others, was his mind now bent towards inaction? The reason, the commentator says, is that only now, after reaching awakening, does he fully realize the strength of the defilements in people's minds and of the profundity of the Dharma. Moreover, he wants Brahmā to entreat him to teach so that beings who venerate Brahmā would recognize the precious value of the Dharma and desire to listen to it and have respect for it (MA 2:176 f).⁸ Analayo, in his comparative study of the **Ariya,pariyesanā Sutta**, comments:

The same problem also faced the Pāli commentary, which attempts an explanation by suggesting that on surveying the world the Buddha realized the degree to which people were under the influence of defilements.⁹ Moreover he wanted Brahmā to invite him, since this would cause people in the world to conceive respect for the *Dhamma*.¹⁰ These commentarial explanations are not convincing.

The first explanation confuses the temporal sequence of events, since the Buddha's hesitation to teach occurred before he surveyed the world. Once he did survey the world, after Brahma's request, the Buddha realized that some beings would be able to understand and thereon decided to teach. As made explicit in **the Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya's** account, it was once the Buddha surveyed the world that great compassion arose in him.¹¹

The second explanation is even less acceptable, since it would imply that the Buddha only pretended hesitation in order to stage a show with the view of enhancing his reputation, an act which does not seem to be compatible with the personality of the Buddha. A more serious implication of this second explanation is that it turns the Buddha's statement to the monks present in Rammaka's hermitage, in which he informed them of his initial disinclination to teach, into a falsehood.¹²

⁷ T Endo, *Buddha in Theravada Buddhism*, 1997:90, also 331:n127.

⁸ Also at Lalita Vistāra, tr Lefmann 1902:395.

⁹ DA 2:176. The comy at this point speaks of the Buddha surveying the world with his omniscient knowledge. As Bareau 1963:142 points out, if the Buddha was really omniscient, how come he remained blind to the potential of beings and of his teaching, which was to become a widespread religious tradition in ancient India and abroad. (Analayo's fn)

¹⁰ DA 2:177. That the motivation for the Buddha's hesitation to teach was in order to instill respect for the Dharma in the world, by getting the supreme Brahma to request its teaching, recurs also in the Lalita-vistara, Lefmann 1902, tr in Foucaux 1884:329. (Analayo's fn)

¹¹ The Chinese version, T1450 = T24.126c22, tr Waldschmidt 1957:119; and the Skt version (Saṅghabheda, vastu) in Gnoli 1977:130. (Analayo's fn)

¹² M 1:168,9: "Thinking thus, my mind inclined to living at ease, rather than teaching the Dharma," *itiha me, bhikkhave, paṭisañcikkhato appossukkatāya cittaṃ namati, no dhammadesanāya*. See **Ariya,pariyesanā S** (M 26) = SD 1.11 ad loc for notes.

Hence it seems that the Buddha indeed felt disinclined to teach. The reason given by him in **the Ariyapariyesanā Sutta**, which recurs in the other versions with similar expressions, was that it will be fatiguing (*kilamatha*) and vexing (*vihesā*) for him if others were to fail to understand the profound and sublime truth he had realized.¹³ The same becomes even more evident in **the Theravāda Vinaya**, according to which a single request by Brahmā was not sufficient to overcome the Buddha's disinclination to teach. According to this account, Brahmā Sahampati had to repeat his request for three times before the Buddha consented.¹⁴ Similarly **the Mahāvastu** reports that Brahma at first convinced Sakka, the king of gods, to request the Buddha to teach, a request which did not meet with success, followed by trying the same himself, again without success.¹⁵

This evident disinclination to teach does not seem to stand in complete contrast to the Buddha's earlier motivation. According to **the Ariyapariyesanā Sutta** and its parallel in **the Madhyama Āgama**, the Buddha described his motivation for going forth in search of awakening entirely in personal terms, speaking of himself being subject to old age, disease and death and of searching a way out of this predicament for himself, not alluding at all to the wish to save others.¹⁶ (Analayo 2005:5 f ad M 1:167)

In other words, even without Brahmā's entreaty, the Buddha, in all his infinite wisdom, would have been able to convince his audience, and it is needless, therefore, for him to have hesitated. Moreover, in modern times, Brahmā's entreaty could be misinterpreted as a **divine intervention** by a higher being to bestow charisma or prophetship upon the Buddha.

Where the first problem is concerned, one must remember that no one is obliged to teach the truth that one has discovered. Had the Buddha decided not to declare the Dharma, he would have lived and died just like any other enlightened saint. But, the fact that he has decided to teach, and that he has the ability to do so, makes him "the Perfectly Self-awakened Buddha" (*sammā,sambuddha*).

2.3.2 BUDDHA'S THEOPHANY? As for the second problem, about the likelihood of misinterpreting Brahmā's entreaty as a **theophany** (divine manifestation in the world), it should be borne in mind that even the highest of the Brahmā Gods has not attained to nirvana, whereas the Buddha has. The ancient Indians, especially the brahmins, looked up to Brahmā as the Supreme Lord and Creator. The fact that Brahmā himself comes down and humbly entreats the Buddha to teach the Dharma obviously means that the Buddha's message is a vital one worthy of listening to and

¹³ M 1:168,2. It is notable that the stronger of the two terms, *vihesā*, recurs again at M 1:169,26 as the related form *vihimsā*, when the Buddha referred to his former disinclination to teach as *vihimsa,saññī*, "perception of harm". The similar expressions *viheṭṭha,prekṣa* occurs in the corresponding passages in the Catuspariṣat Sūtra and the Saṅgha,bheda,vastu (Waldschmit 1957:118 and Gnoli 1977:130). Similarly EĀ 19.1 (T II 593a29) has the Buddha explain the reason for his disinclination to teach with 損, which according to Soothill's DCBT 1937:402 refers to "hurt", or "damage"; the *Dharmaguptaka* and the *Mahīṣāsaka Vinaya*, T 1428 (T XXII 786c6) and T 1421 (T XXII 103c13), speak of the arising of 勞疲 and 苦 "weariness and *dukkha*," and the *Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya*, T 1450 (T XXIV 126b14), of "weariness" (疲勞) and 惱, which according to Soothill's DCBT 2000:371 represents "vexation," "irritation," or "annoyance."

¹⁴ Vin 1:6. The need for three requests before the Buddha agrees is also found in T 189 (T III 643a17).

¹⁵ Senart 1897:315, Jones 1978:304. Two verses with which first Sakka and then Brahmā invited the Buddha to teach recur as a discourse on its own, S 11.7/1:233, a discourse which however takes place at Jeta's Grove in Sāvattḥī. Verses spoken by two devas in order to invite the Buddha to teach, occurring however at an earlier point of time, can be found in the Catuspariṣat Sūtra (Waldschmit 1957:74-76, see esp n 8 on p74) and in Saṅgha,bheda,vastu (Gnoli 1977:121). The Jātaka Nidāna,kathā (J 1:81, Jayawickrama 1990:108) also reports Brahmā Sahampati to have been in the company of Sakka (and other gods). (Analayo's fn)

¹⁶ M 1:163,21: *yan nūnāhaṃ attanā jarā,dhammo ... nibbānaṃ pariyeseyyaṃ*. MĀ 204 (T1.776a19): 我自 實老法... 我今寧可求... 涅槃. (Analayo's fn)

following (DA 2:467).

2.3.3 SIDDHATTHA'S PERSONAL QUEST. The episode of the Buddha's hesitation to teach and the Brahmā Sahampati's invitation is a universal Buddhist tradition, found even outside the Pali tradition.¹⁷ As such, it cannot be a late sectarian invention. However, it appears difficult to resolve the Buddha's hesitance with the universal Buddhist tradition that he has prepared himself for countless aeons for Buddhahood [2c(1)].

The Commentarial argument that the Buddha waits for Brahmā to invite him to teach so that people have respect for the Dharma (MA 2:177) is not convincing. In **the Brahmā Nimantanika Sutta** (M 49), the Buddha declares to Māra:

Evil one, if the Tathagata [Thus Come] teaches the Dharma to disciples, he is such (*tādiso*); and, evil one, if the Tathagata does not teach the Dharma to disciples, he is such (*tādiso*).

Evil one, if the Tathagata [Thus Come] guides disciples, he is such (*tādiso*); and, evil one, if the Tathagata does not guide disciples, he is such (*tādiso*). (M 49.30/1:330)

This statement means that whether the Buddha teaches or not, he remains the Buddha [awakened], Tathagata [Thus Come]. His liberation is intact whether he teaches or not, and he is not obliged to teach. So why does he decide to teach the Dharma? Let us first look at some important comments by Analayo:

To understand the Buddha's reasoning after his awakening, two other passages could be brought in. One of these passages occurs in **the Brahmanimantanika Sutta**, where in reply to Māra the Buddha explained that his condition of inner freedom was independent of whether he taught or not.¹⁸ The other passage is from **the Mahāparinibbāna Sutta**, according to which the Buddha renounced his life principle and thereby set an end to his teaching activities because his attendant Ānanda had failed to request him to stay alive, even though that would have been possible.¹⁹

The point that emerges from these two passages is that the quality of the Buddha's awakening did not in any way depend on him becoming a teacher. His realization was self-sufficient as it were, and there was no need for him to proselyte in order to corroborate the truth he had discovered. Once he had been requested to teach, he did so, but when on a later occasion he was not requested to continue teaching, he stopped teaching.

It is important to remember Siddhattha's original purpose of leaving home, which is clearly stated in this excerpt from **the Ariya,pariyesanā Sutta** (M 26):

¹⁷ **Ariya,pariyesanā S** (M 26/1:169 f); (**Uruvelā**) **Āyācanā S** (S 6.1/1:136-138); EĀ 19.1 = T2.593a-b (tr in Bareau 1988:78; cf Bareau 1980:5); individual trs: T186 = T3.527c23, T187 = T3.603a10, T189 = T3:642c-643a, T190 = T3.806a3, T191 = T952c-953a (cf Waldschmidt 1967g:173); Catuspariṣat Sūtra (DĀ) in Waldschmidt 1957:108-120; Lalita Vistāra in Lefmann 1902:392; **V 1:4-7**; Dharmaguptaka Vinaya T1428 = T22.786b-787b (tr Bareau 1963:138 f); Lokottaravāda Vinaya (Mahāvastu): tr Senart 1897: 314, tr Jones 1978:302; Mahīśāsaka Vinaya T1421 = T 22.103c-104a: tr Bareau 1963:136-138; Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya: Chinese T1450 = T24.126b (tr Waldschmidt 1957:109-121), Skt in Gnoli 1977:128-130, Tib in Waldschmidt 1957:109-121, tr Feer 1883:14-16.

¹⁸ *desento...Tathāgato sāvakānaṃ dhammaṃ tadiso va, adesento pi...tadiso va* (M 1:331,18).

¹⁹ D 2:103. The same recurs in the Skt fragments of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra* (Waldschmidt 1951: 204), and in the Chinese parallels DĀ 2, T5, T6, and T7, (T1.15b24, T1.165a13, T1.180b20, & T1.191b19; a tr of DĀ 2 in Weller 1939:78-79, of T5 in Puini 1909:36, and of T6 & T7 in Waldschmidt 1944:98-99). (Analayo's fn)

Monks, before my awakening, while I was still only an unawakened Bodhisattva,²⁰ I, too, being myself subject to birth, sought what was also subject to birth; ...subject to ageing; ...subject to sickness; ...subject to death; ...subject to sorrow; being myself subject to defilement, sought what was also subject to defilement.²¹

Then, monks, I thought thus:

“Why, being myself subject to *all these unwholesome states*, also seek what are subject to them?

Suppose that, being myself subject to birth, having understood the danger in what is subject to birth, were to seek the unborn supreme security from bondage, nirvana.

Suppose that, being myself subject to ageing...subject to sickness...subject to death...subject to sorrow, subject to defilement, were to seek the undefiled supreme security from bondage, nirvana.”

Monks, later, while still young, a black-haired young man endowed with the blessing of youth, in the prime of life, though my mother and father wished otherwise and wept with tearful faces, I shaved off my hair and beard, put on the saffron robe, and went forth from the household life into the homeless life. (M 26.13-14/1:163)

There is clearly no mention here, nor anywhere else in the texts, of the Bodhisattva’s intention to teach others or start a new religion: it is *personal quest*. The young Siddhattha, emotionally traumatized by the sufferings he sees around him, decides to find the answer and way out of all these conditions.

2.3.4 BRAHMĀ SAHAMPATI.²² One of the most enigmatic episodes in the Buddha story is the renunciation of his life-formation (*āyu, saṅkhāra*),²³ mentioned in **the Mahā Parinibbāna Sutta** (D 16) and in cognate passages elsewhere.²⁴ There is a vital significance to the Buddha’s renunciation of his life-formation. The Buddha’s awakening does not depend on a God-idea, the gods, or any teacher. The Buddha’s awakening, too, does not entail that he should declare it to others, but when later requested by the Brahmā Sahampati, he teaches the Dharma for our benefit.

And when the Buddha teaches, he does so with such wisdom and compassion that he veritably founds the world’s first missionary religion, and he does not pass away until the fourfold company—his monk disciples, nun disciples, laymen disciples and laywomen disciples²⁵—is well-established.

Brahmā Sahampati, a Mahā Brahmā of the Akaniṭṭha heaven,²⁶ plays a vital role in inviting the Buddha to declare his awakening to the world. However, Sahampati is not merely a High

²⁰ *Pubbe va sambodhā anabhisambuddhassa Bodhisattass’eva sato*, as at **Bhaya, bherava S** (M 4.3/1:17), **Dvedhā, vitakka S** (M 19.2/1:114), **Mahā Saccaka S** (M 36.12/1:240), **Bodhi Rāja, kumāra S** (M 85.10/2:93), **Saṅgārava S** (M 100.9/2:211), but different contexts. See also S 2:5, 10, 104, 170, 3:27, 4:7, 8, 97, 289, 5:263, 281; A 1:258, 3:240-242 (passim), 4:439; Pm 2:109; Miln 235.

²¹ The **Sukhumāla S** (A 3.38/1:145 f) and **Mada S** (A 3.39/1:146 f) form the prelude to this section.

²² See SD 12.2-4, esp 12.2 Introd.

²³ **Satta, vassāni S** (S 4.24/1:122-124); A 5:46; J 1:78 f; DhA 3:195 f; **Mahā Parinibbāna S** (D 16.3.3/2:103 & 16.3.10/2:107) = SD 9.

²⁴ *Mahā Parinirvāṇa Sūtra* in Waldschmidt 1951:204; DĀ (Chinese): T1 = 1.15b24; T5 = 1.65a13; T6 = T1.180b20; T7 = T191b19. DĀ 2 tr in Weller 1939:78 f; T5 in Puini 1909:36; T6 & T7 Waldschmidt 1944:98 f.

²⁵ *Bhikkhu, sāvaka, bhikkhunī, sāvakā, upāsaka, sāvaka, upāsikā, sāvika* (**Mahā Parinibbāna S**, D 16.3.7-10/2:105 f), which I take as “split tadpurushas.” It is important to note here that the Buddha is clearly not referring to a statistical population, but a spiritual community of saints (stream-winners, once-returners, non-returners, arhats).

²⁶ “The Buddhist discourses contain a multi-levelled model of the Brahma world [t]hat culminates in a highest level which can only be reached by developing the stage of never-return. (The lowest level requires at least jhaana; merit alone is insufficient.) Once that cosmic model was accepted, it is not surprising that in

God, but one closely connected with the dispensation of Gotama Buddha. He is present at the Nativity and, at the Great Awakening, he holds a white parasol three yojanas across over the Buddha's head (BA 287).²⁷

Sahampati's status as a non-returner (*anāgāmi*) is attested to in **the Brahmā Sahampati Sutta** (S 48.57), where the Buddha, while in retreat, reflects on the five spiritual faculties.²⁸ Reading his mind, the Brahmā Sahampati appears before the Buddha and declares his approval, saying that he [Sahampati] too has cultivated the spiritual faculties during the time of the immediate past **Buddha Kassapa**,²⁹ when he [Brahmā] is a monk named **Sahaka**. Having destroyed all desire for sense-pleasure, he is reborn in the Brahmā world,³⁰ and is thereafter called **Sahampati**.³¹ Here, "having abandoned lustful desire for sense-pleasures" clearly refers to being a non-returner.³² The Commentaries actually state that he is a **non-returner (anāgāmi) brahma**, born in the Suddhāvāsā,³³ there to pass a whole aeon (*kappa*),³⁴ because he has developed the first dhyana as a monk.³⁵

Sahampati visits our Buddha Gotama on a number of occasions. On such visits, he approves of the Buddha's decision to take the Dharma as his teacher³⁶ and of the Buddha's teachings them-

Buddhist sources (Theravaadin at least) the deity who requested the Buddha to preach was understood to be the chief deity of the Eldest Gods (Akani.t.tha) ie the highest and greatest of all beings who have a physical form. To some extent, he could be viewed as far closer to the Brahma of later Hinduism than the relatively minor ruler of the lowest Brahma heaven." (LS Cousins, Buddha-L posting, 26 May 2005).

²⁷ This episode has been sculpted in the Relic Chamber of the Mahā Thūpa in Sri Lanka (Mahv 30.74); cf J 4:266.

²⁸ S 48.57/5:233f. "The five spiritual faculties" (*pañc'indriya*) are: (1) faith (*saddhā*); (2) effort (*virīya*); (3) mindfulness (*sati*); (4) concentration (*samādhi*); (5) wisdom (*paññā*) (D 3:239; A 3:10; Vbh 342). These faculties are to be balanced in a meditator in these pairs: faith and wisdom, effort and concentration, and the balancing faculty is mindfulness. See SD 10.4.

²⁹ There were six past Buddhas before Gotama—Vipassī, Sikhī, Vessabhū, Kakusandha, Konāgamana and Kassapa (D 14.3.1-7/2:35-40).

³⁰ *Kāmesu kāma-c, chandaṃ virajetvā, kāyassa bhedā paraṃ maraṇā sugatim brahma,lokaṃ upapanno*, "Having abandoned lustful desire in sense-pleasures, after death when the body has broken up, he arose in the heaven of the Brahma-world." Cf **Tevijjā S** on how a monk "unburdened by wives and wealth" and cultivating the liberation of the mind through the four brahmaviharas, arises in the Brahma world after death (D 13.76-81/1:251 f).

³¹ **Sahampati) Brahmā S** (S 48.57/5:232 f; SA 1:199).

³² The stock passage describing a non-returner is this: *pañcannaṃ oram, bhāgiyānaṃ saṃyojanānaṃ parikkhayaṃ opapātikā tatha parinibbāyino anāvatti, dhammā tasmā lokā*, "with the destruction of the five lower fetters [connected with the lower realms of existence], are **spontaneously reborn** [in the Pure Abodes] and there attain final nirvana, without ever returning from that world" (M 118.10/3:80). The 5 lower fetters (*oram, bhāgiya*) are: (1) Personality view (*sakkāya, dīṭṭhi*), (2) persistent doubt (*vicikicchā*), (3) attachment to rules and rites (*sīla-b, bata, parāmāsa*), (4) sensual lust (*kāma, rāga*), (5) repulsion (*paṭigha*). See **Ānāpāna, sati S** (M 118) = SD 7.13.10 n (the 10 fetters).

³³ SnA 2:476. **The Pure Abodes** (*suddh'āvāsa*), ie, the five highest heavens of the form world (*rūpa, loka*) (in the 4th dhyana sphere), inhabited only by non-returners who assume their last birth to become arhats and attain nirvana. These worlds are Āviha ("Non-declining"), Ātappa ("Unworried"), Sudassā ("Clearly Visible"), Sudassī ("Clear-visioned") and Akaniṭṭhā ("Highest") (D 3:237, M 3:103, Vbh 425, Pug 42-46). Cf **Mahāpadāna S** (D 14.3.29-32/2:49-53) where the Buddha visits the Suddh'āvāsa realms, and is informed about Vipassī Buddha. Cf BA 12, where he is merely said to be reborn as a Mahā Brahmā in the first-dhyana realm (*paṭhama-j, jhāna, bhūmiyaṃ kapp'āyuka mahā, brahmā hutvā nibbato*).

³⁴ "Aeon," *kappa*, technically *mahā, kappa* (great aeon), that is, one full cycle or age of the world (V 3:109; D 1:14, 3:109; S 2:185 = It 17; A 2:126, 142; Miln 108, 232; DA 1:162; PvA 21), described as comprising of four stages—expanding, stable, contracting, stable—of a pulsating universe (A 2:142). For similes on the aeon's length, see S 2:181; DA 1:164 = PvA 254.

³⁵ BA 12.

³⁶ **Gārava S** (S 6.2/1:138-140); **Uruvelā S 1** (A 4.21/2:20).

selves, such as the five faculties (*indriya*),³⁷ and the focusses of mindfulness (*satipaṭṭhāna*).³⁸ He shows great interest in the welfare of the Sangha, such as extolling an arhat monk on almsround,³⁹ reproaching Devadatta for his evils,⁴⁰ and intervening to reconcile the Buddha with some unruly monks.⁴¹ **The Brahma,deva Sutta** (S 6.3) relates how he admonishes a brahminee, a Brahmā devotee, to stop making meaningless offerings to Brahmā and instead give alms to her own son, the monk Brahma,deva.⁴² Just as he has welcomed the infant Siddhattha into the world, Sahampati is present at the Buddha's parinirvana, where he utters a verse of eulogy.⁴³

During the eighth week of the Great Awakening, as the Buddha sits under the Aja,pāla Nigrodha [Goatherd Banyan], hesitating to teach the Dharma, the non-returner Brahmā Sahampati appears before him and beseeches him to open the "doors of deathlessness" to the world.⁴⁴ Sahampati reports to the Buddha that there are those "with little dust in their eyes" [3a] who, not listening to the Dharma, would fall away. Seeing this to be true, the Buddha decides to teach the Dharma.⁴⁵ In so doing, Sahampati has linked together the past Buddha Kassapa's dispensation with that of our present Buddha Gotama's dispensation.

There is another important point regarding the Buddha's hesitance to teach. In **the Mahā Parinibbāna Sutta** (D 16), when Ānanda fails to invite him to extend his life-span to continue teaching, he renounces the life-formation and passes into final nirvana.⁴⁶ In other words, when invited, the Buddha teaches; when he sees his work is done, he takes his leave. This gentle unobtrusive spirit of compassion and wisdom is at the heart of Buddhist mission, where one should not (and cannot) force the truth upon another, but like nourishing food, it can only be gently and wisely offered to others, but they must themselves partake of it.

2.4 The decision to teach

The most important reason for the Buddha to teach the Dharma is given in Brahmā's words as recorded in **the Āyācanā Sutta** (S 6.1), and in identical passages in the Vinaya, the Dīgha (Vipassī Buddha), the Majjhima and the Saṃyutta (with BHS parallel in the Mahāvastu),⁴⁷ thus attesting to its importance. The Saṃyutta Commentary says that this event occurred in the eighth week after the Great Awakening.⁴⁸

The Āyācanā Sutta shows the Buddha sitting under the Goatherd Banyan Tree reflecting on the profundity of the newly-realized Dharma, his hesitation to teach it and Brahmā's entreaty. This same episode is recorded in **the Ariya,pariyesanā Sutta** (M 26) without mention of the venue.⁴⁹ What Brahmā says following this serves as the rationale for the Buddha to declare the newly-found Dharma to the world:

In the past there has appeared (until now) in Magadha
An impure Dharma devised by those still tainted.

³⁷ (**Sahampati**) **Brahmā S** (S 48.57/5:232; SA 1:199).

³⁸ (**Ekāyana**) **Brahmā S** (S 47.18/5:167 f); (**Sahampati**) **Magga S** (S 47.43/5:185 f).

³⁹ **Andhaka,vinda S** (S 6.13/1:154).

⁴⁰ (**Sahampati**) **Devadatta S** (S 6.12/1:153 f).

⁴¹ **Cātumā S** (M 67.8-12/1:458); (**Sahampati**) **Piṇḍolya S** (S 22.80/3:91).

⁴² **Brahma,deva S** (S 6.3/1:140 f) = SD 12.4.

⁴³ **Parinibbāna S** (S 6.15/1:157 f).

⁴⁴ J 81; BA 13, 291.

⁴⁵ The Brahmā Sahampati also appears in (**Sahampati**) **Vandanā S** (S 11.17/1:233 f), (**Sahampati**) **Piṇḍolya S** (S 22.80/3:91-94) and **Brahmā Sahampati S** (S 48.57/ 5:232 f).

⁴⁶ D 16.3.3/2:103 & 16.3.10/2:107 = SD 9.

⁴⁷ S 6.1/1:137 = V 1:4 ff = D 14/2:36 ff = M 26/1:169 = S 48.7/5:232 respectively; Mvst 315 (Senart 1897). The Chinese Āgama version at DĀ 1 = T1.8b21.

⁴⁸ SA 1:199; see also J 81; BA 13, 291.

⁴⁹ M 26.20/1:170 f.

Throw open this door to the Deathless!
Let them hear the Dharma discovered by the Stainless One!

Just as one standing on a mountain peak
Might see below the people all around,
So, O wise one, Universal Eye,⁵⁰
Ascend the palace of the Dharma!
Being yourself free from sorrow, behold the people
Drowned in sorrow, oppressed by birth and decay.

Arise! O Hero! Victor in battle!
O Caravan Leader, debt-free one, wander in the world!
Teach the Dharma, O Blessed One!
There will be those who will understand.

(V 1:4-7; M 1:167-69; S 1:136-39; D 2:36-40
Vipassī Buddha; Mvst 3:314-19; cf S 1:234)

In the past there has appeared (till now) in Magadha | An impure Dharma devised by those still tainted. In dialectical terms, this is the **thesis**, the real but unsatisfactory state of things stated by Brahmā on behalf of sentient beings as it were. In social terms, this statement clearly refers to the brahminical system of philosophy and practices, that is, the *āstika* system.⁵¹

This statement also means that the liberating truth has been forgotten during this time. As such, the Buddha's claim that his newly proclaimed Dharma is "unheard of before"⁵² is clearly justified.⁵³

Throw open this door to the Deathless! | Let them hear the Dharma discovered by the Stainless One. This is the **antithesis** to Brahmā's earlier request. The first statement was a definition of the problem, and this second statement is a proposal for its solution.

3 The lotus pond simile

The Ariya,pariyesanā Sutta (M 26) relates how the Buddha, having examined the world with his Buddha-eye, noticed that there are indeed those beings would benefit from his teaching, or would otherwise fall into evil. He finally decides to declare the Dharma to the world:

3.1 THREE KINDS OF BEINGS

Then, having understood Brahmā's request, and out of compassion for beings, I surveyed the world with the Buddha eye.⁵⁴ I saw beings with little dust in their eyes and with

⁵⁰ "The 5 eyes" (*cakkhu*). **The Buddha eye** (*buddha,cakkhu*) is a name for the knowledge of the degrees of maturity in the faculties of being (*indriya,paropariyatta,ñāṇa*) and the knowledge of the dispositions and underlying tendencies of beings (*āsayānusaya,ñāṇa*). The knowledge of omniscience is called the **Universal Eye** (*samanta,cakkhu*). The knowledge of the three lower paths is called the **Dharma Eye** or "Dharma vision" (*dhamma,cakkhu*). Together with the **Divine Eye** or clairvoyance (*dibba,cakkhu*) and the **physical eye** (*maṃsa,cakkhu*), these make up the "five eyes" of the Buddha (Nc 235).

⁵¹ See **Mahā Parinibbāna S** (D 16.6.4) = SD 9 & Piya Tan, "The Buddha and His Disciples" 2004b: §§10:20b, 11a.

⁵² *Pubbe ananussutesu dhammesu* (S 56.11/4:422).

⁵³ Kvu 4.8/286 discusses the question how far the Buddha did not have a teacher (**Ariya,pariyesanā S**, M 26.25/1:170 = SD 1.11) when, as a Bodhisattva (named Jotipāla) he had been Kassapa Buddha's disciple (**Ghaṭikāra S**, M 81.6/2:46, 81.3/2:54), and how far the Buddha's awakening was an insight into "things unheard of before" (**Dhamma,cakka-p,pavattana S**, S 56.11.9-12/5:422- f; V 1:10-12 = SD 1.1). See also Comy ad loc (KvuA 78).

⁵⁴ On the "five eyes," see 2c n above & SD 9 Introd (7f).

much dust in their eyes, with keen faculties and with dull faculties, with good qualities and with bad qualities, easy to teach and difficult to teach, and a few who dwell seeing blame and fear in the next world.

Just as in **a lotus pond of the blue or white or red lotuses**,⁵⁵ some lotuses might be born in the water, grow up in the water, and thrive while submerged in the water, without rising out of the water; some lotuses might be born in the water, grow up in the water, and stand up at an even level with the water; some lotuses might be born in the water and grow up in the water, but would rise up from the water and stand up in the water without being soiled by the water—

So, too, surveying the world with the Buddha Eye, the Blessed One sees beings with little dust in their eyes and with much dust in their eyes, with keen faculties and with dull faculties, with good qualities and with bad qualities, easy to teach and difficult to teach, and a few who dwelt seeing blame and fear in the next world.

Having seen this, he answers Brahmā Sahampati in verse:

Open are the doors to the Deathless

For those who would hear! Give up the (troublesome) shraddha [ancestor worship]!⁵⁶

Foreseeing trouble, O Brahmā, I did not speak

The refined, sublime Dharma among humans.

Then, Brahmā Sahampati, thinking, “There is consent by the Blessed One for the teaching of the Dharma!”⁵⁷ pays homage to the Blessed One, keeping him to the right, disappeared right there.⁵⁸ (V 1:7; M 1:170; S 1:138; D 2:39 Vipassī Buddha; Mvst 3:318; cf. S:B 1:233 n372; also Sn 1146c)

This occasion is an integral part of how the Dharma comes into the world: it is an important episode in the Buddha story, as noted by Analayo:

This much is also reflected in the statement by Brahma Sahampati, recorded in **the Ariyapariyesana Sutta**, that he had “made an occasion” for the Buddha to teach, indicating that a request was indeed required.⁵⁹ The need for Brahma to intervene seems to some

⁵⁵ *uppala* (Skt *utpala*), *paduma* (*padma*) and *puṇḍarīka* respectively.

⁵⁶ *Pamuñcantu saddham*, alt tr: “Let them declare their faith” or “Give up your faith.” This is a difficult sentence. Dīgha Subcomy glosses as *saddham pavedentu*, “let them declare their faith”; Woodward: “renounce the creed ye hold” (Woodward 1973:7); Horner: “let them renounce their faith” (V:H 1:9); “abandon other faiths” (Nakamura 2000:462); Walshe: “put forth faith” (D:W 215); Bodhi: “release faith” (S:B 1:233); cf Norman: “declare your faith” (Sn 1146). See esp **Masefield** 1985:76-80; also Sn:N n1146 and Nakamura 2000:461 f, n 53. On *saddha* (Skt *śrāddha*), see D 1:97; A 1:160, 5:269-273, 273; J 2:360; DA 1:267. PED proposes the interesting interpretation of *saddham pamuñcati* (V 1:7; D 2:39; Sn 1146), as “to give up offerings, to abandon Brahmanism” (PED: *Saddha*²). PED takes *saddha* as a synecdoche for Brahmanism.

⁵⁷ *Katāvakāso kho’ mhi bhagavatā dhamma, desanāya*, free tr: “The Blessed One has consented to the teaching of the Dharma!” Here *bhagavato* (dat, gen) at S 1:138 (PTS 1884) appears to be wr. In **Ariya-pariyesanā S** (M 26.21/1:169), M:ÑB (similarly at V:H 4:10) has “I have created the opportunity for the Blessed One to teach the Dhamma.” **CPD: katāvakāsa**, however, remarks that this rendition is “both grammatically impossible and contextually unlikely; the reading *bhagavato* at S 1:138,26, however, would seem to represent a reinterpretation of the clause supporting the traditional interpretation of the passage, unless the gen is taken as the gen of the agent to be construed with *katāvakāso*.” CPD cites **Mahāvastu**, *bhagavatā mahābrahmaṇe avakāśe kṛte* (Mvst 3:319), “which would seem to support the interpretation suggested above.”

⁵⁸ V 1:7; M 1:170; S 1:138; D 2:39 Vipassī Buddha; Mvst 3:318; cf. S:B 1:233 n372; also Sn 1146c.

⁵⁹ *katāvakāso kho’ mhi Bhagavatā dhamma, desanāya* (M 1:169,28).

extent to be a natural part of the sequence of events leading up to the teaching activity of a Buddha, since **the Mahāpadāna Sutta** and its Chinese parallel report the same happening in the case of the previous Buddha Vipassī.⁶⁰ (2003:6)

3.2 THE PARABLE OF THE FIELDS

In due course, the Buddha uses another analogy for the kinds of audience he would teach. In the **Desanā Sutta** (S 42.7), the Buddha gives the parable of the three fields:

THE THREE FIELDS. Now what do you think, headman? Suppose a farmer here has three fields, one excellent, one moderate, and one poor, hard, salty, of bad soil. When that farmer wants to sow his seeds, which field would he sow first: the best field..., the middling field..., or the poor field...?

THE WISE FARMER. “The farmer, venerable sir, wishing to sow his seeds, would first sow the best field..., and having done so he would sow the middling one.... Having done so, he might or might not sow the field that is poor....

Why is that? Because in any case it might do for cattle-food.”

(1) THE BEST FIELD (*agga khetta*). Well, headman, just like that best field are **my monks and nuns**. I teach them the Dharma that is good in its beginning, good in its middle and good in its ending, both in spirit and in letter. I make known to them the holy life that is wholly perfect and pure.

Why is that? Because, headman, these people abide with me for their island, with me for their cave and shelter, with me for stronghold, with me for their refuge.

(2) THE MIDDLING FIELD (*majjhima khetta*). Then, headman, just like that middling field are **my laymen disciples and laywomen disciples**. I teach them the Dharma that is lovely... I make known to them the holy life...

Why is that? Because, headman, these people abide with me for their island...for their refuge.

(3) THE POOR FIELD (*hīna khetta*). Then, headman, just like that field that is poor, hard, salty, of bad soil, are **my followers of other sects, recluses, brahmins and wandering ascetics**.⁶¹ To them, too, I teach the Dharma that is good... I make known to them the holy life...

Why is that? Because if it be that they understand but a single sentence of it, that would be their benefit and happiness for a long time to come.

(S 42.7/4:315 f, abridged)

3.3 TEACHING THE MASSES

The Buddha’s purpose in arising in this world is **to teach the Dharma for the upliftment and liberation of beings** from spiritual ignorance and suffering. Through his boundless compassion, the Buddha declares the Dharma to the world. It is a general rule that nothing happens in the life of a Buddha which has not already happened in the lives of his predecessors or will not happen to his successors.

When contemplating on a lotus pond, the Buddha notices that some of the lotus buds are still immersed in the muddy waters while others have risen well above the waters. Still others are obscurely trying to reach the light, close to opening, just floating on the surface. Surveying the world with his divine eye, the Buddha sees that human beings fall into three categories: those who have sunk completely into error, those who already have reached the Truth or are ready for the Truth, and those who still float between error and truth.

The first kind of lotus—drowned in the dark and murky waters—represents those with much

⁶⁰ D 2:36 and DĀ 1 (T1.8b21).

⁶¹ *mayham añña,tiṭṭhiyā samaṇa,brāhmaṇa,paribbājakā*, alt tr: “my recluses, brahmins and wandering ascetics, those of other religions.”

dust in their eyes, with dull faculties, with bad qualities, difficult to teach, not seeing blame and fear in the next world. For such beings, there is little hope, at least for the time being, of bringing them out of the darkness of their ignorance and delusion. They are like the poor field that would be cultivated only after the better ones have been cultivated.

Then there is **the second**, in-between, group (the lotuses bobbing up and down on the water surface), hesitating between the true and the false, wavering between good and evil. They would either be saved or be lost, depending on whether or not they hear the Dharma. This is the moderate field waiting for cultivation by the wise farmer.

The third group (the lotuses standing high above the waters and open in the sunlight) is the best audience since they have good roots, that is, enjoying the fruit of their past good deeds and excellent present conditions. They are those with very little dust in their eyes, with keen faculties, with good qualities, easy to teach, seeing blame and fear in the next world. They are like the rich field, heavy with crop, ready for harvest and celebration.

It is **for the sake of the rich fields, for the love of the medium fields and for the thought of the poor fields** that the Buddha resolves “to set the Wheel of Truth in motion.” In aspiring to declare the Dharma to all, the Buddha sees the world as a single mission field, not as an artificially stratified society, divided by race, religion and status.

The Buddha’s decision to openly teach the Dharma is **a revolutionary event** in the history of Indian religion (indeed, in this time-cycle). In his book, *Gotama Buddha*, Hajime Nakamura remarks:

In India at that time it was rare for religious teachers to instruct the people at large. Philosophers in the *Upaniṣads* are depicted as teaching only a limited group of students: their own children or perhaps people with high qualifications.⁶² It was Gotama who broke down such customary restrictions on teaching; to do so, however, required resolution and courage, which he may have gained by means of such psychological phenomena as quelling Māra and hearing Brahmā’s encouragement. (Nakamura 2000:235; see also 228 f)

The decision is made: **“In this blind world, I will beat the Drum of Deathlessness!”** the Buddha proclaims.⁶³ To whom shall the Buddha teach first, who will understand the Dharma quickly? He thinks of his former teachers, Āḷāra Kālāma and Uddaka Rāmaputta. A deva informs him that both of them have passed away (a week before and a day before respectively). Then he thinks of the five monks who have attended to him during his period of self-mortification. Through his divine eye, he sees that they are residing in the Deer Park at Isipatana near Benares.

UPAKA

4 Upaka meets the Buddha

Satisfied with his stay at Uruvelā, the Buddha sets out for **Benares** to look for the five monks. Between Buddha, gayā and Gayā, the Buddha meets the naked ascetic, **Upaka**,⁶⁴ who, struck by the Buddha’s radiant personality, utters,

“Serene are your senses, friend! Clear and bright is your complexion. Under whom have you gone forth? Who is your teacher? Whose doctrine do you profess?”
[Buddha:]
All have I overcome, all do I know,

⁶² Cf Yājñavalkya (Bṛhad Up 4.3, 33); Satyakāma (Chānd Up IV, 10); Raikva (Chānd Up 4.2, 3); Prajāpati (Chānd Up 8.7 f); Yama (Kāth Up 1.21 f).

⁶³ V 1:8; M 1:171; J 1:81; DhA 4:71.

⁶⁴ Also known as Kāla, probably a nickname for his dark complexion (Thī 309), or Upaganena (Divy 393).

From all am I detached, all have I renounced,
Through the stopping of craving, I am freed,
Having understood all by myself, whom shall I call teacher?

No teacher have I,⁶⁵

An equal to me there is none.

In all the world, with its gods, there is no rival to me.

Indeed, an arhat am I in this world.

An unsurpassed Teacher am I.

Alone am I the All-awakened One,

Quenched, whose fires are all extinguished.

I'm going to Kāsī to set the Wheel of Truth in motion.

In this blind world, I shall beat the Drum of Deathlessness!

“Then, friend, you admit that you are a Conqueror of the Infinite (*ananta,jina*)?”⁶⁶
Upaka asks.

The Conquerors like me are those whose impurities have been destroyed.

All the evil things I have conquered.

Therefore, Upaka, am I called Conqueror!

“It may be so, friend,” Upaka wryly remarks and shaking his head [in lukewarm approval or ambivalence],⁶⁷ turns into a path and leaves.

(V 1:8; M 1:171; J 1:81; DhA 4:71 f; cf Miln 235; UA 54; Kvu 289; Mvst 3:326)

The importance of this meeting is that the Buddha for the first time proclaims from his own mouth and before another person his new and supreme dignity—the **first public statement of his awakening**—as well as his determination to liberate the world. This is what is important to the simple follower. Whether Upaka understands his privilege or not is of little consequence. In fact, the Dīgha Commentary says that the Buddha walks all the way (about 7 km) from Gayā to Isī-patana, instead of teleporting himself, so that Upaka would meet him (DA 2:471).

5 Upaka's return

After meeting the Buddha, Upaka heads for **Vaṅga,hāra** or Vaṅka,hāra country. There he meets and falls in love with **Cāpā** (or Chāvā), a huntsman's daughter, who looks after him. Desperately in love with her but failing to win her, he goes on a hunger strike for seven days. In the end, he succeeds in persuading the huntsman to give Chāvā to him in marriage.⁶⁸

Upaka supports her by hawking the meat brought in by the huntsman and in due course the

⁶⁵ According to Comy on **Ghaṭikāra S** (M 81), the Bodhisattva had learned all of Kassapa Buddha's teachings and was effectively on the brink of stream-winning (MA 3:282). Moreover, the other teachers only taught him worldly (*lokiya*) attainments; he discover the supramundane (*lokuttara*) truth himself: see Miln 6.1/235 f. As such, the Buddha's proclamation here that he has no teacher apparently refers to the fact none of his teachers are alive then. See Analayo on M 81, 2005:8.

⁶⁶ It is understandable that Upaka uses a well-known Jaina epithet, simply because the Buddha has not started to teach, and so there is no Buddhist terminology at all as yet.

⁶⁷ This is Indian body language: when the head is moved sideways (left-right) in a conversation, it denotes an “oriental yes,” where it means something like “I understand what you are saying, but I am not sure about it.”

⁶⁸ According to ThīA, the huntsman who has been supporting Upaka, is away and returns a week after the fast. When he learns that Upaka has not been receiving alms from the house, he visits him and discovers the real reason. Sympathizing with Upaka, he asks Upaka if he knows any trade so that he is able to support Cāpā if they marry. Upaka admits that he knows no trade, but is willing to carry and hawk the meat that Cāpā's father brings back. (ThīA 211).

couple have a son, named **Subhadda**. Whenever he cries, Cāpā sings to him, “Upaka’s son, ājīvika’s son, meat-hawker’s son, don’t cry!” thus mocking her husband. The exasperated Upaka then proudly speaks of his “lord [master]” (*nātha*), the “Ananta,jina” (the Buddha) but Cāpā still does not stop teasing him. Consequently, despite her attempts to keep him back, he leaves her behind at Nālā (his birthplace), a village near the Bodhi Tree, and goes to the Buddha at Sāvathī (ThīA 225).

The Buddha, seeing him from afar, instructs that anyone asking for “Ananta,jina” should be brought to him. Having listened to Upaka’s plight, the Buddha has him admitted into the order. As a result of his meditation, Upaka becomes a non-returner and is reborn in the Avihā heaven of the Pure Abodes (Suddhāvāsa),⁶⁹ where he immediately becomes an arhat (MA 1:190). Later, Cāpā, too, goes forth and becomes an arhat nun.⁷⁰

In reference to Upaka’s attainment of the fruit of non-return (*anāgāmi,phala*), the Buddha’s declaration is recorded in the fifth verse of **the Muni Sutta**:

Overcoming all, knowing all, truly wise,
Unattached to all things,
Giving up all, completely released in the destruction of craving—
Him, indeed, the wise know as a sage.

*Sabbābhibhuṃ sabba,viduṃ sumedhaṃ
Sabbesu dhammesu anūpalittaṃ
sabbañ,jahaṃ taṅha-k,khaye vimuttaṃ—
yaṃ vā’pi dhīrā muniṃ vedayanti.* (Sn 211)

THE BUDDHA’S SKILLFUL MEANS

6 Antecedental terminology

A successful teacher is a good communicator. To communicate his teachings, the Buddha (and the Buddhists) not only introduced new terms (such as *paṭisambhidā*) but even more so adopted numerous old terms (Buddha, arhat, dharma, karma, nirvana) giving them new senses. Both these categories need to be clearly defined.

In his article, “Theravāda Buddhism and Brahmanical Hinduism: Brahmanical Terms in a Buddhist Guise” (1991), **KR Norman** investigates the terminology used by the Buddha to show how he copes with this problem. Norman discusses the Buddha’s usage of brahminical terms in three categories (here listed with a few examples):

6.1 TERMS AND STRUCTURES TAKEN OVER BY THE BUDDHA

deva. They are accepted as merely superhuman and not allowed any causal role in the universe.⁷¹

Myths and fables. In the **Brahmajāla Sutta** (D 1), the Buddha humorously shows how Mahā Brahmā comes to think that he has created other beings, and he alludes to the creation myth in the Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad. In his comments in **the Aggañña Sutta** (D 27) on the way in which brahmins are born, the Buddha satirizes the Puruṣa,sūkta of the Ṛgveda.⁷²

⁶⁹ S 172/1.50/1:35, 342/2.24/1:60; MA 2:189-91; ThīA 220 ff.

⁷⁰ For Cāpā’s story, see Thī 291-311 & ThīA 12.3/220-228 = ThīA:M 277-288.

⁷¹ See **Kaṇṇakaṭṭhala S** (M 90) = SD 8 & **Saṅgārava S** (M 100) = SD 9. On the 3 types of devas (Nc 307; KhA 123) see KR Norman, “Devas and Adhidevas in Buddhism,” JPTS 9 1981:154.

⁷² R Gombrich, “Recovering the Buddha’s Message” in T Skorupski (ed), *The Buddhist Forum* 1, 1990:13 ff and 14 n25.

6.2 TERMS TAKEN OVER BY THE BUDDHA BUT USED WITH NEW SENSES

aggi. Following the Vedic tradition of *āhitāgni*, the brahmin keeps three fires burning. The Buddha declares that there are three fires that should not be served but should be abandoned, namely, the fires of lust, hate and delusion (*rāg'aggi dos'aggi moh'aggi*).

amata. In Brahmanism, *amṛta* (Skt for *amata*) is the world of immortality, heaven, eternity, or the nectar (ambrosia) which confers immortality, produced at the churning of the ocean. The Buddha however uses the word as an epithet of nirvana, which is described as the *amatam padam* (the path where there is no death). This is not, however, an immortal place, but the state where there is no death. Elsewhere Norman points out a common error in the usage of the terms *nibbāna* and *parinibbāna*.⁷³

brahman.⁷⁴ The word *brahma* (uncompounded neuter), in the Upaniṣadic form *brahman* is not found in Pali, but the word *brahma* is used in the compounds apparently in the sense of “excellent, perfect” [and I might add “supreme,” as in *brahma,daṇḍa*].⁷⁵

brahma,cariya. In its basic brahmanical sense, this means “the practice of a *brāhmaṇa*,” that is, to live a celibate life, learning the Vedas. The Buddha uses the term in the more general sense of “to live a holy, celibate life (or in the case of married couples, a chaste and moral life)”.

brahma,vihāra.⁷⁶ The term literally means “dwelling in or with *brahman* or *Brahmā*,” and it perhaps show a trace of its original meaning in the **Tevijjā Sutta** (D 3:235-253), but it should be noted that this means only being born in the same heaven as *Mahā Brahmā*, not union with the Upaniṣadic *brahman*.

brāhmaṇa or brahmin. In Brahmanism, a “brahman” ($\sqrt{brh-}$,⁷⁷ “to increase, be great, be strong”) is a brahmin by birth and is a kinsman of *Brahmā*. This idea is known to the Buddha,⁷⁸ but by adopting a different etymology ($\sqrt{brh-}$, “to destroy”), he is able to justify the view that a brahmin is one who has destroyed evil.⁷⁹ Besides what Norman has mentioned here, I might add another etymology for “brahman”—from *bahi*, “outside”—in the sense of “keep outside, ward off” (*bāheti*), that is, a brahmin is “one who wards off evil.” This etymology is found in the **Aggañña Sutta** and elsewhere (D 3:94; S 1:141; Sn 510 = Nc 464a; Dh 267).⁸⁰

jhāna. The Sanskrit *dhyāna* (and English “dhyana”) is “religious thought, meditation.” For the Buddha, *jhāna* applies to a very specific type of meditation absorption, and is rarely applied in a wider sense.⁸¹

khetta,jina (Sn 523 f). The Commentary here is uncertain of its meaning, which on the face seems to mean “conqueror of the field(s).”⁸² Norman proposes that the second element of the compound is actually *-jñā* (knowledge), not *-jina*, pointing to its connection with *kṣetra-jñā* (one who knows the field/s) (Manu 12:12).

⁷³ KR Norman, “Mistaken Ideas about *Nibbāna*”, *The Buddhist Forum*, vol. 3, 1995:211-225. See **Mahā,parinibbāna S** (D 16) = SD 9 Intro (15): Aspects of (*pari*)*nirvāna*.

⁷⁴ For the occurrences of *brahman* in the Pali Canon, see K Bhattacharya, “Brahman in the Pali Canon and in the Pali Commentaries,” *Amalā Prajñā: Aspects of Buddhist Studies*, Delhi 1989:91-102.

⁷⁵ *Brahma,daṇḍa*, see **Mahā Parinibbāna S** (D 16.6.4/2:154) = SD 9.

⁷⁶ EJ Thomas, *The Life of the Buddha* (3rd ed), London, 1949:126.

⁷⁷ Norman gives this as $\sqrt{brmḥ}$.

⁷⁸ See Buddha’s remark regarding **Aṅgaṇika Bharadvāja** (ThaA 2:85,4-5 ad Tha 221).

⁷⁹ ThaA 2:85,5-6 ad Tha 221; cf. Dh 383-423.

⁸⁰ For other etyms of *brāhmaṇa*, see M 1:280, Dh 388, DhG 1, Uv 33.10; cf DhG:B 178 n.

⁸¹ LS Cousins, “Buddhist *jhāna*: Its nature and attainment according to the Pali sources.” *Religion* 3,2 1973:116.

⁸² See Norman 1991:197 n25 & Norman, “Notes on the *Sutta-nipāta*,” 106 (ad Sn 423 f.).

uposatha. In Brahmanism, the *upavasatha* is a fast day, the day of preparation for the Soma sacrifice.⁸³ In Buddhism, the fast day itself is the day of reciting the Pātimokkha (Skt Prātimokṣa) (for monks and nuns), and of listening to the Dharma and keeping religious observances (for the laity), that is, it is no longer part of a ritual for purity, but the occasion for a confession of moral and ethical transgression, and for spiritual observance.

veda. This is used in Buddhism in its general sense of “knowledge,”⁸⁴ instead of as a title of brahmanical texts. The term *veda,gu*, which in its brahmanical sense means one who has gained competence in the Vedas, is interpreted as one who has gained knowledge of release from cyclic existence (*saṃsāra*) (ThaA 2:85:17-19 ad Tha 221).

6.3 TERMS REFERRED TO BUT REJECTED

There are ideas that the Buddha refers to but rejects, but in such a way that the reasons for the objection could only be understood by those who know the brahmanical terminology:

attā. The Buddha’s rejection of the existence of *attā* (Skt *ātman*), that is, his view that everything is *anattā* (“not self”), is based upon the brahmanical belief that *ātman* is *nitya* and *sukha*. Hence, the Buddha refutes this by pointing out that the world is in fact *anicca* (“impermanent”) and *dukkha* (“unsatisfactory”).

6.4 COMMON RELIGIOUS TERMINOLOGY?

KR Norman concludes:

Besides the convenience of taking over terms which were already known to his audience, albeit in a different sense, the Buddha possibly had other reasons for acting in this way. In part it may have been due to his desire to show that Brahmanical Hinduism was wrong in its [basic] tenets: a Brahmanical *brāhmaṇa* was *suddhi* [pure], etc. If a teacher takes over his rivals’ terms and repeat them often enough in his own meaning, he gives the impression that he is using them in the correct sense, and the original owners are wrong in their usage.

It must be made clear that we cannot prove that the Buddha (or the Buddhists) was the first to make use of these Brahmanical terms in a new sense, since there is a possibility that such a use of some of these terms was also common to other contemporary religions. Some of the terminology of Buddhism is held in common with **Jainism**, eg Buddha, *pratyeka, Buddha, jina, nirvāṇa, tathāgata, bhāvanā, dhuta, yoga, kevalin, āsrava, karman, gati, mokṣa, śramaṇa, pravrajyā, pravrajita, tapas, ṛṣi, tā(din), phāsu(ya)*, and also certain epithets of the Buddha and the Jina [4]. It is possible therefore that the use of Brahmanical terms in a non-Brahmanical sense was taken from the general fund of vocabulary of *śramaṇical* [ie non-brahmanical] religions.

(KR Norman, 1991:199f.; emphasis mine)

7 Language: a skillful means

In the **Araṇa Vibhaṅga Sutta** (M 139), the Buddha advises his followers to use language in a wholesome communicative manner, reaching out to the level of the audience:

⁸³ The traditional and eligible brahmin is required to perform a daily simple ritual before the three sacred fires, the Agni, hotra. This ritual is especially important during the new-moon or full-moon day, when, during the Soma sacrifice. Here Soma refers to a drink, distilled from the soma plant (possibly a hallucinogenic mushroom, *Amanita muscaria*), said to be of divine origin. It is regarded as ambrosia, the beverage of the gods that brings immortality. **Soma** is also a moon god, the bringer of the cool of night and measurer of the rhythm of time. For brahmins, the soma sacrifice is one of the most important rituals, for the consumption of soma is believed to bring one closer to the gods and the universe. Just as Agni, as the sacrificial fire, is an emissary between gods and men, so is Soma, for his drink brings intimate communion with the divine.

⁸⁴ For example, *veda, sampanno ti nāṇa, sampanno* (ThaA 3:169,20 ad Tha 1170).

“You should not cling to a regional language; you should not reject **common usage**.”
So it is said. In what connection is this said?

How, monks, is there clinging to a regional language and rejection of common usage?⁸⁵

Here, monks, in different regions, they call a “bowl” *pāti, patta, vittha, serāva, dhāropa, poṇa* or *pisīla*. So whatever they call it in such and such a region, they speak accordingly, firmly adhering (to the words) and insisting, “Only this is right; everything else is wrong.”

This is how, monks, there is clinging to a regional language and rejection of common usage.

And how, monks, is there no clinging to a regional language and no rejection of common usage?

Here, monks, in different regions, they call a “bowl” *pāti, patta, vittha, serāva, dhāropa, poṇa* or *pisīla*. So whatever they call it in such and such a region, without adhering (to the words), one speaks accordingly.

This is how, monks, there is no clinging to a regional language and no rejection of common usage.

So it is with reference to this that it is said, “You should not cling to a regional language; you should not reject common usage.” (M 139.12/3:234 f)

The Vinaya reflects the same spirit of skillful communication in its account where two monks complain to the Buddha that other monks of various origins are distorting the Buddha’s Teaching in using their own dialect (*sakāya niruttiyā*) and propose that the Teaching be transmitted in Vedic verse (*chandaso*). The Buddha refuses to do so and declares: “**I allow you, monks, to learn the Buddha Word in your own dialect.**” (*anujānāmi bhikkhave sakāya niruttiyā Buddha, vacanaṃ pariyāpuṇitum*, V 2:139).⁸⁶

The Dharma that the Buddha has awakened to is the ineffable truth of personal liberation: it is inexpressible in human language, since words are only symbols and signs, but awakening is a personal experience. As such, the Buddha has to resort to skillful means by using language as pointers, maps and travellers’ tips and tales to guide and inspire the pilgrim. Understandably, language is best and most common tool there is for communicating the idea of awakening to an unawakened world. When the journey is done and the sleeper awakes, he disembarks and leaves the vehicle behind.⁸⁷ On language and words, the Buddha declares in **the Poṭṭhapāda Sutta** (D 9), thus:

For, Citta, these are merely common names, common expressions, common usages, common designations in the world that the Tathāgata [Thus Come] uses without attachment to them.” (*Loka, samaññā loka, niruttiyo loka, vohārā loka, paññattiyo yāhi Tathāgato voharati aparāmasan ti*).⁸⁸ (D 9.53/1:202)

— evarṃ —

⁸⁵ The Vinaya relates an incident where two monks complained to the Buddha that other monks of various origins were distorting the Buddha’s Teaching in using their own dialect (*sakāya niruttiyā*) and proposed that the Teaching be transmitted in Vedic verse (*chandaso*). The Buddha refused and declared: ‘I allow you, monks, to learn the Buddha Word in your own dialect.’ (*anujānāmi bhikkhave sakāya niruttiyā Buddha, vacanaṃ pariyāpuṇitum*, V 2:139; Geiger, PLL 1968:6 f).

⁸⁶ See W Geiger, *Pali Language and Literature*, 1968:6 f.

⁸⁷ See the parable of the raft in **Alagaddūpama S** (M 22.13/1:135 f) = SD 3.13.

⁸⁸ This important reference to the two truths is mentioned in **Sumaṅgala, vilāsini**, the Dīgha Commentary, as “conventional speech” (*sammuti, kathā*) and “speech of ultimate meaning” (*param’attha, kathā*). See **Poṭṭhapāda S** (D 9) = SD 7.14 Intro (4).

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