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Myth in Buddhism

Symbols and stories in our actions and the potential for good

An essay by Piya Tan ©2011

Dedicated to Patrick Ong, Singapore, who loves mythology and the divine.

1 The myths we live by**1.0 DEFINITIONS**

1.0.1 Theories of Buddhist myth. A myth is a story that is bigger than we are, lasts longer than we do, and reflects what lies deep in our minds and hearts, our desires, dislikes and delusions.¹ To recognize and understand myths is to raise our unconscious² into clear mindfulness, so that we can work with it to evolve into true individuals and wholesome communities. A myth breaks down the walls of *language*, with which we construct our worlds of sights, sounds, smells, tastes and touches. Next, we begin to identify with these creations like a creator-god priding over his fiats. Then, we delude ourselves that we have the right to dominate others, other nations, and nature herself. Since we have deemed ourselves superior to others, we surmise that we have the right to command and rule others, to be served and indulged by them. This is the beginning of slavery and colonialism.

A myth uses *language*, our most common means of mass communication, but it *tweaks* language in such a way as to speak to us in parables and images so that we can see beyond the words and the thoughts into the heart of reality.³ The more we understand myths, the less enslaved we are by the wily words and ways of others, and of our own devices. We begin to be emancipated from the limitations of philosophy and religion, of crafty priests and priestly crafts, of the limiting views and habits entrenched in our own hearts. We are on the inward path to realizing our true individuality and liberation.

Technically, there is, firstly, a specific theory of Buddhist myth reflected in the individual stories, episodes, imageries and sayings, that comprise a myth or mythic cycle. After all, a myth is our habitual experiences and feelings, our karmic habits and conditionality, put into *words and images*. Myths have no life of their own except in our telling them, hearing them, and remembering them; and so we connect with them, and live them. Their truth is brought to life in our thoughts, words and actions, especially when we speak in parables. [3]

When a story grows big enough, beyond the limits of everyday language, it becomes a myth, so that it works by way of a general theory of Buddhist myth. Here, a myth may be a single story, but more often a family of imaginative or fabulous stories, often with actors who do not live in our day-to-day world: they inhabit in the depths of our minds, reflecting our desires, our fears, our delusions, our tribulations, our triumphs. These emotions are often expressed in long discourses that speak in a language of its own, about the past, the future, other beings and other worlds [4]. This mythic language can be called “the middle language.” [5]

1.0.2 Mythology. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary (online) defines “**myth**” as follows:

1 a: a usually traditional story of ostensibly historical events that serves to unfold part of the world view of a people or explain a practice, belief, or natural phenomenon. **b:** parable [a short story that teaches a moral or spiritual lesson], allegory [a story in which the characters and events are symbols that stand for ideas about human life or for a political or historical situation] [3.3].

¹ This a working def we will be using for our study here. For a more comprehensive lexical def, see 2.0 below.

² As a rule, I use “unconscious” for the latent tendencies; “subconscious” for the rebirth consciousness; and “pre-conscious” for the motivational mind in connection with conscious actions: see **The unconscious** = SD 17.8b (6).

³ This is not an exhaustive or academic study of myth, but a reflection in connection with early Buddhist teachings (esp its content and function). On myths in the Buddha’s life, see **The Buddha as myth** = SD 36.2. For a helpful intro to mythology, see eg Robert A Segal, *Myth: A very short introduction*, 2004 (with a biblio).

2 a: a popular belief or tradition that has grown up around something or someone; especially: one embodying the ideals and institutions of a society or segment of society. **b:** an unfounded or false notion.

3 a: person or thing having only an imaginary or unverifiable existence.

4 the whole body of myths. (<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/myth>)

All these senses of “myth” can be found in the early Buddhist texts, not always in their distinct senses, but overlapping, or in a polysemic (multi-sense) way. As Buddhism regards language and myths as constructions, they are at best *tools* for realizing a “higher” or noble conduct, personal and social, and for understanding a higher truth, leading to spiritual liberation.⁴

1.0.3 Living stories. Mythology is, first of all, *a story or narrative we live by*, and then a way of acting, a way of talking, a way of living, a way of teaching and understanding, reflective of a collective consciousness or our perception of it. This collective consciousness is a sort of common memory of a culture, or a popular tradition of stories, legends and folk tales reflective of the values of an individual or a group. A myth may not at once be apparent in our actions and thoughts, but it effectively shapes and guides how we act and think.

As **Robert A Segal**, a professor of theories of religion, has noted, some myths reflect certain universal events or truths, for example, those *depicting* the impending end of the world [1.5]. Some myths are stories or make-belief, and serve as *guides* to viewing the world [1.3, 1.6]. Other myths can be taken either way, for example, the belief in progress, ideologies, and world-views like secularism and materialism [1.4]. (2004:39)

Mythology is at the roots of our world-view, deeply influencing how we think and act, whether unwholesomely (when it is merely habitual) or wholesomely (when it is liberating). In an important way, mythology is web of narratives, rituals and conduct that reflect our beliefs, hopes and fears that we share with a larger community, even as a species. Often, we might be attracted to a particular myth or an aspect of it, propping and propelling our lives by it. In short, it is amongst the most deeply rooted views we hold of ourselves, of life and of the world.

Since myths lie at the core of our being as members of a group, any attempt to communicate with such members must address the myths that influence them. How these myths are understood and used, as a rule, defines or influences the quality and effectiveness of such a communication, especially in politics, the sciences, literature, the arts and religion. Here, however, we shall only focus on the last, the *religious* aspects of myth, or more exactly, myths in early Buddhism.

Having said that, it should be noted that we shall mainly look at two meanings or functions of myth, in the Buddhist light, that is, as an *explanation* of our behaviour or a social phenomena [1.3], and as a *depiction* of a non-linguistic non-conceptual dimension of reality [1.6]. In other words, we will attempt to have some understanding of how myths lie at the root of our thinking and conduct (our mind), and how such an understanding can move us to evolve into true individuals and liberated beings (our heart).

1.1 MYTHICAL ACTS. One of the first independent acts we perform as a maturing human child is to *play*. As the English child psychiatrist and psychoanalyst **D W Winnicott** (1896-1971) has observed, play is a bridge between childhood and adulthood. It allows the child to construct realities with personal meanings. A simple object, such as a wood-block becomes a house, or fire could appear from thin air under a toy wok to prepare a Barmecide feast.

Play gives the child the right to treat any thing (or even anything) as a desired object or action. An adult may only ask what the object is, or what the child is doing, without affecting what they are. Adults, in other words, *acknowledge* play as other than true reality. Children may actually *believe* those play-things or playful actions are virtually real, but they, too, would in due course grant that they are just playing. Play, in short, is more than fantasy or escapism; it is a learning and socializing process.

⁴ As an interesting exercise, students can discuss which sense/s (1a 1b 2a 2b 3a 3b or 4) that the word “myth” is used in this essay, and the significance of this in the spirit of what is stated in this paragraph.

See how involved and blissful a child at play is. His joy is his ability to project his inner world more palpably, so that in his own ways, he could simply, that is, literally, manipulate his external world. Such a projection can only be *joyful* and *useful*, for it is a pleasant preparation for a more mature stage of life. The child is playing at being a father to the man.

On the other hand, a child who is unable to or disallowed from externalizing his internal world would naturally feel empty or lost—he would be pathologically bored. A wholesome child is one with a good balance between a consciousness of his inner world and his ambient reality, and relating to others in a clever and kind, even if naive, manner. For, a child must be simply well and happy.

1.2 MYTHICAL SPEECH. In a significant sense, play or make-belief, continue into our adult lives. Our toys only become more sophisticated and our virtual realities more real. As an extreme example, we might say that if a child habitually plays with toy-guns and enjoys war-games, he is likely to become a belligerent political leader. Thankfully, not everyone of us, however, become political leaders. We mostly create an inner world of personal meaning out of our perceptions of others and the world.

When we construct these private and virtual realities through art, music, literature, religion, or even hobbies, we are likely to use them as the tools for constructing our personal worlds, but with deeper meanings, as Winnicott [1.1] further informs us of a child's "middle" world or "middle" language [5.3]:

It is assumed here that the task of reality-acceptance is never completed, that no human being is free from the strain of relating inner and outer reality, and that relief from this strain is provided by an intermediate area of experience which is not challenged (arts, religion, etc). This intermediate area is in direct continuity with the play area of the small child who is "lost" in play.

(Winnicott, "Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena," 1971:13)

These meanings are especially expressed in our speech and language, how we communicate with one another. The more myths we share, the better we communicate and the closer we feel for one another. We are likely to build and direct our lives as envisioned or dreamed in the myths that we hold on to. We are better unified by the myths we hold in common.

Put into a Buddhist context, play is a permanent part of our unawakened lives, a "middle" or "transitional" activity between now and our awakening. Play provides a transition from childhood to adulthood, a living link between our inner world of fantasy with outer reality, and from what we make of the world to what it really is. Myth provides a middle ground between our present affairs with life and religion, and our awakening in due course.

Just as a child clings to a physical object (a blanket, a toy, or a doll) as a sort of protective totem or safety device to enter and explore the outer world, or to create a safe world inner world of his own, even so we, as adults, cling to an internalized object (an idea, an interest, a hobby—a myth) that empowers us to deal with the reality out there, and even see the profound in the simple. However, while a child knows that *the toy is not the thing*, or that the doll is not mummy, yet he clings to it as if it were, the adult ironically may not always see that a myth is not reality, so that he holds on to it as if it were.⁵

1.3 MYTHICAL LIVING

1.3.1 False myths. For most adults, especially if we are unawakened, a myth can be "fixed and forever," that is, a sort of eternal idea, so that we are caught in an emotional rut. Our lives become predictably measured and mechanically propelled, consciously or unconsciously, by such ideas. In short, we have misunderstood or misused a myth: we are living by a *false myth*. Of course, myths can be wholesome, that is, they open up our minds and hearts to a vision of bliss and goodness, and empower us towards such goals. We will examine this positive aspect of myth in the second half of this essay.

A myth, because it lies embedded in the collective mind of a group, community or tribe, can have a powerful influence on it. There was a time, for example, when ancient Indians practised sati (suttee) or widow burning (when her husband dies, the widow is obliged to join him at the funeral pyre). This ritual is rooted in the myth of the goddess Satī, who burned herself to death in a fire that she created through

⁵ See Segal 2004:108-112, 137-142.

her yogic powers after her father insulted her husband, the god Shiva. The social reality is clearly that women here are chattel (personal property) of their husbands, and have no existence apart from them, and so perishes with them.

Another false myth is used to justify killing for sport. The English aristocrats defend fox-hunting as an “ancient tradition” of their class and country life. In other words, the defenceless foxes must die to glorify the fancifully dressed wealthy bipeds on horsebacks running after dogs that hound the foxes. So we do such things because they have “always” been done. Here, a myth is used as an explanation, justification or excuse for an act, a life-style or a phenomenon, usually something negative.

One of the most inhuman myths ever put into practice with devastating results is that of the “master race” (*herrenvolk*) by Hitler and the Nazis during the late 20th century.⁶ Of the 9 million Jews who lived in pre-World War 2 Europe, some 6 million—about 1 million children, two million women and 3 million men—were systematically murdered by state-sponsored genocide.⁷

In a young, evolving, urbanized society like Singapore, which is becoming increasingly westernized, globalized, and affluent, the following false and often unhealthy myths are common amongst both Buddhists and non-Buddhists.⁸

- having some kind of paper qualification (for the sake of gainful employment and a title);
- having a large flat or condominium in an upper-class neighbourhood (for the sake of status);
- having a western or western-sounding nickname (to facilitate communication with prospects);
- having connections with a “westerner” (meaning “white”) (for the sake of being “global”);
- having a western religion, especially Christianity (for purposes of “blending in” or one-upmanship); and
- regarding affluence and charisma as the result of “merit,” that is, the fruits of past karma.

Regarding the myth of Christian conversion as a way of social integration, the Straits Times (14 Jan 2011), reporting on “Shedding light on decline in Buddhism,” quotes Dr Mathew Mathews, a research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies, as saying that the sense of community Christian groups offered was “ideal to new residents,” so that they may convert to blend into the new society.⁹ Such attitudes are surely based on the notion that happiness is based on the attainment (not necessarily enjoyment) of palpable needs, comforts and pleasures. The painful reality is that we are still enslaved in a colonial rut.

1.3.2 The false myth of “having.” This “life myth” of *having* is what drives us to aspire towards our first million dollars by 25, or buying a second or third or next house or car, or having a well-trimmed or socially acceptable body, or finding for a gratifying partner, becoming a social worker to help the less fortunate and dispossessed, or becoming a monastic to save the world. Somehow, even when that goal is met, a sense of dissatisfaction persists. This is the stuff that our waking dreams are made of. It might have arisen from a justifiable concern, or truly altruistic impulse, or perhaps simply from being disillusioned with the rat-race, or even from smarting over a failure at achieving a certain goal, or worse, a narcissistic quest for self-attention and self-glorification.¹⁰

⁶ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Master_race.

⁷ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Holocaust.

⁸ None of these are a problem in itself, but these are a few of the criteria which, in the eyes of status-conscious locals that makes one respectable. Another common measure of acceptable success amongst local socialites are one’s having the 5 C’s (cash, credit cards, cars, condominiums and country club membership).

⁹ While most Chinese converts in mainland China, Singapore and Taiwan tend to join charismatic or Pentecostal churches, most of them in the US joined evangelical, non-denominational, and ethnic Chinese churches. For an overview and refs, see Yang & Tamney, “Exploring mass conversion to Christianity among the Chinese: An introduction,” *Journal of Religion* 67,2 2006:125-129 <http://www.purdue.edu/crcs/itemPublications/articles/Yang-Tamney.pdf>.

¹⁰ On the best benefits of wealth, see *Ādiya S* (A 5.41/3:45 f) = SD 2.1. On worldly happiness, see *Anaṇa S* (A 4.62/2:69 f) = SD 2.2. On the importance of good health and true happiness, see Dh 204 & (*Paribbājaka*) *Māgandīya S* (M 75.21/1:510) = SD 31.5.

This kind of myth induces a thought-crowded and self-propelled impulse, almost totally lacking in feeling. Here, an unrelenting and seductive inner voice, self-seeking thoughts, the “inner controller,” keeps goading us on to accumulate pleasure, to collect fame, to accumulate information, to use people, and *have* things (as everything could be measured). It is ultimately a self-destructive subverbal mental proliferation: a thinking rut that breeds the *demon* and banishes the *human* from us, even relegating us to a *subhuman* realm in this very life. [4.3]

Deluded by the myth that “having” is happiness, many of us turn to a religion asking what it can *do* for us: what do I *get* from religion. Firstly, the question is wrongly put, as it reflects an appropriative mindset. Properly put, the question should be something like, “How can I *be* truly happy?”¹¹ If true happiness is what we seek, then the Buddha’s way is the best one for us.

True happiness is not merely about what we have. To *have* something simply means a proximity to it: “I have money” basically means the money has not really benefitted us. If we are preoccupied with *having*, we are little different from being addicts, because we are never really satisfied with what we have. Our having has become *addiction*. Mythically speaking, we might be materially well off, but we are still be stuck in a subhuman plane. What makes us really rich is what we really *are* in a wholesome sense.

If we *are* happy, if we *are* wise, if we *are* compassionate, we will look at gain and loss, praise and blame, fame and obscurity, happiness and sorrow, with the same eyes. For, there is no other way to look at the world. That’s the way the world *is*. When we define our world with these subjective and virtual realities, we are really reacting to our inner lack, instead of working to *being* truly happy. One important way truly *happy* is that of *being* wholesomely aware of the present moment and joyfully living now.

To be “wholesome” means not to see others as things to be appropriated. It is not to think “how useful are you to me?” but “how can we work happily together?” or even “How can *we* make *us* happy?” This is to rise above the myth of duality, to live by the golden rule that we should live with others as if there is no “other.” This is the beginning of a boundless heart.

1.3.3 Momentary beings. We are but *momentary beings*, built upon how we think, how we feel. Our bodies may be human, but our minds are still evolving, albeit at different rates for each of us. If we are not yet awakened, then we are still a sleeping species child, and if we do not cultivate our minds and hearts, we would surely remain as nightmares in the dark night of negative emotions, ruled by past shadows, propelled by immediate wants: we are effectively still be a beast.

In our formative years and moments, the kind of people we listen to or admire, powerfully shape us. We are likely to be cast in their moulds. Often enough, the pains we suffer in our conscious moments are rooted in our associating with unwise parents, weak teachers or false friends. If we strive diligently enough, however, we would be able to meet true-hearted companions and spiritual friends who can assist in our self-healing.

For our actions—our body, speech and mind—habitually and deliberately done, shape us into karmic beings, persons of consequences. A powerful Buddhist myth speaks of the six realms—the deva (a heavenly being), the human (the thinker), the asura (a violent narcissistic demon), the preta (an insatiably hungry sprite), the animal (ever fooled by ignorance and habituality), and the hell-being (drowned in violence and suffering). We are capable of experiencing any of these states at any moment in our mental lives. In mythical terms, these six realms are habitual psychosocial states:¹² *how we habitually behave* shapes our minds and how we view others and interact with them, and most importantly, how we end up becoming the very things we desire or hate.

At the moment of dying, our habitual karma—what type of *karmic being* we have been—will very likely predominate, and act as karmic momentum propelling us into a new cycle of a similar karmic state. How our minds habitually acts will shape our karmic destiny. We are what we think, say and do. Our

¹¹ Here, to “be” refers to an experience of reality, being *truly* happy [1.3.2]. Elsewhere “to be,” like “to have” can also be a defilement of acquisitiveness: see **Right livelihood** = SD 37.8.

¹² I am not at all denying that the 6 realms might be actual ontological states (planes of beings), but here the dynamics of these states can be experienced within a human being in this life itself.

bodies are the palpable manifestation of how we think. The hand that grasps an object takes its shape. In short, we can, if we make a conscious effort, cultivate and decide our wholesome being and destiny.

To humanly live is to truly *feel*, that is, to live in the present, like a bee naturally drawn to a sweet flower, harmlessly drawing its fill of nectar (Dh 49), and then returning to the hive, telling others about the flowery find, and to make honey for the community. It is to live the moment fully and joyfully, leaving the dead past buried, and letting the unarrived future remain where it should be, crossing the bridge when we reach it. For when we grasp the present well and wisely, the past and future will serve us well and wisely, too.

1.4 MYTHICAL TEACHINGS. What differentiates religion from folklore is that religion takes its myths more consciously and more seriously, often to extremes. Again, while folklore grows naturally, often in an informative and entertaining manner, religion uses myths to train, discipline, threaten, even punish, its believers. There is, of course, the promise of salvation, but, as in politics, it is a reward for having *feared* than having loved: salvation is meted out as a reward for fearing God and authority rather than loving goodness. Religion, in other words, always has vested interests: it must grow itself, often at any cost.

This is especially true of *word-based religions*, where the word or dogma is holy, inviolable and above everything else, even life itself. Both the history and mythology of such religions are often filled with violence and the language of power. If it is a tribal religion, the tribe's past painful memories might be preserved in stories of wars, conquests, mass destruction and annihilation of the enemy. It is often a dualistic myth, of self and other, and an eternal conflict between us and them.

If tribal religion is rooted in patriarchal leaders, sages or prophets, then women are likely to be relegated to a lesser, even less human, position. Even where the teachings seem noble—and there is nobility in every religion—these would often be lost to the zealots, to whom religious tenets are but toys in their simplistic minds and unkind hands. They become weapons of open violence and mass destruction against those whom they see as being different from them, thus to be their enemies.¹³

Myths do not have any life of their own; *we* breathe life into them. Religious zealots, fanatics, evangelists, and the unhinged, on the other hand, are capable of seeing death in them, that is, by annihilating those who are different. Just as there is only life *within* the tribe, and certain death *outside* in the lifeless wilderness and desert all around, even so such religions are capable of conjuring such a stark and terrible dualistic world, based on the sick myth that “either you are with us or against us.”¹⁴

1.5 UNIVERSAL THEMES. On the positive side, we have religious stories that are universal in appeal. Stories such as that of *the blind men and the elephant* have become so universal that it is commonly quoted by other religionists without ever realizing its Buddhist source.¹⁵ Many of the biblical miracles ascribed to Christ, such as the feeding of the multitude, walking over water and the transfiguration, are already mentioned in the Pali canon and commentaries centuries before the appearance of Bible as we know it today.¹⁶

Where myths recount a universal theme, they are often found as parallel stories in many religions and folklores. Often such stories or their roots go back to an ancient common floating tradition, popularly told and retold. Many such stories, as those preserved in the Jātakas, one of the fifteen books of the Khuddaka Nikāya, have mostly been forgotten in India.¹⁷ [3.4.3]

Some of the Buddhist stories themselves probably go back to earlier times, rooted in some remote civilization. **The Kevaddha Sutta** (D 11), for example, preserves one such ancient allusion to the imagery of the “land-sighting bird” (*tīra, dassim sakuṇam*).¹⁸ This bird-dispatching episode is found in numerous ancient flood myths.

¹³ See **Beyond good and evil** = SD 18.7(4): The non-duality of good and evil.

¹⁴ See **Three Roots Inc** = SD 31.12 (5.3).

¹⁵ **Nānā Tittiya S 1** (U 6.4/66-69) = SD 40a.14.

¹⁶ See **Miraculous stories** = SD 27.5b.

¹⁷ See eg John Garrett Jones, *Tales and Teachings of the Buddha*, 1979.

¹⁸ D 11.85/1:222 f = SD 1.7.

The first Mesopotamian flood story known to the western world was that of **Berosus**, a 3rd-century BCE priest of Marduk in Babylon, who wrote a three-volume history of his country. Xisuthros, the hero of the flood story in Berosus's account, sends out some birds from the vessel and they too return to him after failing to find food or land. He waits a few days, then sends them out again. They return with their feet smudged with mud. The third time he sends them out they do not return.

A similar sequence is related in the most famous, detailed and complete account of *Mesopotamian flood stories*: the ancient Akkadian **Gilgamesh** Epic (Tablet XI) (2000-650 BCE) in which the flood hero Utnapishtim waits seven days after being grounded on a submerged mountain-top before releasing a dove, then a swallow, and then a raven to search for dry land.¹⁹ About a thousand years later, this episode was apparently incorporated into the Jewish Bible as the Noah story (1500-500 BCE) (Gen 8:11). It was probably a well known and popular story in India of the Buddha's time.

1.6 MYTH AS A COLLECTIVE CONSCIOUSNESS.

1.6.0 The power of myths. Not all myths are false tales or make-belief [1.0]. Some myths reflect certain universal events or truths, for example, myths about the impending end of the world. There are at least two well known early Buddhist texts—the **Aggañña Sutta** (D 27) and the **Cakka,vatti Sīha.nāda Sutta** (D 26)—that record mythical teachings about the evolution of the world and society.²⁰ This kind of myth roots itself in the collective consciousness of ancient Indian society, but much of its symbolism and narrative apply to any organized human society, even those in our own times, especially our own.

A myth, especially in Buddhism, is an expression of the Dharma in a non-intellectual way, such as using the language of images and intuition. Such a myth appeals directly to our feelings rather than to our intellect. Very often, we might *know* the Dharma or some aspects of it, or at least we *think* we know. However, if we are observant or mindful enough, we will notice that over time, we often change our views, and often enough we mature in our understanding of the Dharma and knowing ourselves. Myths inspire us to *feel* more and in a wholesome way, strengthening our being as a whole.

A myth, in other words, looks directly into our hearts, using words but in a literary or artistic way, that is, expressing or pointing beyond the words themselves. Like great literary works (such as a poem, a painting or a musical piece), a myth is meant to be *enjoyed*. Yet, unlike a work of art (often enjoyed for its own sake), we can and must also *learn* from a myth, but in a pleasant way, filling in or even seeing what conventional words usually fail to convey,

1.6.1 The Aggañña Sutta (D 27) is a delightful mythical story, peppered with humour, on the origin or evolution of the world, society and basic human values. The discourse is aetiological in recounting, amongst other things, *the origins* of crime in society, of personal property, of contract, of marriage and of kingship.

Above all, the Aggañña Sutta is a self-admonishment to the monastic community by relating how the early humans broke numerous Vinaya rules in the dawn of our civilization, ending up in much of what society, with its classes, became then. By contrast, in such a society, the disciplined and wise monastic community is its most developed social phase, acting as the precursor to spiritual evolution and awakening.

The Aggañña Sutta ostensibly tells us of the re-evolution of the universe and society, especially how humans organize themselves against crimes and keep order in society. Underlying every episode or detail, if we look carefully enough, we will see that there is a greater truth behind the events themselves. Often, if we look only on the surface of the myths (simply as a story), such activities may appear merely as rituals, or as magical, even frivolous. However, when we are able to see beyond the words, we see a wider unity of reality, of which we are an integral part. We are ourselves actors in this cosmic drama, and we begin to examine our role, whether it is a positive one, or what potential we have yet to tap. A myth, in other words, is about our true selves presented on a cosmic stage.²¹

¹⁹ Cf **Kevaḍḍha S** (D 11.85/1:222) n = SD 1.7.

²⁰ D 27/3:80-97 = SD 2.19 & D 26/3:58-79 = SD 36.10.

²¹ See SD 2.19(1).

1.6.2 The Cakka,vatti Sīha,nāda Sutta (D 26), as it were, carries on from where the Aggañña Sutta ends, but focussing itself more on a tale of *power*, political and spiritual, that is, the proper role of kingship and governance, especially how moral virtue is closely linked with socioeconomic conditions. However, both the Suttas share one important theme, namely, how crimes arise in society.

The main difference is that the Cakka,vatti Sīha,nāda Sutta treats this theme in greater detail, showing how karma works closely in tune with the moral conduct of the people in society. The Sutta relates how when the ruler (or authorities) fail to remove widespread poverty in time, but introduces reforms too late, the cumulative effects can lead to general social decline.

On a positive note, the Sutta relates how when the situation sinks into its lowest level, people realize the futility of violence, give up warfare, and so begin to keep the moral precepts, initiating a social renewal leading up to the advent of the future Buddha, Metteyya. The Sutta closes with the Buddha detailing the meaning of the monastic's five blessings of long life, beauty, happiness, wealth and power. True monastic power is, of course, that of spiritual awakening.

The Cakka,vatti Sīha,nāda Sutta is clearly a late discourse, composed probably during Asoka's time, as it serves as a sort of monastic memorandum to the "world monarch" exhorting him in good governance. This is the only place in the Pali Canon where the future Buddha, Metteyya, is mentioned, which probably evinces the fact that the historical Buddha Gotama has passed away, and the Buddhist community is still struggling with the memory and meaning of his passing. While the Mahāyāna trend is to deify the Buddha, the more conservative Hinayana monastics work on the Buddha-lineage, extending it into the near future (in cosmic time).²²

1.6.3 Stories of the collective consciousness. What is so powerful about such texts as the Aggañña Sutta [1.6.1] and the Cakka,vatti Sīha,nāda Sutta [1.6.2] is that they easily appeal to any Indian of the Buddha's time and the after-millennia, or those who share the same myths of time, divinity, and religion (such as belief in karma). This is the ancient Indian collective consciousness expressed by way of a mythology of gods and non-humans (in her various religions), of heroes and talking animals (in the form of folk tales), and of cosmic ages of cyclic time (that encompass all).

Indian religions are perpetuated by traditions of sadhus, story-tellers and image-spinners. Upon the bones of stories and images are grafted the flesh and blood of philosophy, ethics and religiosity. Whose story is better told is likely to convey these teachings to the enthralled audience, which are the memory cells of this collective consciousness. The Buddha is not only a supreme master of meditation and spiritual truth, but also a supreme story-teller and visionary.

In fact, one of the reasons that Buddhism declined in India, was because the non-Buddhists, especially the brahmins, were well aware of the Buddha's teachings and myths, and they retold and re-spun these teachings and tales in their own mythic vision. Since the Buddha was no more present to counter such myth-spinning, and the after-centuries Indian Buddhists were unable to come up with effective responses, the brahminical mythology had the upper hand—for the moment.

1.7 ANTI-BUDDHIST AND ACCIDENTAL MYTHS

1.7.1 Brahminical myths. After the Buddha, the Hindu zealots and polemicists worked their genius in countering the popularity of Buddhism in various ways. Some very effective measures included the production of new religious texts, introducing the ashram (*aśrama*) system and the *avatāra* myth. The Manu Smṛti (the laws of Manu)²³ instituted the ashram system, dictating that every male caste Hindu should follow the "four stations of life" (each lasting 25 years), that is, of the student (*brahma,carī*), the householder or family man (*grhastha*), the hermit (*vāna,prastha*), and the wandering mendicant (*sannyāsin*). This was to prevent male caste members from renouncing the world to become Buddhist monks.²⁴

²² See SD 36.10(1).

²³ Composed just after the Buddha's time, between 200 BCE and 200 CE. See Basham 1989:100-103.

²⁴ The ashram system, however, was well known even the Buddha's own time: see **Doṇa Brāhmaṇa S** (A 5.192) = SD 36.14 (1.2.3). P Olivelle proposes that the ashram system was introduced, not so much as a reactionary strategy, but rather as "a scheme within which the pivotal category of *dharma* could be extended to include religious modes of life different from that of the Brāhmaṇical householder." In short, it was an effort to liberalize the brahm-

As a religious broadside to prevent the masses from joining the Buddhists, the Hindu myth-spinners composed **the Bhagavad Gītā** (“the Lord’s Song”),²⁵ perhaps the most popular of Hindu texts. One of the best known verses in this connection is number 3.35,²⁶ where these words are put into the mouth Krishna (Kṛṣṇa),²⁷ one of the best loved of modern Indian divinities (a sort of Hindu Apollo): “It is better to perform one’s own duty [Dharma], however badly, than to do another’s well. It is better to die in one’s own duty; the duty of other men is dangerous.”²⁸

The poet clearly has in mind the respective duties or *dharma* of the classes. Modern interpreters and apologists understandably tend to ignore or reinterpret such passages. Krishna’s words here voice the collective consciousness of the brahmins, concerned at the influence of Buddhism, and vowing to destroy it. In fact, the brahmins went further, and conscripted the whole of their universe to absorb the Buddha and convert him, as it were, into one of their own. This is the ultimate conversion, at least to the Hindus.

This is the doctrine of the “divine descents” or incarnations (*avatāra*),²⁹ an early reference to which is made in the Bhagavad Gītā.³⁰ In this myth, as recorded in the Bhāgavata Purāṇa, the Buddha is viewed (by Hindus) as the twenty-fourth of twenty-five avatars of Vishnu (Viṣṇu).³¹ Similarly, in a number of other Hindu traditions, the Buddha is portrayed as the ninth, the most recent, of ten principal avatars, known as the Daśāvatāra (the Ten Incarnations).³²

The polemical Hindu performance text **Bhaviṣya Purāṇa**,³³ portrays the Buddha negatively as a “deluder of demons,” thus:

At this time, reminded of the Kali Age, the god Vishnu became born as Gautama, the Shakyamuni, and taught the Buddhist dharma for ten years. Then Shuddodana ruled for twenty years, and Shakyasimha for twenty. At the first stage of the Kali Age, the path of the Vedas was destroyed and all men became Buddhists. Those who sought refuge with Vishnu were deluded.

(Doniger O’Flaherty, 1976:203)

The German Indologist **Helmuth von Glasenapp** (1962) attributes these developments to a Hindu desire to absorb Buddhism in a peaceful manner, both to win Buddhists to Vaishnavism and also to account for the fact that such a significant heresy could exist in India.³⁴ According to **Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty**, a scholar of Hinduism and comparative mythology, the “Buddha” avatars as depicted in the Purāṇas may

inical religious life (1993:100 f). Prob, after the Buddha’s time, the system was enhanced as a reaction against Buddhist monasticism.

²⁵ See Klostermeier 2007:74-85 (ch 5).

²⁶ Repeated with variations at 18.47, and in Dharma Śāstra literature of later times. In fact, the most famous verses which open the Bhagavad Gītā itself, showing Arjuna, the warrior, as a disciple of Kṛṣṇa, who defends war and killing, and it is clear that “the text is a defence not only of the warrior’s duty to wage righteous war but also of the whole brāhmaṇic social system” (Basham 1989:94).

²⁷ Ironically, Kaṇha (Pali form of the Skt Kṛṣṇa), which means “the dark one,” is an ancient epithet for Māra the evil one (D 2:262, M 1:377; Sn 355; Tha 1189, 1191, 1193, 1195, 1197, 1201, 1203), and also an ancient synonym for *pisāca* (goblin, D 1:93). See **Māra** = SD 61.8 ().

²⁸ Basham’s tr (1989:94).

²⁹ Often anglicized as avatar. See eg [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Avatar_\(Hinduism\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Avatar_(Hinduism)).

³⁰ See eg Noel Sheth, “Hindu avatāra and Christian incarnation: A comparison,” *Philosophy East and West* 52,1 Jan 2002:98-125.

³¹ Interestingly, **Dasa,ratha J** (J 461) is a story of the Buddha’s past life as the wise prince Rāma, son of king Dasa,ratha of Benares. Lakkhaṇa is the Bodhisattva’s brother, and Sītā his sister. The story is brief and very different from the better known Rāmāyaṇa of the Hindus. As the Buddhist version is shorter, it is possible that it is the source or inspiration for the longer one, or both could have been inspired by a common older source.

³² See eg http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gautama_Buddha_in_Hinduism.

³³ On the Purāṇas, see Freda Matchett, “The Purāṇas,” in *The Blackwell Companion to Hinduism*, ed Gavin Flood, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003:129-143 (ch 6).

³⁴ Quoted in Doniger 1976:203.

represent an attempt by orthodox Brahminism to slander the Buddhists by identifying them with the demons (1976:200).

1.7.2 Catholic myths. Steven Collins, a specialist scholar in Theravada, sees such claims regarding Buddhism as related to the “modern intellectual Hinduism, reacting to the Christian missionary effort,” often claiming that “all religions are one,” and that Hinduism is uniquely valuable because it alone recognizes this fact (1989:9 f). Such a universalist or triumphalist claim is, of course, a common one, for this is what often defines a world religion. Roman Catholicism, for example, believe that the Divine Word (Logos) “exists and existed” from the beginning of time, invoking John 1:1, which opens with the words, “In the beginning was the Word.”

The early Catholic Church fathers were faced with numerous old religions which they understandably regarded as degenerate. They followed one of two courses. They either declared that Christianity had the the whole Truth and that therefore there was no need to look elsewhere, or that they held that all truth, no matter where it was found, belonged to the integrity of the Faith, and was therefore to be accepted, absorbed, and embraced. As Thomas Aquinas said, quoting Ambrose, “all truth, no matter where it is found, has the Holy Spirit for its author.” In a similar manner, Jerome adopted the Buddha’s life-story and Christianized as hagiography of St Josaphat.³⁵

Such myths work when a critical mass of people believes it and recounts it to others. Rightly or wrongly, truly or falsely, we are often the myths we live by. Indeed, religions, especially the theistic book-religions, are mostly colourful and systematic myth-spinning. People love good stories, and how we love them and live by them make them what they are. Man creates God who creates Man; vox populi, vox dei.³⁶

1.8 POST-BUDDHA BUDDHIST RESPONSES

1.8.1 The Mahāyāna myth. The post-Buddha Indian Buddhists responded with their own genius to the brahminical broadside on Buddhism in a number of ways. From our textual records and history, we can surmise that these responses are mainly philosophical, doctrinal, and ritual, each with their new myths. The main thread running through all these responses was that of making Buddhism more universalist and populist, even triumphalist.

Beginning around the 1st century BCE, we see the rise of the **Perfection of Wisdom** (*prajñāpāramitā*) literature, a central concept of the newly emerged Mahāyāna. Although these texts often give inspiring accounts of meditation, their tone is predominantly *philosophical*, which are not easily comprehensible or practicable for the masses. Most of these great works, however, have come down to our times.

The new Mahāyāna mythology is rich and colourful with new Buddhas and paradises, the best known of which are clearly **Amitābha Buddha** and his Western Paradise of Sukhāvati. The earliest Mahāyāna texts often centred around *meditation*,³⁷ but the texts that follow are generally more ritualistic and apotropaic (magical). Many such texts deify the Buddha, so that he is endowed with omniscience and boundless powers, and inhabit various universes, besides ours.³⁸

³⁵ Josaphat was a corruption of the orig Joasaph, which is again corrupted fr the Middle Persian *Budasif* (*Budsaif* = *Bodhisattva*). He (“the Buddha”) is even credited with the “second conversion” of India to Christianity, after the country had relapsed to “paganism” following the mission of the Apostle Thomas. Both Barlaam and Josaphat were remembered in the roll of saints recognized by the Roman Catholic Church, with the festival day of 27 November. See **Mahā,parinibbāna S** (D 16) = SD 9 Intro (8) & **Miraculous stories** = SD 27.5b(7.4).

³⁶ An early ref to this saying is found in a letter from the English ecclesiastic, Alcuin of York, to Charlemagne in 798, which in full, reads: *Nec audiendi qui solent dicere, Vox populi, vox Dei, quum tumultuositas vulgi semper insaniae proxima sit*, “And those people should not be listened to who keep saying the voice of the people is the voice of God, since the riotousness of the crowd is always very close to madness.” (Letter 164 in “Works” (1863) 1:438; qu in *The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*, 5th ed, 1999: 1.38). This phrase is prob an aphorism alluding to the common political wisdom of the times

³⁷ Eg **Pratyutpanna,buddha,sammukhāvasthita Samādhi Sūtra** which centres around the 4 satipatthanas: see Paul Harrison, *The Samādhi of the Direct Encounter with the Buddhas of the Present*, Tokyo: International Institute for Buddhist Studies, 1990.

³⁸ See eg **How Buddhism became Chinese** = SD 40b(3) (Cosmic Buddhas and Paradises).

The Mahāyāna mythology as a whole is unparalleled in the history of religion. However, if we look deeply into the threads that run through many of them, we could say that they reflect that their authors are struggling with the death of this historical Buddha. There is a general *denial* that such a great being as the Buddha could be mortal. This, anyway, is a common reaction of devout believers after the passing of their founders, who then are apotheosized.³⁹ [7.3]

The Mahāyāna authors are arguably great literati, living in urban monasteries, especially well versed in Buddhist texts and secular learning. Such urbanized settings, as a rule, are not home for the Buddhist contemplatives, who prefer to live in smaller groups in remote forests, or as eremites (solitary wanderers). Lacking the detachment of the eremites, these post-Buddha coenobites (settled monastics) are understandably concerned with promoting, or at least preserving, their communities and teachings. They also have to present their followers and the public with a mythology that would continue to strengthen their faith and sustain, even increase, their patronage.

These settled monastics conceived the cults of *cosmic* Buddhas who are regarded as eternal beings, with whom they are capable of having communion through meditation, prayer, trance or dreams.⁴⁰ These new Buddha-myths became very popular, and grew into numerous new schools and sects, as Buddhism spread into other cultures, and was in turn assimilated into local cultures.⁴¹

The early Buddhist ideal of the arhat is side-lined, even disdained, as in the Lotus Sutra, arguably the most remarkable tome of Mahāyāna mythology.⁴² In place of the arhat ideal, the bodhisattva ideal is loudly proclaimed, and followers are admonished to work for Buddhahood itself. Understandably, such a high and difficult ideal is not very attractive to the masses. The faithful, however, regularly recite such aspirations in their religious offices, so that it is an important part of the Mahāyāna liturgy and ritual.

The more religious and faith-inclined Mahāyāna Buddhists not only tend to see the Buddhas as supernatural beings, but go on believe that they are actually *physically* present in their relics, stupas and images.⁴³ In a significant way, such Buddhists see these Buddhas in the same way that other Indians see their numerous gods, capable of answering their prayers, granting them certain powers, or even guide them to rebirth in some kind of paradise. With such a plethora of pleasant choices, a Buddhist need not turn to any other religion to answer their religious or emotional needs.

However, there are occasions when such a latitude might be costly, especially when basic Buddhist teachings were sidelined, even violated. Sacred texts like **the Saṅghāṭa Sūtra**, a spurious Mahāyāna work, for example, promise to make an “immediate end” to our bad karma, even the “five heinous sins” (of killing of mother, killing of father, drawing the Buddha’s blood, killing an arhat, and causing a schism) simply by reciting from the text!⁴⁴ This text became very popular in northern India, central Asia, China and Tibet even to this day.⁴⁵

Unfortunately, this kind of myth was clearly symptomatic of more serious lapses in the Buddhist spirituality of the times. As Buddhism became a more externalized religion, where religious truths and needs were defined and dispensed by priests, Buddhist chants and rituals were perceived as magical, and Buddhism became more commercialized and money-centred, the Buddhist practitioners lost the vision of

³⁹ See eg SD 9(9h).

⁴⁰ See Harrison, “Buddhānusmṛti in the Pratyutpanna-Buddha-saṁmukhāvasthita-samādhi-Sūtra,” 1978: 38. See also SD 40b.4(4.3.3.6): The Bodhisattva precepts and self-ordination.

⁴¹ See eg **How Buddhism became Chinese** = SD 40b.

⁴² More fully, **Saddharma Puṇḍarīka Sūtra**, the oldest parts of which (chs 1-9 and 17) were prob composed btw 100 BCE and 100 CE. Most of the text had appeared by 200 CE (Paul Williams 1989:142).

⁴³ See Ray 1994: 348-352, 364. See also SD 9(7+9g) & **Miraculous Stories** = SD 27.5b (6.2).

⁴⁴ This is clearly and blatantly against core Buddhist teachings, such as those recorded in **Parikuppa S** (S 5.129/-3:146) = SD 40b.2(2.8.3.2).

⁴⁵ See **Cult Buddhism** = SD 34.5(1.2.3.2) & **How Buddhism became Chinese** = SD 40b.2(2.8.3).

their inherent spirituality of self-reliance.⁴⁶ These monastics essentially turned into priests, shamans and simonists.⁴⁷

1.8.2 The Vajrayana myth. As Buddhism became more liberal and innovative, its **Mantra,yāna**, the mantra vehicle, buddhicized many of the brahminical chants and gods. The Saivite *Namaḥ śivāya* mantra was adopted and skillfully turned into the famous six-syllable Avalokiteśvara mantra, *Oṃ maṇi,padme hūm*, as recorded in the Karaṇḍa,vyūha Sūtra. The greatest of the Mahāyāna Bodhisattvas, **Avalokiteśvara** (*avalokīta*, “who looks down (from above)” + *īśvara*, “the lord”) himself, evolved from the Hindu god Śiva, whose primary epithet is *Īśvara* (“Lord”).⁴⁸ One essential difference is that while Śiva has a wrathful aspect, Avalokiteśvara is the embodiment of compassion.

So successful was this cross-grafting in Buddhist religiosity that the mantra and the Bodhisattva became, as it were, intrinsically Buddhist, so that today the world knows them better than their Saivite forbears. Yet, this is only one example—clearly the best—we have of how the Indian Buddhists relentlessly and successfully converted many of the more popular Hindu gods, symbols, rituals, texts and practices of their times.

From the 6th to the 9th century, **Nālandā**, especially its university, grew in size, prestige and wealth as a centre of Mahāyāna philosophy and secular learning.⁴⁹ This strongly Mahayanist emphasis gave further boost to Mantra,yāna, so that it evolved into **Tantra,yāna**, the “woven” vehicle.⁵⁰ Tantra is a generic name for a genre of ritual-based guru-centred religious and magical practices, involving initiations and secret teachings.⁵¹

Like their Hindu forbears, the Buddhist Tantrikas (Tantric practitioners), too, are often associated with various illicit practices and black magic, especially in connection with the “five M’s” (*pañca-ma-kāra*), that is, *madya* (intoxicant), *māmsa* (meat), *matsya* (fish), *mudrā* (fermented or parched grain) and sexual union (*maithuna*).⁵² Such practices are meant to be ritual or symbolic means of breaking down dualism. Taken symbolically, these may be understandable, but even then they are certainly not in keeping with the teachings of the historical Buddha.

Tantric Buddhism in its most developed form is called **Vajra,yāna**, the “diamond” vehicle, which incorporates a huge pantheon of Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, deities and beings, and numerous rituals, centering around the myth that this body itself is the door to salvation. A tradition unique to this Buddhism is that of the *Siddha*, the Tantric adept (again a concept adapted from Hindu Tantra).

The Buddhisms of Nepal and Tibet went on to enumerate 84 “great adepts” (*mahā siddha*), masters of Tantric meditation, primarily active between the 8th and 12th centuries in India, and they are regarded as

⁴⁶ See **Gāraṇa S** (S 6.2/1:138-142) = SD 12.3 and **Mahā Parinibbāna S** (D 16.6.1/2:154) = SD 9.

⁴⁷ See eg G Schopen, *Buddhist Monks and Business Matters*, Honolulu: Univ of Hawai’i Press, 2004:1-18 (The good monk and his money in a Buddhist monasticism of “the Mahāyāna period”).

⁴⁸ See esp Alexander Studholme 2002.

⁴⁹ Nālandā is in Bihar, India, and was a great Buddhist centre of learning from 427 to 1197 CE. It has been called “one of the first great universities in recorded history.” The complex included 11 monasteries and several temples built with red bricks. At its peak, the university attracted scholars and students from as far away as China, Greece, and Persia. It was sacked by Turkic Muslim invaders under Bakhtiyar Khalji in 1193, a milestone in the decline of Buddhism in India. The great library of Nalanda University was so vast that it was said to have burned for 3 months after the Turks set fire to it, sacked and destroyed the monasteries, and drove the monks from the site. Today, its ruins occupy an area of 14 hectares (0.05 sq mi). In 2006, Singapore, China, India, Japan, and other nations, announced a plan to restore and revive the ancient site as Nalanda International University.

⁵⁰ *Tantra*, in mediaeval Skt, refers to “many forms of complex arrangement and may denote military deployment, a loom, certain forms of ritual, a political culture, a scriptural text emphasizing selected rituals, the pan-Indic religious aesthetic, and so on” (Macmillan Ency of Buddhism 820). In Buddhist Tantra, it refers to a guru-centred practice of mantra recitations, visualizations and worship of Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, deities, teachers and mandalas (ritual circles) as vehicles for overcoming difficulties, even overcoming enemies, and ultimately of enlightenment.

⁵¹ The lay leader of a local Vajrayana temple once publicly said that there are Vajrayana rituals that can guarantee “getting whatever we wish for,” provided we follow their every rule and step.

⁵² <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Panchamakara>.

founders of various Tantric lineages. Saraha and Maitrīpa, for example, were responsible for the spread of Mahā Mudra (great seal) instructions; Tilopa and Nāropa were the earliest founders of the Tibetan Kagyu sect; and Virūpa was the source for the Tibetan doctrine of path and fruition (*lam'bras*, pronounced “lam.dré,” ie *marga,phala*) of the Sakya sect.

The Siddhas are said to possess yogic accomplishments (*siddhi*, “success”), which are of two types: the ordinary or mundane accomplishment of magical powers, and the supreme accomplishment of perfect enlightenment. Life stories of individual siddhas abound with examples of the first type, such as mastery over the elements and material world, superhuman cognition, even immortality. Siddhas are commonly associated with particular displays of accomplishment; for example, Virūpa’s ability to stop the sun mid-course and Saraha’s immunity to the heat of molten metal. According to tradition, however, such powers are only the by-products of Tantric meditation, not the goal itself. The second kind of Siddhas are regarded as the Vajrayana model for “short-cut” enlightenment through the Tantric practice of meditation and yoga.⁵³

1.8.3 Vicissitudes of the new Buddha myths

1.8.3.1 MYTHICAL PERIODS IN BUDDHISM. It cannot be denied that the post-Buddha Buddhist genius is highly successful in adapting and adopting the popular and outstanding aspects of other religions by buddhizing them. As new religions and local forms of Buddhism, they became very successful. However, there are *hidden costs*: in adopting these extra-religiosities, they are themselves transformed in due course into *new* religions themselves, or at least new *Buddhisms*, with new religious agenda and ideals.

Soteriologically (in terms of spiritual liberation), we can divide popular Buddhism as evolving through **four periods**, each characterized by its predominant or popular conception of the religious virtuoso or spiritual ideal.⁵⁴ In the **1st period** (500-0 CE), the religious ideal is the liberated saint or **arhat**, in whom all cravings are extinguished and who will no more be reborn. This is the period of *early Buddhism*.

In the **2nd period** (0-500 CE), the predominant the ideal was that of the Bodhisattva, not the historical Buddha-to-be, but a new conception, the hypostasis (or embodiment) of compassion and other qualities, that is, a being human or otherwise) who wishes to save other beings, even at the cost of postponing his own final enlightenment, and who is often endowed with various magical or salvific powers. This is the period of great philosophical development, that is, the era of *Mahāyāna Buddhism*.

In the **3rd period** (500-1500), it is the Siddha, a yogic adept who is said to be so fully in harmony with his environment that he is under no constraint whatsoever and as a free agent is able to manipulate even the cosmic forces both inside and outside himself. This period is dominated by the shamanism of *Tantric Buddhism*.

In the **4th period** (1500-2000), it is the Seth,⁵⁵ a secular professional or executive, a person of means, whose wealth, professional or social success, and charisma, are regarded as blessings of past good karma—as such, worthy of emulation and respect as a leader and teacher, even by the monastics who need his patronage. This is time when *corporate Buddhism* predominates.

As for the **5th period** (2000- ?), it is likely to be dominated by the Vidyadhara,⁵⁶ person of great learning and charisma, especially in terms of a scientific understanding and implementation of meditation

⁵³ See “Mahāsiddha,” *Macmillan Encyclopaedia of Buddhism*, ed Robert E Buswell, Jr, NY: Macmillan Reference, 2004:490 f; also see <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mahasiddha>.

⁵⁴ The notion of “religious virtuosi” was introduced by Max Weber and developed by other scholars like Guenther Roth. See G Roth & W Schluchter, *Max Weber’s Vision of History, Ethics and Methods*. Berkeley, CA, 1979.

⁵⁵ Skt *śreṣṭhī*, P *seṭṭhī*, “merchant banker.” *Seth* is a modern Hindi word for a wealthy entrepreneur or businessman. The traditional definition of *seṭṭhi* is given in the PED as “foreman of a guild, treasurer, banker, “City man,” wealthy merchant, V 1:15 f, 271 f, 2:110 f, 157, S 1:89...etc.”

⁵⁶ Skt *vidyā,dhara*, lit tr as “knowledge-bearer.” In Hindu mythology, they are supernatural beings who attend to the god Siva, and live in the Himalayas with the Kinnaras (half-bird half-human beings). Although the term is found in Vedism and Tibetan Buddhism, I use it by way of convenience (using a familiar term to convey an unfamiliar truth) to represent the new Buddhist ideal of one who is knowledgeable not only in Buddhist lore, but also in modern learning. Interestingly, Brahmavamso, is a good example, as he graduated in theoretical physics from Cambridge, UK, and is a spirited defender of Buddhism as “the only real science” (2004). See SD 17.8c(10).

and mental skills. Such a person may range from being a well known lay but titled academic scholar to an accomplished monastic figure (also titled), or more likely, one who is a master of both Buddhist religiosity and academic learning, what might be popularly but loosely (not always correctly), be labelled as a kind of “*scientific*” Buddhism.

1.8.3.2 MAIN REASONS FOR PAST BUDDHIST DECLINE IN INDIA

(1) The Muslim invasion. Up to the time the Muslim armies devastated India in the 13th century,⁵⁷ organized Buddhism in India (except for the far south and in the Himalayas) was found primarily in its great and wealthy monasteries (*mahā, vihāra*) and universities. Once these were destroyed, and the students and scholars killed or scattered, Indian Buddhism lost the core of its identity and life. Hinduism and Jainism, on the other hand, had no identifiable core at which to strike. Moreover, the opulent Buddhist establishments, mostly in the urban areas, were easy targets for the plunderers.

Indeed, whenever Buddhism was privileged as a state religion or supported by the country’s elite, it congealed into an hierarchical system with a palladium of priestly power and dogmas, whose authority and control would reach right out down to the grassroots. Such a Buddhism tends to be a sort of state pantheon, authenticating or supporting the ruling elite. It has to be a politically correct, and as such a materialistic and populist, that is, an authorized Buddhism, an elitist Buddhism of the rich and powerful.

The destruction of Nālandā in 1197 and of Vikramaśilā in 1203 by Muḥammad Ghūrī marked the effective end of Buddhism in mediaeval India. The Ghurid invaders saw themselves as wielding the sword of Allah and his prophet Muhammad, dutifully destroying the idolatrous Hindus and Buddhists. The Muslim invaders looted the temples and enslaved thousands.

Like most military campaigns, they used religious fervour and indoctrination to fire up their troops. Their main objective, however, was wealth, territory and power. The temples and monasteries that were looted and destroyed were worldly and opulent centres, often flooded with funds and images of bejewelled gold.⁵⁸ The Ghurids did not pay their generals or governors, or provide them with supplies. They were expected to support themselves and their troops from local gains. Understandably, they did not seek to conquer Kashmir or convert the Buddhists there, since Kashmir was impoverished then, and the monasteries had little or no wealth worth plundering.⁵⁹

(2) The Jains. On the survival of Jainism despite the 12th-century Muslim invasion, **P S Jaini** (1980) notes that the main reason for this was the work of the *śramaṇôpāsaka* (“lay recluses”) or laymen Dharma teachers who propagated the teachings without arousing the curiosity of antagonists. Jainism has many historical parallels with Buddhism (both arose around the same time and have similar teachings of non-violence). For the Jains, however, no synthesis of the human and the divine is ever possible, and such Tantric practices as the identification of the self with the deity were simply out of question. Hence, the Tīrthaṅkaras (“ford-makers” or saviours) remain the highest model and ideal of spiritual development.

In the Mahāyāna conception of celestial bodhisattvas, Mañjuśrī and Avalokiteśvara *often usurp the place of the historical Buddha himself*, who ceases to be the ultimate spiritual goal. Even before the Muslim invasion, the Buddhists were crushed by the weight of their own philosophies, ritualism and worldliness. The unawakened Indian Buddhists had, at best, their worldly learning and wealth. Their forgetting or disregard for the Buddha’s admonitions and injunctions against monastics associating with worldliness and wealth came with a very great cost: their own annihilation by Mara’s horde itself.⁶⁰

In fact, the Buddhism that the Muslim invaders destroyed in India in the 12th century was a far cry from the simple monastic early Buddhism, steeped in study, practice and meditation. This Buddhism that

⁵⁷ For details of the Muslim destruction of Buddhism, see, for example, A K Warder, 1970: 502-513; also N R Reat 1994:75-77. See A Berzin 2001. For a Muslim’s response to Buddhism here, see S M Yusuf, 1955:1-28.

⁵⁸ On the wealth of the Buddhist monasteries around this time, see §22 above & Schopen 1994 & 1997:3-5.

⁵⁹ As a rule, the invading Muslims did not forcefully convert everyone under their power to Islam. For if they did so, they could not exploit large portions of the population for additional taxes. As such, as in Afghanistan, the Ghurids continued the traditional custom of granting dhimmi status to non-Muslims in India and exacting the jizya poll tax. See Berzin 1955:10 online ed.

⁶⁰ See further **Monastics and money** = SD 4.19-23.

disappeared from India was mostly an urbanized, settled and worldly system, highlighted by the elites of the great universities at Nālandā and elsewhere, more adept at reinterpreting and revising Buddhism academically, philosophically and magically than in keeping to the Buddha's system of moral simplicity, mental cultivation, and liberating wisdom. It were as if Māra had fattened his cows before descending with his horde for the final kill.

Despite such widespread annihilation of worldly Buddhism in India, surely the less obtrusive forest monastic tradition survived. We still see such monks keeping up the early Buddhist practices in the forest traditions of Myanmar, Thailand, and to a lesser extent in Sri Lanka. Even today Sinhala monasticism, some of which is caste-based,⁶¹ has generally become very worldly, ritualistic and academic, like the Buddhism of 12th-century India. One positive sign is that there are growing lay Buddhist movements and activities in the practice and promotion of the Buddha Dharma there.⁶²

(3) Idolatry and wealth. Despite the Indian Buddhist genius in effectively countering brahminical and Hindu challenges, such as introducing powerful and attractive new myths by way of Mahāyāna and Vajrayana, Buddhism disappeared from India within a few decades due to being exterminated by the ferocious and fanatical Muslim invaders. Although the Muslims were generally tolerant of their subjects, the Buddhists were not spared for two main reasons: these Indian Buddhists were awash in fabulous *wealth* (which the invaders desired), and swamped in *idolatry* (which the invaders hated).⁶³

The problems of our own times, however, are much more complex. Yet, they can still be spoken of as being rooted in *idolatry*, but of a mental kind. In psychological terms, many Buddhists, especially those unfamiliar with the suttas and meditation, tend to be idol-worshippers. Sacred texts and Dharma talks are taken as “holy” in themselves, and not as means or memos for personal practice and meditation. Books by respected monastics and respectable laymen are published for free distributions as “acts of merit.” In other words, they are need not so much to be read (after all, most of them write about the same things, and often of questionable quality) but merely browsed, shelved and passed on.

Foreign teachers are often *idolized*, attracting admirers to their forms of Dharma, Abhidhamma, Vipassana, Zen, meditation, and modern Buddhisms. Such sessions would have been beneficial if they were systematic and sustained so that local Buddhist vocations would take root and flourish. But these gatherings are like trade fairs of foreign wares for raising funds for centres, retreats and projects in foreign lands. Even more colourful and expensive are the Tibetan rituals (often by guest incarnate royal lamas), inviting a million mantra chants, and guaranteeing successful business, healing, world peace, and sundry—all for a fee, of course. We are facing another kind of foreign invasion here. For local Buddhists, not well rooted in the Suttas, these road-shows are very fascinating Dharma. Many decades have passed with such circuses, but local Buddhism has hardly taken root in Singapore.

(4) Power and politics. Another key reason (besides worldly wealth) for the downfall of Buddhism is *political power*. In **China**, when Buddhism was patronized by the elite and rulers, especially when it became the state religion, its doctrines, life-style and myths were redefined by those in power, monastic and secular. When the patronizing dynasty fell, Buddhism fell with it, too, like nesting birds in a falling tree, often persecuted by the new dynasty, under the influence of the Confucianists, or to a lesser extent, the Daoists.⁶⁴

Buddhism in **Japan**, too, became powerful through patronage by the ruling elite. However, due to the centralized nature of pre-modern Japan, dominated by regional shoguns or war-lords, the Buddhist tem-

⁶¹ On Sri Lankan caste and religion, see [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Caste_system_\(Sri_Lanka\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Caste_system_(Sri_Lanka))

⁶² See Piyasilo, *Buddhist Currents: A brief social analysis of Buddhism in Sri Lanka and Siam*, Petaling Jaya (Malaysia), 1992a.

⁶³ For a discussion of the reasons for the disappearance of Buddhism from India, see Piya Tan, *History of Buddhism*, Singapore, 2005: 1.31.

⁶⁴ See **How Buddhism became Chinese** = SD 40b, esp (7.4).

ples, by the Heian period (794-1185), with its capital at Kyoto, were so wealthy and powerful that they recruited their own warrior priests (*sōhei* 僧兵), who were feared by even the rulers themselves.⁶⁵

By the Kamakura period (1185-1392), the Tendai, who had the most powerful *sōhei* army, became the biggest and most powerful of the eight Japanese Buddhist schools existing then. All this, however, would end in the Tokugawa period (1543-1868): in 1571, the shogun Oda Nobunaga, distrustful of the immense wealth and power of these temples, first attacked and razed the Tendai headquarters, Enryaku-ji, on Mt Hiei, breaking up the *sōhei* forever. Then he went on to ruthlessly suppress the other Buddhist temple establishments. While the *wealth* of the Indian monasteries attracted extermination by the Turks, the *power* of the Japanese monasteries invited devastation by the asura war-lords.

1.8.3.3 SEXUAL TRANSMISSION. The deathblow to Japanese Buddhist monasticism came in the Meiji period (1868-1912). In 1872, the Meiji government of Japan promulgated a law that simply stated: “From now on Buddhist clerics shall be free to eat meat, marry, grow their hair, and so on.⁶⁶ Furthermore, there will be no penalty if they wear ordinary clothing when not engaged in religious activities.”⁶⁷ Known informally as **the *nikujiki saitai*** 肉食妻帯 (“meat-eating and marriage”) law, it was introduced to incapacitate or at least weaken Buddhism as a political and social force in Japan.⁶⁸ This move effectively emasculated the Buddhist monastic system in Japan, which has since not been revived.⁶⁹

The reality is that clerical marriages and temple families have covertly existed since ancient times in Japanese Buddhism. However, since at least the time of Shinran (1173-1262), the founder of Jōdo Shinshū (the True Pure Land denomination), his clerical followers have openly married and frequently passed on their temples from father to son (or adopted son).⁷⁰ Shin temple wives, known as *bōmori* (temple caretakers) traditionally have played an important role in ministering to parishioners, caring for the temple, and raising the temple children. (Jaffe 2003:161)

The 1872 legalized emasculation of Japanese Buddhism, however, effectively uprooted its monasticism. This naturally encourages, or at least does not forbid, greater sexuality amongst its clergy.⁷¹ Clerical marriages are now more open and temple families are common among all denominations of Japanese Buddhism. Although many non-Shin denominations leaders bitterly resisted it for decades, proponents of the practice accepted clerical marriage and temple families as the best way to create a vigorous Buddhism capable of competing with the family-centered Protestantism, with its married ministers, that was making headway in Japan in the late 19th century. By the late 1930s, clerical marriage had spread to the majority of clerics in most denominations of “monastic” Buddhism. Today, all denominations of Japanese Buddhism have granted de facto legitimacy to clerical marriage and temple families.

Clerical marriage and sexual openness⁷² are generally tolerated in secular Japan for at least two reasons, that is, firstly, clerical celibacy is, after all, banned by law, and secondly, Japanese society is gener-

⁶⁵ See Stephen Turnbull, *Japanese Warrior Monks AD 949-1603*, Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2003; see also <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/S%C5%8Dhei>.

⁶⁶ Robinson & Johnson 1982: 181.

⁶⁷ Date 1930: 621 (qu in Jaffe 2002).

⁶⁸ The Japanese monks were esp powerful, feared even by the shoguns, in the Nara period (710-784). The arresting of Buddhist monastic powers started in the Tokugawa period (1600-1867) and was complete by the Meiji era (1868-1912): see Piya Tan, **History of Buddhism**, ch 5 “The spread of Buddhism: Buddhism in Japan,” §§9-13 (Nara period), 12 (Tokugawa period), 23 (Meiji restoration).

⁶⁹ See further **Cult Buddhism** = SD 34.5(1.2.4): Fear-based cult.

⁷⁰ Monastic families are also found in Sinhalese Buddhism, esp amongst the wealthy exclusively high-caste Siyam Nikaya, whose abbots would ordain their nephews to ensure temple wealth and property remain within the “family.” See Piyasīlo, *Buddhist Currents: A brief social analysis of Buddhism in Sri Lanka and Siam*, Petaling Jaya, 1992a.

⁷¹ Scholars, eg, generally believe that homosexuality, esp btw adults priests and boy pages, are a natural part of Japanese clerical life at last from the time of Kukai (774-835): see Mac Ency Bsm 764.

⁷² “Aberration” because the Vinaya (monastic discipline) expressly disallows monastics any kind of sexual act, which when committed deliberately entails “defeat” (*pārājika*), immediate loss of the monastic status. See **Sexuality** = SD 31.7(2): Monasticism is above sexuality.

ally tolerant of sexual deviance.⁷³ Despite this open attitude towards sexuality, Japanese society (like other east Asian societies) are still influenced and guided by Confucianist and Buddhist ethical values, especially respect for others (especially seniors) and social distance.

Traditional Japanese and Tibetan societies, like most Asian communities, run along a complex system of reciprocal obligations, which were unspoken but clear. All levels of relationships and all relationships between the levels are subtly controlled by *a strong desire to save face*. There is an invisible space or social distance between groups and between individuals, with each individual clear of his status and duties.

However, when such cultural forms of Buddhism were transplanted into the US, where such social conventions did not exist, it encouraged sexual and mental exploitation of devotees by spiritually weak high lamas and strong-willed Zen teachers, and other cultish problems. There were no traditional or social controls in the US over the Tibetan high lamas or the Japanese Zen masters who arrived in the 1970s and 1980s. This was the aftermath of the 1960s free-love drug-happy psychedelic hippie culture. It was a time of unbridled social freedom and moral licence.⁷⁴

1.8.3.4 THE STATUS MYTH. Furthermore, despite their avowed *non-celibate* status, Zen priests and teachers, especially in western circles, often use monastic terms, such as “monk” for a Zen lay teacher, “sangha” for their lay community, “monastery” for their centres, and “abbot” for their centre heads, and so on. All this evokes an air and aura of false sanctity. The word “monk,” “monastic, etc” are derived from the Greek μοναχός, *monachos* (“single, solitary, unique”) and μοναστικός, *monastikos* (literally, “pertaining to the solitary life”). Thus, if we use such monastic terms for the Zen situation, it is like using the word “single” to describe a “couple.” This is no Buddha-killing koan. If a Zen word has moved so far away from its proper meaning, then it must surely have lost its original face.

Perhaps such label-lifting is inspired by the myth that the old system is dysfunctional, even dead, or that traditional monasticism needs to be redefined. Yet, there is a perception that early Buddhism and monasticism are still the ideal (in which case, they should be respected so). Or, perhaps such terms provide an aura of sanctity or a sense of status upon the bearer. However, if the teacher is spiritually developed, he would not be dependent on words and titles. Good sake needs no busshu. Furthermore, such label-ripping might encourage further laicization of the monastics who are struggling to keep to their celibate spirituality and yet in touch with worldly realities.

Anyway, it would be socially and ethically more appropriate and advantageous if such a terminology reflects their realities. At least one traditional forest monk, **Brahmavamso**, living in Western Australia, has spoken out on *the proper usage of such Pali terms*.⁷⁵ A “middle way” solution to the Zen usage of early monastic terms could be that these terms be used in their translations, that is, “order” instead of sangha, and appropriate terms like “temple” instead of monastery, and “priest” or “order member” instead of monk or nun. Using inappropriate terms is like false job or trade descriptions. Honesty and accuracy in terms and titles often reflect a deeper integrity which is valuable in a religion. Of course, in the end, good wine needs no bush, especially since good Buddhists abstain from any intoxicant.

1.8.4 Social significance of the new Buddha myths

1.8.4.1 BUDDHISM, MONEY AND POWER. Wealth and power have always haunted religion. As we have seen, where religion begins to worship money, becoming moneytheistic, they would stifle and drown in their opulence and worldliness. Or, the more powerful would seek to control and shape it, or

⁷³ Larger Japanese often have their own fetish subculture, which has influenced many fetish communities worldwide. Prostitution is popular during economic boom, and Japanese pornography is well known worldwide. However the 21st century saw a decreased sex drive in even young Japanese leading to a low birth-rate and declining population growth. <http://newsinfo.inquirer.net/breakingnews/world/view/20110114-314431/Young-Japanese-losing-sex-drive-govt>. Two possible reasons may be cited: (1) sexuality is freely tolerated and often taken as entertainment, (2) the strict and demanding work culture causes stress and fatigue. In extreme cases, it leads to *karōshi* (過勞死), “death from overwork.”

⁷⁴ See **Bad friendship** = SD 64.17 esp (7).

⁷⁵ See last article, “The meaning of Sangha,” here: http://www.vimutti.org.nz/wp-content/uploads/books/VINAYA_articles.pdf.

defile and deform it. Such temples of the affluent would seek to attract affluent priests and their servile devotees.

The Anāgata Bhaya Sutta 4 (A 5.80) ominously foresees such dark shadows. On the long road to the future, it says, there will be monks who, seeking fine robes, fine almsfood and fine quarters, would move to urban areas and large cities, and conduct themselves in unseemly ways for such gains. They would socialize with nuns, probationers and female novices, committing foul deed with them, and return to lay life. They would live with lay workers and novices who are made to work on their land and crops.⁷⁶ Far from being moneyless forest wanderers, these “monastics” are amongst society’s wealthiest members, receiving monthly cash payments amounting to a business executive, so that they are far richer than any pious devotee who worships at their temples. These worldly priests would shameless socialize with the rich and powerful, and thriving in scandals and controversies without any qualm.⁷⁷

Money can yet serve well to promote religion, especially in the hands of the resourceful laity. An example of this is the “new religions” of Japan. Today, lay Nichiren organizations—such as the Rissho Kosei Kai and the Soka Gakkai International—are very successful modern religions. However, the main reason for their success is less spiritual than it is socioeconomic and political. A lesson here is that it is not too difficult to start and run a new religion when we have *a vision* and *a lot of funds*.

Next, we build a few imposing building (or even just one), and maybe start a college or university (at least in name), and hold seminars with professional scholars to refine or defend aspects of the faith that we favour. The Korean cult guru of the Unification Church, Sun Myung Moon, even started his own “New World Encyclopedia” in response to Wikipedia, as a Moonie-friendly ginger-bread house in the webbed forest of digital information. After all, what you seek you will find, especially a religious truth, and what we have found only affirms our beliefs. Whoever shapes such a religion and defines such beliefs wields great power over the seeker. So seeker, beware.

However, those who have tasted some true inner peace, and the more insightful scholars of religions, too, would surely see that such religious phenomena are constructed (that is, desired and imagined) realities and wishful fancies. Colourful and varied as such a web of ideas might be, they only serve to trap and hold seekers tenaciously, so that their minds and conduct are only directed one way, in the service of the guru or the cult. Of course, the guru’s ultimate aim is some kind of world domination, or at least some influence upon our society.

Minoru Kiyota, in his paper on “Japan’s New Religions (1945-65),” reports that, in a 1965 interview, his (lay Nichirenist) Soka Gakkai informants stated that “their own brand of religion is the only way to bring about the well-being of mankind and the prosperity of the state [Japan], and that to realize these goals, the conversion of all citizens is necessary.”

When questioned as to the possibility of converting all Japanese citizens to the Soka Gakkai faith, its leaders shrewdly remarked that only one-third of the citizens needed to be converted because amongst the remaining two-thirds, one-third would be half-way sympathizers and only the remaining one-third would be downright opponents to the Soka Gakkai faith and to the political aims of the Komeitō [the Soka Gakkai’s political party].” (1981:206).

However, in terms of global Buddhism, the political success of the Japanese Buddhists is quite remarkable. Their success, however, is incumbent on the fact that the Komeitō and the Soka Gakkai are, or rather, have (by law) to be *separate* entities. With this necessary separation, the powers-that-be allow the Nichiren Buddhists to play the power game. This separation is to deprive such a party from asserting undue influence on the masses and rivals with its religious myths.

1.8.4.2 BUDDHISM AND THE GOD MYTH. There is another lesson to be learnt from how myth can help Buddhists live and prosper in a nation. A case in point is that of how Indonesian Buddhists, in recent times, had to deal with the God-myth. In 1965, as a result of an attempted Communist coup, the Indonesia government outlawed all organizations that doubted or denied the existence of the one and only God (*ke-*

⁷⁶ A 5.80/3:108-110 = SD 1.10(3.4); cf 16.1/2:195 f; Miln 401.

⁷⁷ See eg **The Three Roots Inc**= SD 31.12(3.4.4): The Mingyi scandal.

tuhanan yang maha esa), through their national ideology called *Pancasila* (“Five Principles”),⁷⁸ which ironically is a Buddhist term. This was, of course, a problem for “non-theistic” Theravada Buddhism.

Ashin Jinarakkhita,⁷⁹ a Buddhayāna (that is, eclectic) monk and founder of Perbuddhi (Indonesian Buddhist Organization), however, proposed that the Buddhist supreme deity was Sang Hyang Adi Buddha, that is, the **Ādi-Buddha**,⁸⁰ the primordial Buddha of Mantrayāna that had existed in the region. Jinarakkhita tried to legitimize this uniquely Indonesian version of Buddhism by invoking ancient Javanese texts, and even the shape of the Buddhist temple complex at Borobudur.

The orthodox Theravadins, however, were determined to keep to the early Buddhist teachings. They explained that **nirvana**, the “unborn, uncreated, unconditioned,” was their “God.” Another response, personally communicated to me, was the interpretation of *Tuhan* (“God”) as **Ketuhanan** (Godliness), which was more acceptable to informed Buddhists since it reflected a quality rather than a being: this is the divine abodes (*brahma, vihāra*).⁸¹

1.9 MYTHS AS TOOLS. Buddhism, like any world religion or religion-family, has a penchant and acumen for myth-spinning. Myths are constructs and conventional truths—imagined and virtual realities—that can work both ways: they can be wholesome, inspiring and encouraging the mythic community in moral virtue, compassion, courage, wisdom and liberation, or they can be unwholesome, limiting the hearts and minds of their believers to some dogmas or misperceptions of the myths.

When a myth is widely believed, it must be carefully examined for the wholesome reality or higher truth that it symbolizes. A good Buddhist myth encapsulates wholesome qualities and imageries that point to a higher truth. It is a “capsule,” a “seed-cover,” and the seed must sprout in time in all its goodness. Such goodness is always reflective of the Buddha’s teaching, especially those relating to social well-being (moral virtue), personal development (mental cultivation), and liberation (wisdom), that is, the three trainings.⁸²

Before we examine Buddhist mythology further in terms of the three trainings, let us look at the rationale for myths in Buddhism and how myths work in the Buddhist context [2]. Then we will look at how myths help explain meditation [3], and how myths are helpful in inculcating social well-being [4]. In closing, we will examine how myths transcend language [5], and reveal the true nature of feeling [6], inspiring heroism in us [7].

1.10 TWO KINDS OF PARABLES. Unlike in Jainism, where a parable or comparison (*upama*) is considered a separate source of knowledge, the Buddhist texts only regard it as an aid to understanding.⁸³ The Commentary to the Vatthūpama Sutta (M 7) opens by stating that there are two kinds of parables, namely,

- (1) those based on individual disposition (*puggal’ajjhāsa*), and
- (2) those that embellish the teaching (*desanā, vilāsa*).⁸⁴

⁷⁸ See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pancasila_\(politics\)#.281.29_Belief_in_the_one_and_only_God_.28-Ketuhanan_yang_Maha_Esa.29](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pancasila_(politics)#.281.29_Belief_in_the_one_and_only_God_.28-Ketuhanan_yang_Maha_Esa.29).

⁷⁹ Jinarakkhita wore the brown Burmese robes. The sapling of Bodhi tree at the Melaka Buddhist Association in Malaysia was brought by him. I met him at the Assoc when I was a still a young schoolboy (the early 1960s), and remember him going to the small provision store and bringing back some pieces of tofu. When I asked him about it, he said that no one had offered him any almsfood.

⁸⁰ The **Ādi,buddha** (Tib *dang-po’i sangs-rgyas*) refers to the self-created, self-emanating Buddha present before anything else. Samanta,bhadra/Samanta,bhadrī and Vajradhara are the best known names for him. As such, it is the closest Buddhist notion to monotheism. However, Ādi,buddha, as an emanationist force, is closer to the Hindu *Brahman* than creator-God notions like Yahweh or Īśvara. In Vaishnavism (the Viṣṇu cult of the Hindus), the Ādi,buddha refers to the original form of Sakyamuni manifested as one of the 10 avatars [1.6.4.1].

⁸¹ See **How Buddhism became Chinese** = SD 40b (7.4.3): Buddhist growth in Indonesia.

⁸² On the 3 trainings (*ti,sikkhā*), see **Sīla Samādhi Paññā** = SD 21.6.

⁸³ Buddhism regard only sensory perception (normal and paranormal) (Skt *pratyakṣa*) and inference (based on perception) (*anumāna*) as valid sources of knowledge [4.4.2].

⁸⁴ MA 1:166; SA 2:306, 4:141; AA 4:118, 140; SA 2:306, 3:133; DhA 179, 225; VbhA 37. Cf another division of teaching: for embellishing the teaching (*desanā, vilāsa*) and the accumulating of merit (*puññ’ussaya*) (AA 1:110; BA 17; NmA 1:183; NcA 68; PmA 1:212).

The Commentaries do not elaborate or give any specific discourses as examples, but this duad actually describes the two ways in which the Buddha teaches, that is, in terms of *individuals* and in terms of *ideas*.

Firstly, the Buddha teaches in response to the special needs of an individual (*puggal'ajjhāsa*),⁸⁵ such as Yasa,⁸⁶ Āṅgulimāla,⁸⁷ Vakkali,⁸⁸ the youth Sigāla,⁸⁹ and we can also include the group of five monks.⁹⁰ Secondly, he would present ideas and teaching models, teaching *unprompted*, either addressing some matter that has arisen,⁹¹ inspired by a special event,⁹² reflecting on some doctrinal or disciplinary point,⁹³ giving an “object” lesson (using a parable or simile),⁹⁴ relating to a commonly known process or activity,⁹⁵ or telling a story,⁹⁶ that is, by way of embellishing a teaching (*desanā, vilāsa*).⁹⁷

Another similar duad of teaching (*desanā*) is mentioned elsewhere in the commentaries, that is, the person-based teaching (*puggalādhiṭṭhāna*) and the Dharma-based teaching (*dhammādhiṭṭhāna*).⁹⁸ Both these duads are very similar, even identical, differing only in terminology. Based on these duads, let us elaborate on this commentarial list of two kinds of parables as follows. The parable based on *the person* refers to a “specific theory of Buddhist myth” [3], while the parable based on *the Dharma* refers to a “general theory of Buddhist myth” [4].

Before that, it is useful that we first have some idea of the forms and functions of Buddhist myth in general. In other words, we will here examine the “mythical method” in early Buddhism.

2 The mythical method in early Buddhism

2.1 THE FACTS AND THE FIGURES. A myth is often made up of a simile, a metaphor or an imagery, or a combination of them, which sometimes work with other imageries to weave out a narrative tapestry by way of a fable, a story, a narrative cycle, or an epic. In the Greek myth of Sisyphus, for example, he repeatedly rolls a boulder up a steep hill, only for it to roll downhill again. This points to some futile habitual rut that our desire or dream keeps us in [6.2.1].

The early Pāli discourses have numerous figures, often by themselves help to clarify a teaching or a point. We often see the Buddha, for example, highlighting his key teachings by first stating them in conventional terms (as a fact) and then following them with figures or parables.⁹⁹ Such figures are part of a larger imagery, such as water imagery, or fire imagery, or stream imagery, and so on. Some of the best known imageries are parables related to meditation, the most famous of which are the following pericopes (stock passages) on *the four dhyana*.¹⁰⁰ [2.2]

⁸⁵ DA 3:804; MA 1:158, 5:25; SA 2:262, 3:2, 6, 127, 133; A 5:50; PmA 1:194; DhA 179, 227, 230, 237, 274; VbhA 120, 123.

⁸⁶ See Mv 1.7.1-14 = V 1:15-18; **The Great Commission** = SD 11.2.

⁸⁷ See **Āṅgulimāla S** (M 86/2:97-105) = SD 5.11.

⁸⁸ See **Vakkali S** (S 22.87/3:119-124) = SD 8.8.

⁸⁹ See **Sigāl'ovāda S** (D 31/3:180-193.) = SD 4.1.

⁹⁰ See **Dhamma.cakka-pavattana S** (S 56.11/5:420-424) = SD 1.1.

⁹¹ Eg **Aputtaka S 1** (S 3.19/1:89-91) = SD 22.4.

⁹² Eg **Dāru-k, khandha S 1** (S 35.24/4:179-181 = SD 28.5); **Phēṇa, piṇḍa S** (S 22.95/3:140-143) = SD 17.12.

⁹³ Eg **Asīvisōpama S** (S 35.238/4:172-175) = SD 28.1, on the 4 elements & 5 aggregates; **Cha, pāṇā S** (S 35.-247/4:198-201) = SD 19.15, on mindfulness; **Khaluṅka S** (A 8.14/4:190-195) = SD 7.9, on a matter of discipline.

⁹⁴ Eg **Amba, laṭṭhika Rāhul'ovāda S** (M 61/1:414-420) = SD 3.10.

⁹⁵ Eg **Paṁsu, dhovaka S** (A 3.100a/1:253-256) = SD 19.11; **Udakūpama S** (A 7.15/4:11-13) = SD 28.6.

⁹⁶ Eg **Velāma S** (A 9.20/4:392-396) = SD 16.6; **Āṇi S** (S 20.7/2:266 f) = SD 11.13.

⁹⁷ DA 1:67; MA 1:51, 166, 2:110; AA 1:28, 72, 4:78, 83, 5:25; KhpA 79, 85; UA 59, 132, 333; ItA 1:56, 120, 2:192; ThaA 1:36, 194, 2:2; VbhA 132; DhA 185; VbhA 37; VA 1:132, 136. On parables, see further **Myth in Buddhism** = SD 36.1(2-3).

⁹⁸ Nett 164 f; MA 1:24; PmA 449.

⁹⁹ In some cases, such as the parable of **Te, vijja S** (D 13), the figure is given first, followed by the teaching in conventional terms (D 13.19-30/1:241-247) = SD 1.8.

¹⁰⁰ It is advantageous to break off here and go on to read **Dhyana** = SD 8.4(8): Similes of the four dhyanas, if you have not done so. For an intro to *jhāna*, read the whole of SD 8.4.

2.2 IMAGERIES OF OVERCOMING THE HINDRANCES

2.2.1 Imageries of the hindrances. Dhyana, a profoundly blissful meditative consciousness (or altered state of consciousness) is experiential, and is, as such, difficult, if not impossible, to describe, except perhaps through figures. As these imageries have been explained elsewhere,¹⁰¹ we will here instead look at the imageries of overcoming the five mental hindrances (*pañca nīvaraṇa*),¹⁰² as found in **the Te,vijja Sutta** (D 13), in the light of Buddhist myth.¹⁰³

69 (1) THE SUCCESSFUL BUSINESSMAN (overcoming sense-desires). Suppose, maharajah, that a man, taking a loan, invests it in his businesses. His businesses succeed. He repays his old debts and there is a surplus for maintaining his wife. The thought would occur to him,

‘Before, taking a loan, I invested it in my businesses. Now my businesses have succeeded. I have repaid my old debts and there is a surplus for maintaining my wife.’ Because of that he would experience joy and happiness.

70 (2) ONE RECOVERED FROM SICKNESS (overcoming ill will). Suppose, maharajah, that a man falls sick, in pain and seriously ill. He does not enjoy his meals, and there is no strength in his body. As time passes, he recovers from that sickness. He enjoys his meals and there is strength in his body. The thought would occur to him,

‘Before, I was sick. Now, I have recovered from that sickness. I enjoy my meals and there is strength in my body.’ Because of that he would experience joy and happiness.

71 (3) THE PRISONER FREED (overcoming sloth and torpor). Suppose, maharajah, that a man is bound in prison. As time passes, he eventually is released from that bondage, safe and sound, with no loss of property. The thought would occur to him,

‘Before, I was bound in prison. Now, I am released from that bondage, safe and sound, with no loss of my property.’ Because of that he would experience joy and happiness.

72 (4) THE SLAVE LIBERATED (overcoming restless and remorse). Suppose, maharajah, that a man is a slave, subject to others, not subject to himself, unable to go where he likes. As time passes, he eventually is released from that slavery, subject to himself, not subject to others, free, able to go where he likes. The thought would occur to him,

‘Before, I was a slave... Now I am released from that slavery, subject to myself, not subject to others, freed, able to go where I like.’ [73] Because of that he would experience joy and happiness.

73 (5) THE TRAVELLER SAFELY ARRIVED (overcoming doubt). Suppose, maharajah, that a man, carrying money and goods, is journeying on a road through the wilderness. As time passes, he eventually emerges from the wilderness, safe and sound, with no loss of property. The thought would occur to him,

‘Before, carrying money and goods, I was journeying on a road through the wilderness. Now I have emerged from the wilderness, safe and sound, with no loss of my property.’ Because of that he would experience joy and happiness.

74 In the same way, maharajah, when these five hindrances are not abandoned in himself, the monk regards it as *a debt, a sickness, a prison, slavery, a journey on a road through the wilderness*.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰¹ See **Dhyana** = SD 8.4(8): Similes of the four dhyana.

¹⁰² For a detailed study of the 5 mental hindrances, see SD 32; for an overview, see SD 32(1).

¹⁰³ This well known set of positive similes—embedded in the *peyyāla*—for one who has overcome the mental hindrances is also found in **Sāmañña,phala S** (D 2.69-73/171-73), (**Ānanda**) **Subha S** (D 10.2.6/1:207) = SD 40a.-13, **Mahā Assa,pura S** (M 39.14/1:275 f), and **Kandaraka S** (M 51.19/1:346 f). MA 2:318-321 gives a detailed account of each of the 5 similes. See Nyanaponika, *The Five Mental Hindrances*, BPS Wheel 26, 1961:27-34. See also *Nīvaraṇa* = SD 32.1.

¹⁰⁴ MA 2:318-321 explains this section in some detail: see App to **Mahā Assa,pura S** (M 39) = SD 10.13.

75 When he is aware that these five hindrances are abandoned in him, he regards it as *solven-
cy, good health, release from prison, emancipation, a place of security*.¹⁰⁵

(D 13.69-74/1:72 f) = SD 8.10

These five parables—the *successful businessman, the one recovered from sickness, the prisoner freed, the slave liberated, and the traveller safely arrived*—are all images of the urbanization myth, that is, the vicissitudes of a highly organized social system reflective of the Buddha’s times. Scholars speak of the “second urbanization”¹⁰⁶ as occurring in the middle Gangetic plain (and the Oxus river basin and Afghanistan) during the Buddha’s times.¹⁰⁷

2.2.2 The urbanization myth. **Urbanization** begins with a growing migration of the rural population to certain prospective areas, especially those conducive to trade and work, and with proper living conditions (where basic human needs are easily accessible). In India of the Buddha’s time, such areas started off as villages (*gāma*), then grew into market towns (*nigama*), into cities (*nagara*), and then metropolises (*mahā nagara*).¹⁰⁸ **Agriculture** continued and prospered in the countryside, where a surplus supported the urban population. This meant specialization of trades and services, so that there was a vital economic interdependence of supply and demand.

For such a surplus to be possible, there must be a sizeable **labour force** (there were neither sophisticated machines nor mass-production at that time). This vital labour pool was provided by the “slaves and hired labourers” (*dāsa, kamma.kara*), whose duties and rights are mentioned in **the Sigāl’ovāda Sutta** (D 31). Such workers were mostly from the menial class, that is, the shudras (*sudda*), or the outcastes (the “fifth” class). Understandably, they were often an exploited lot, so that the Sutta exhorts their proper treatment.

Money,¹⁰⁹ especially gold and silver (in the form of punch-marked coins),¹¹⁰ was used as common means and measure of exchange, becoming more common than barter trade, even replacing it. With a money economy there were merchants (*vāṇija*)¹¹¹ and merchant bankers (*seṭṭhī*). With the rise of trade, came trade laws, money-lending, and a taxation system. Those who wished to start a business often had to borrow money, and there were legal penalties for failure to repay one’s debts.¹¹² The beginnings of corporate organizations for commerce were evident in the use of such terms as *seṇi* (guild) and *pūga* (corporation).¹¹³

Merchants often had to travel great distances to obtain valued products, or to deliver their goods. They mostly travelled, often in caravans, along established trade routes (*vaṇi-p.patha*), especially southwards and to the northwest.¹¹⁴ Market-towns grew along such routes, making travel and trade even more convenient

¹⁰⁵ *Ānaṇyaṃ yathā ārogyaṃ yathā bandhanā mokkhaṃ yathā bhujissaṃ yathā khem’anta, bhūmim.*

¹⁰⁶ The “first urbanization” was that of Indus Valley civilization, a bronze age culture that matured as the Harappa civilization. While this civilization diffused from west to east, the “second urbanization,” that of the iron-age middle Gangetic plain moved from east to west.

¹⁰⁷ See Chakravarti 1987:16-31; Thapar 2002:137-164.

¹⁰⁸ See Ghosh 1973 ch 3 & Wagle 1966 ch 2.

¹⁰⁹ *P kahāpaṇa*; Skt *kārṣāpaṇa*: see CPD sv for refs & readings. According to M C Joshi, the word is derived from √KRS, to cultivate [drag, plough] and √PAṆ to exchange, barter, bargain (1974:91n).

¹¹⁰ On the different kinds of coins, see **Money and monastics** = SD 4.19(1).

¹¹¹ Sn 614, 651, 1014; J 5:156 (*vaṇija*); Pv 1.106; KhpA 224; SnA 251; PvA 47, 48, 100, 191, 215, 271. On related similes, see *Journal of the Pali Text Soc* 1907:134.

¹¹² **Iṇa S** (A 6.45) says that a poor man who falls into debt is harrassed by his creditors (A 6.45/3:351-354) = SD 37.5.

¹¹³ **Seṇi** means a guild (V 4:226; J 1:267, 314, 4:43; their number was “eighteen” (J 6:22, 427; VbhA 466); *~pamukha*, the guild head (J 2:12 (text *seni-*)). A **pūga** is a corporation, guild (V 2:109, 212, 3:265, 4:30, 78, 83, 226, 252; M 3:48; A 3:300; U 71; Pug 29 (= *seṇi* PugA 210); *~āyatana*, guild’s property (J 6:108 (= *pūga, santaka dhana*, Comy); *~gāmaṇika*, a guild superintendent, guildmaster (A 3:76); *~m-ajjhagata*, gone into a guild (A 1:128 = Pug 29; SnA 377).

¹¹⁴ Mv 6.28.8 = V 1:229; D 16.1.28/2:88; U 88. All these refs mention Pāṭali, gāma (future Pāṭali, putta) as the terminus of the trade route.

and profitable. Yet, where there was wealth, there was danger of losing it, especially on the long and lonely highways, which were also open to the inclemencies of nature.

Slavery was known in the Buddha's time. Any Indian could end up as a slave, possibly through a court decision for having committed a serious crime. Others might be enslaved as war captives or through being trafficked. People were known to put up their freedom as surety for a cash loan or for a gambling stake. Such enslavement, however, were not necessarily permanent. They could buy back their freedom. In some cases, slaves were allowed one chance to try to escape and, if they succeeded, they were accepted as having won their freedom.¹¹⁵

Buddhist texts, such as **the Sigāl'ovāda Sutta** (D 31), exhort that "slaves and hired workers" (*dāsa*, -*kammakara*) should be properly treated by being allocated work according to their strength, provided with food and wages, given medical and health support, occasionally given a share of excellent food, and given timely breaks and holidays.¹¹⁶ In fact, compared to hired help (*kamma,kara*), slaves (*dāsa*) might actually be better treated, especially when they were regarded as a part of the family that owned them. Even then, the lot of slave was surely not better off than the free person, and they definitely had to work harder than the free, and even to suffer various hardships.¹¹⁷

2.3 THE SMALL PICTURE AND THE BIG PICTURE. It is clear from all this that the figures and parables used by the Buddha reflect the realities of the day. The use of such a language is for the benefit of the listener or audience, by way of clarifying the teaching, looking at it from another angle for a fuller picture. The figure may be a single imagery, like that of *a mother and her only child* in **the Karaṇīya Metta Sutta** (Sn 1.8 = Khp 9).¹¹⁸ Often the figures would be in the form of a set of disparate parables, such as those of the five mental hindrances, as given in **the Te,vijja Sutta** (D 13) [2.2], or of the four dhyanas, as given in such discourses as **the Sāmañña,phala Sutta** (D 2).¹¹⁹ Sometimes, a set of parables refers to *the same topic*, such as the ten relating to how sensual pleasures provide little gratification, given by the Buddha in **the Alagaddûpama Sutta** (M 22).¹²⁰

Sometimes, the parables form a cohesive set, usually alluding to *a familiar object*, such as a chariot (that is, parts of it), as in **the Abhaya Rāja,kumāra Sutta** (M 58),¹²¹ or alluding to *an occupation*, such as the cow-herding parables (skills in caring for cows) of **the Mahā Gopālaka Sutta** (M 33).¹²² Such parables are good examples of the Buddha as one having the knowledge of the individual (*puggal'aññū*).¹²³ In other words, he is able to clearly teach the Dharma, *both in fact and in figure*, in terms of what the listener is familiar with. In short, using a smaller picture (that of the listener) or *conventional* reality, the Buddha shows him the bigger picture of *true* reality.

The Buddha's parables are often recorded as being introduced by the words, "**This parable [simile] of mine has been made up for the sake of instructing**" (*upamā kho me ayam, ...katā atthassa viññāpanāya*), as found in these suttas:¹²⁴

	<u>Parable given by</u>	
Dvedha Vitakka Sutta (M 19.26/1:118)	the Buddha	to the monks;
Nivāpa Sutta (M 25.7/1:155)	the Buddha	to the monks;
Sunakkhatta Sutta (M 105.27/2:260)	the Buddha	to Sunakkhatta;
Tissa Sutta (S 22.83/3:108 f)	the Buddha	the monk Tissa;
Āsīvisôpama Sutta (S 35.238/4:174 f)	the Buddha	to the monks;
Kimsuka Sutta (S 35.245/4:194)	the Buddha	to a monk;

¹¹⁵ Saran 1957:24-26.

¹¹⁶ D 31.32-33/3:191 = SD 4.1.

¹¹⁷ D N Chanana, *Slavery in Ancient India*, Delhi: People's Publishing House, 1960:58, 162.

¹¹⁸ Sn 150/p26 = Khp 9.7/8 = SD 38.3.

¹¹⁹ D 2.77-84/2:73-75 = SD 8.10. See **Dhyana** = SD 8.4(5).

¹²⁰ M 33.4e/1:131 = SD 3.13.

¹²¹ M 58.10/1:395 = SD 7.12.

¹²² M 33.15-16/1:222 = SD 52.6.

¹²³ See **Dhamm'aññū S** (A 7.64.9/4:116 f) = SD 30.10.

¹²⁴ Cf ThaA 3:36; J 1:394.

Janapada Kalyāṇī Sutta (S 47.20/5:170)	the Buddha	to the monks;
Nandī Sota Sutta (It 4.1.10/114)	the Buddha	to the monks;
Nandak’ovāda Sutta (M 146.12/3:275, 21/3:277)	the monk Nandaka	to the nuns.

Following the Buddha, other monastic and lay teachers, too, would often use parables in their teachings. A stock passage they use runs thus, “**Here, some wise people understand the meaning [purpose] of what is said through my parable**” (*upamāya m’idh’ekacce* [or *p’idh’ekacce*] *viññū purisā bhāsitassa attham ājānanti*), as found in the following suttas:

	<u>Parable(s) given by</u> ¹²⁵	
Pāyāsi Sutta (D 23.9/2:324, 13/2:330, 17/2:334, 19/2:337, 21/2:339, 23/2:342, 25/347, 27/2:348, 29/2:349)	Kumāra Kassapa	to the rajah Pāyāsi;
Ratha,vinīta Sutta (M 24.13b/1:148)	Puṇṇa Mantāni,putta	to Sāriputta;
Mahā Vedalla Sutta (M 43.22/1:295)	Sāriputta	to Mahā Koṭṭhita;
Upāli Sutta (M 56.26/1:384)	The householder Upāli	to Nigaṇṭha Nāta,putta;
Sandaka Sutta (M 76.52b/1:523)	Ānanda	to wanderer Sandaka; ¹²⁶
Anuruddha Sutta (M 127.16/3:151)	Anuruddha	to Abhiya Kaccāna;
Naḷakalāpī Sutta (S 12.67/2:114)	Sāriputta	to Mahā Koṭṭhita;
Saññojana Sutta (S 41.1/4:282)	Citta the householder	to the monks;
Uttara Vipatti Sutta (A 8.8.6/4:163)	Uttara	to deva Vessavaṇa;
Uttiya Sutta (A 10.95.4/5:194)	Ānanda	to the wanderer Uttayi;
Soṇaka Jātaka (J 529/*5:255) (verse) ¹²⁷	a pratyeka buddha ¹²⁸	to the rajah Arindama;
Mahā Narada Kassapa Jātaka (J 544/6:234)	princess Rujā	to her father king Aṅgati.

The **Yamaka Sutta** (S 22.85) records a rare parable used by Sāriputta to teach the monk Yamaka, where he says, “In that case, avuso Yamaka, I will use a parable here to so that you will know its meaning better” (*tena hāvuso yamaka upamaṃ te karissāmi etass’eva atthassa bhiyyoso, mattāya ñāṇāya*).¹²⁹

3 A general theory of Buddhist myth¹³⁰

3.1 PHRASES AND PARABLES

3.1.1 Dharma-based myths. A general theory of Buddhist myth is “Dharma-based” (*dhammādhiṭṭhāna*). Here *dhamma* has two important senses: (1) nature itself or the nature of things, and (2) the Buddha’s teaching. A general theory of Buddhist myth identifies and explains the truths and teachings expressed by way of *words and figures* that directly points to a higher or more universal meaning or reality. Such expressions are centred around *ideas* or *values*, and may be in the form of parables, similes or metaphors, allegories, proverbs, maxims and aphorisms, or even very short stories and fables, such as those of the Jātakas. In the case of the Jātakas [3.4.4], however, the longer stories, would better be understood under the specific theory of Buddhist myth, which is person-centred, as they work better as stories.

While **the specific theory** deals with the “stage” on which a myth occurs—its mechanics—is nature itself, in which the myth *happens* and what the myth is *about*. **The general theory** explains and explores

¹²⁵ Unless otherwise stated, the names here refer to monastics.

¹²⁶ Cf M 99.24/2:207.

¹²⁷ Cf **Darī, mukha J** (J 378/3:238-246); Mvst 3:450.

¹²⁸ “I will give a parable. | Listen, Arindama, | by means of my parable here, some | wise men here understand| the meaning” (*upamaṃ te karissāmi | taṃ suṇohi arindama | upamāya m’idh’ekacce | attham jānanti paṇḍitā* (J 529/*5:255)).

¹²⁹ S 22.85/3:1112 = SD 12.12.

¹³⁰ After 13 Nov 2011, I have revised the two theories of Buddhist myth, which essentially takes the “general theory” as being Dharma-based, centering around ideas, while the “specific theory” as being person-based (which is the reverse of the approach used before that time). Otherwise, the main drift of the two theories remains the same.

what the myth is *really* about, that is, its dynamics. This is its teaching or moral, its dharma as a universal truth, which may be negative, such as greed, hate, delusion or fear, or positive, such as charity, love, wisdom, and courage.

We have mentioned that the Buddha's two ways of instructing, namely, the person-based teaching (*puggalādhiṭṭhāna*) and the Dharma-based teaching (*dharmādhiṭṭhāna*), are the bases for the nature of myth in early Buddhism [1.10]. While the person-based teaching is the basis for *a specific or special theory of myth*, the Dharma-based teaching is the basis for *a general theory of myth*. We will here first examine the latter, that is, **a general theory of Buddhist myth**, and the specific theory, later [4].

The stage of Dharma-base myth is dramatized only by words and actions, with neither speaker nor actor. They present an array of words, inspiring phrases, even moving anecdotes, that easily crystallize into allusions, sayings, proverbs, similes and metaphors. We will now examine some of these key terms.

3.1.2 Buddhist parables. From the survey of how figurative language is used in the early Buddhist texts, such as the parables mentioned above [2.3], it is clear that we need to see “parable” in a broader sense. The word for “parable” in the Pali texts is *upamā*, which *A Critical Pali Dictionary* (CPD) defines as “simile; example,” and notes under its rhetorical usage as meaning “the resemblance between the subject of comparison and the comparison adduced.”¹³¹

Cone's *A Dictionary of Pali* (DP) defines *upamā* as “comparison, similarity, likeness; object of comparison; simile; exemplification; parable,” and *nirupama* or *nirūpama* as “incomparable.” The drift of these definitions are also reflected in the etymology of “parable,” from the Greek, *parabolē*, “juxtaposition, comparison, parable.”

The Buddhist usage of parable can also be retrieved from the Oxford English Dictionary (OED), which gives the following

Definitions of “parable”

1 [Archaic, earliest recorded 1325.] A comparison, a similitude; any saying or narration in which something is expressed in terms of something else; an allegory, an apologue. Also vaguely extended (chiefly after Heb[rew] or other oriental words so rendered) to any kind of enigmatical, mystical, or dark saying, and to proverbs, maxims, or ancient saws, capable of application to cases as they occur.

2 A fictitious narrative or allegory (usually something that might naturally occur), by which moral or spiritual relations are typically figured or set forth, as the parables of the New Testament.¹³² (Now the usual sense.)

3 (Dialectal) Something that may be pointed to as an example or illustration (to follow or to avoid). (OED 2nd ed, 1989; digital ver 3.1)

We can see that definitions 1 and 3 are related to the Buddhist notion of “parable.” Its older senses, in other words, were much broader until it was overshadowed by its predominantly biblical application. It is just a matter of resurrecting *the broader meaning* for the sake of a better understanding of the Buddhist figure.

The latitude of the Buddhist parable is further noted by the *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics* (ERE). Although much of this classic is dated, it contains some useful definitions that are worth our renewed attention. Its two entries on “Parable” are such examples.¹³³

3.2 SIMILE AND METAPHOR. As a figure of speech, a parable is, in significant ways, the assertion of similarity between an *imagined* object or conception and some *concrete* object, action, or scene. When

¹³¹ Citing the Subodhālaṅkara (tr G E Fryer, *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* 44:99).

¹³² The is growing scholarship and acceptance on both sides that Christian parables have been derived directly from Buddhism: see eg Rudolf Seydel, *The Gospel of Jesus in relation to the Buddha Legend* (1882) & *The Buddha Legend and the Life of Jesus* (1897); Duncan McDerret, *The Bible and the Buddhist* (Sardini, Bornato [Italy] 2001). See further http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Buddhism_and_Christianity

¹³³ Edward E Nourse, “Parable (Introductory and Biblical)—1 Definition and general use,” ERE 9:628 & J A MacCulloch, “Parable (ethnic),” ERE 9:631 f. The following section is mainly based on Nourse and MacCulloch.

comparison is very simple—eg, “that man is like a lion”—it is called a **simile**. In a simile, the likeness is openly asserted (by “as” or “like,” etc). This is the most common figure we find in the Pali texts [2.3].

A **simile** may also be extended in various ways. Such a simile is often an imagery reflecting the moral or significance of the story. The best known example of such an extended simile is that of *the land-sighting bird*, as recorded in **the Kevaḍḍha Sutta** [1.5], in reference to one who, in quest of self-knowledge, seeks the answer outside of himself instead of looking within where the answer lies.¹³⁴

When the word denoting the comparison (“as” or “like”) is omitted, the figure is called a **metaphor**—for example, “the man is a lion,” or more commonly in Pali, *nara,sīha*, “the man-lion or lion of a man.”¹³⁵ Other metaphors for the Buddha include “the sun of a man” (*nar’ādicca*) (Ap 547.17/2:509), and “the bull of a man, or man-bull” (*nar’āsabha*¹³⁶ or *puris’āsabha*¹³⁷).

A metaphor is *more complete* when the subject and the predicate are both metaphors. The best known example of this is the parable of the water-snake, as found in **the Alagaddûpama Sutta** (M 22), where the Buddha compares the wrong grasp of the Dharma (for the sake of one-upmanship and argumentation) to the misholding of a snake by the tail, thus:

Suppose a man needing a water-snake, looking for a water-snake, wandering in search of a water-snake, sees a large water-snake and grasps its coils or its tail. It would turn back and bite his hand or his arm or one of his limbs, and because of that he would suffer death or deadly pain.

M 33.10/1:133 f = SD 3.13

The right grasp of the Dharma (for the sake of liberation) is like holding the snake by its neck, so that it is almost impossible for it to sting us.¹³⁸

3.3 ALLEGORY. A sustained metaphor, that is, an extended statement in which the significant terms all stand for something else, is an **allegory**.¹³⁹ There are important allegories in the early Buddhist texts, but they are more frequent in later forms of Buddhism, such as the various Mahāyāna Bodhisattvas, who are embodiments (or hypostases) of the Buddha’s qualities, used as meditation objects and as inspirations for daily practice, not for worshipping [6.2.4; 7.3].

One famous example of a simple allegory is when king Mahā Sudassana, as recorded in **the Mahā Sudassana Sutta** (D 17), at the entrance to the meditation hall, exclaims, “Stop, sensual thought! Stop, hateful thought! Stop, violent thought! Only this far, sensual thought! Only this far, hateful thought! Only this far, violent thought!”¹⁴⁰

The best known of the early Buddhist allegories usually allude to the worldly manifestation of the three great evils, that is, decay, disease and death (the 3 D’s of life), by way of the well known four “sights” (*nimitta*). [4.3.4]

More often, however, we see the allegory of evil and badness, that is, personified as Māra.¹⁴¹ We have, for example, the following allegorical allusions:

¹³⁴ D 11.85/1:222 f = SD 1.7.

¹³⁵ Kvu 554; Nett 188; ApA 94; J 1:89.

¹³⁶ Sn 684, 696; Ap 1.68/1:20, 1.97/1:20, 1.100/1:22; B 1.72/5, 3.4/16.

¹³⁷ Ap 540.7/2:493; Nm 1:178.

¹³⁸ M 33.11/1:135 = SD 3.13.

¹³⁹ The Encyclopaedia of Buddhism entry on “Allegories” sadly and summarily dismisses them as non-existent in the Theravāda texts, as “[t]he well-known stories of the previous lives of the Buddha and of persona connected with him...are certainly not myths in the eyes of the Buddhists throughout the centuries.” (Ency BSm 1:394).

¹⁴⁰ *Ṭiṭṭha, kāma,vitakka, ṭiṭṭha, vyāpāda,vitakka, ṭiṭṭha, vihiṃsā,vitakka. Ettāvātā, kāma,vitakka, ettāvātā, vyāpāda,vitakka, ettāvātā, vihiṃsā,vitakkā ti* (D 17.2.2/2:186) = SD 36.12.

¹⁴¹ For a separate study, see **Māra** = SD 61.3. Here, as throughout my Buddhist writings, except where the context demands otherwise, I have used the words “evil” and “bad” interchangeably, as synonyms, *in the Buddhist sense* of non-radical evil: see **Beyond good and evil** = SD 18.7(3): Buddhism and evil.

Those who will restrain their mind, which fares far away, wandering alone, bodyless, lying in a cave (that is, the heart), will be freed from Māra's fetters. (Dh 37; cf 350, U 33, 46)

One should see the world as a bubble, as a mirage; who thus looks on the world, Māra sees him not. (Dh 170; cf U 61)

The legendary life of the Buddha has many allegories, such as Māra's assaults on the Bodhisattva as he sits under the Bodhi tree just before his awakening.¹⁴² In the **Padhāna Sutta** (Sn 3.2), the Buddha declares that he knows "Māra's army" (*māra, senā*):

Sensual pleasures are your first army; the second is discontent;
the third, hunger-and-thirst, the fourth is called craving. (Sn 436)

Your fifth is sloth-and-torpor; the sixth, called fear.
Your seventh is doubt; your eighth, scorn-and-stubbornness; (Sn 437)

gain, reputation, honour, and fame falsely gained,
and whoever praises himself and disparages others— (Sn 438)

this, Namuci [who frees not], is your army, the strike-force of
Kaṇha [the dark one].

One who is not brave conquers it not, but having conquered it
one gains happiness. (Sn 439)

The **Māra Dhītu Sutta** (S 4.25) tells us of Māra's three daughters, aptly named Tanhā (Craving), Arati (Discontent) and Ragā (Lusting). The story goes that soon after the Buddha's awakening, Māra sits down cross-legged, resigned and despondent, "silent, dismayed, his shoulders drooping, hanging his head, glum, unable to speak [at a loss for words]." Māra's daughters then assume the form of a hundred women in six successive forms, each at a different stage of life, from being a maiden to old women.¹⁴³ The Buddha remains unmoved, and they all turn into old hags.¹⁴⁴

Some traditional Buddhists regard Māra, his daughters, and such figures as real living beings. Māra's daughters, however, are hardly mentioned anywhere else. The other extreme view is to *deny* their existence altogether. The "middle way" is to take them as *mythical figures* in that they have a psychological reality, representing our various negative emotions, especially the three unwholesome roots, whose powers over us are very real. Such allegories actually depict us as being dominated or directed by each of these negative emotions in turn. Understanding the import of such imageries, we are better empowered to rise above them.¹⁴⁵

3.4 PROVERBS

3.4.1 Dhammapada proverbs. A **proverb** is a simple, concrete saying popularly known and repeated, expressing a practical or universal truth, often metaphorically. The Buddha's proverbs are found in numerous places in the ancient texts, especially in the **Dhammapada**, an anthology of pithy sayings covering a wide range of topics, on human nature and liberation. The proverbs of the Dhammapada include such gems as:

Although reciting numerous texts, a man, careless, not acting accordingly,
is like a cowherd counting the cows of others: he has not share of recluseship. (Dh 19)

¹⁴² On the Buddha's legendary life, see **Buddha as a myth** = SD 36.2; on the personification of evil, see **Māra** = SD 36.3.

¹⁴³ These are: maidens, women who have not had babies, those who have had babies once, those who have had babies twice, middle-aged women, and old women.

¹⁴⁴ S 4.25/1:125-127 = SD 36.6; cf A 5:46; U 3; J 1:78 f, 469; DhA 3:15 f.

¹⁴⁵ See **Māra Dhītu S** (S 4.25/1:125-127) = SD 36.6(2) on a psychological explanation.

The trembling, fickle mind, hard to guard, hard to restrain,
the wise makes straight just as a fletcher straightens an arrow. (Dh 33)

The fragrance of flowers goes not against the wind,
nor do the smell of sandalwood nor tagara incense nor jasmine;
but the fragrance of the good goes against the wind,
the true man perfumes all the quarters. (Dh 54)

If one lives not finding another better or the same as self,
one should certainly live alone—there is not fellowship with a fool. (Dh 61)

Irrigators lead the waters; fletchers bend out an arrow,
carpenters bend wood—the wise tame themselves. (Dh 80)

One might conquer a thousand men a thousand times in battles,
but if he conquers but one—himself—he is truly the greatest battle conqueror. (Dh 103)

By one alone is evil done, by the self is one defiled;
by oneself is evil not done, by the self is one purified.
Purity and impurity are within oneself. No one may purify another. (Dh 165)

By non-anger should one conquer anger, one should conquer bad by good.
One should conquer miserliness by giving, and the liar by truth. (Dh 223)

3.4.2 Primacy of the Dharma. The main theme in this selection of Dhammapada proverbs is clearly *self-reliance, self-empowerment, and self-liberation*. Such sayings serve to remind us of the immanence of the Dharma which, although discovered and declared by the Buddha, is not dependent on his personal presence. The primacy of the Dharmas as truth and teaching is promulgated almost immediately after the Buddha's awakening, and recorded in **the Gārava Sutta** (S 6.2), where the Buddha declares the Dharma as being even above him, upon which he himself “dwell in dependence on,” that is to say, *it is the Dharma that makes the Buddha*. Furthermore, in the Buddha's last instructions, as recorded in **the Mahā,parinibbāna Sutta** (D 16), we hear the same admonition from him:

“Ānanda, it may be that you would think:

‘Gone is the Teacher's word! We have no teacher.’

It should not be seen thus, Ānanda, for **the Dharma-Vinaya [the Teaching and the Discipline] that I have taught and explained to you, will, at my passing, be your teacher.**”

(D 16.6.1/2:154) = SD 9

Therefore, Ānanda, you should **live as islands unto yourselves**,¹⁴⁶ being your own refuge,
with no one else as your refuge, with the Dharma as an island,¹⁴⁷ with the Dharma as your refuge,
with no other refuge. (D 16.2.26/2:100 f)¹⁴⁸

The “island” (P *dīpa*; Skt *dvīpa*)¹⁴⁹ is a figure for *emotional independence*,¹⁵⁰ resulting from a healthy meditation practice (especially the four satipatthanas),¹⁵¹ and the clear perception of impermanence.¹⁵²

¹⁴⁶ P *atta,dīpa*, Skt *ātma,dvīpa*. See S:B 1921 n143.

¹⁴⁷ “The Dharma as an island,” P *dhamma.dīpa*, Skt *dharma,dvīpa*.

¹⁴⁸ D 16.2.26/2:100 f = 26.1/3:58, 26.27/77 & SD 9 Intro (6). See also D 16.2.26.27/77; S 22.43/3:42, 47.9/5:154, 47.13/5:163, 17.14/5:164)

¹⁴⁹ See **Mahā,parinibbāna S** (D 16) = SD 9(6).

¹⁵⁰ See **Emotional independence** = SD 40a.8.

These are the hallmarks of a “true individual” (*sappurisa*), a term that can refer to either a spiritually wholesome lay person or any of the saints.¹⁵³ All this points to the possibility and necessity of self-awakening.

Elsewhere we can see more mundane proverbs, such as “to see a crocodile in tea-cup,” found in **the Sāmā,vaṭī Vatthu** (the Sāmā,vaṭī story or the Udena cycle, DhA 2.1.5/1:201) and **the Samudda Vāṇija Jātaka** (J 466/4:165). Another such proverb is “a crane’s dream come true,” meaning that some apparently impossible dream might just come true, is found in **the Āsaṅka Jātaka** (J 380/3:252).

3.4.3 Maxim and aphorism. A proverb that describes *a basic rule of conduct or a state of reality* is known as a *maxim*. Although the suttas are full of long and repetitive passages detailing instructions on moral virtue, on mental concentration and liberating wisdom, there are also numerous maxims peppered throughout the ancient texts. These maxims can be one-liners or even verses, serving as keys to the more elaborate teachings, so that they are well-remembered, serving to inspire us to practise properly and effectively.

Here are some examples of maxims from **the Dhammapada**:

Long is the night to the wake. Long is a yojana [a league] to the weary.
Long is samsara [the round of lives] for the foolish who understands not the true Dharma.
(Dh 60)

Non-recitation is the taint of mantras. Non-exertion is the taint in a home.
Idleness [Indolence] is the taint of beauty. Heedlessness is the taint of a minder.¹⁵⁴ (Dh 241)

Like a maxim, an **aphorism**, too, is pithy, and can be a one-liner or a verse. In fact, an aphorism is a proverb that is distinguished by *its particularly good phrasing*. In reality, there is really no important difference between the two. Some abridged examples are as follows:

Like a bee that takes only nectar from a flower without harming its smell or colour,
so should a sage wander through a village. (Dh 49)

A well-spoken word without example is like a lovely flower that is scentless. (Dh 51)

Evil fills a person, like a water-jar is filled, drop by drop. (Dh 121)
The good gain merit as a water-jar is filled, drop by drop. (Dh 122)

If one’s hand has no wound, one may carry poison in it. (Dh 124)

Hunger is the worst of diseases. (Dh 203)

Health is the greatest gain; contentment is the greatest wealth;
the trusted are the best relatives; nirvana is the highest bliss. (Dh 204)

The gift of truth [the Dharma] surpasses all giving. (Dh 354)

Other examples are Dh 47, 128, 219-220.

Proverbs—pithy sayings embodying general truths—frequently imply *comparison*, often explicitly, such as the following Dhammapada verses:

Whatever a foe may do to a foe, or even one hateful to another,

¹⁵¹ See **Satipaṭṭhāna S** (M 10/1:55-63) = SD 13.3.

¹⁵² See **(Anicca) Cakkhu S** (S 25.1/3:225) = SD 16.7.

¹⁵³ On the true individual (*sappurisa*), see **Sappurisa S** (M 113/3:37-45) = SD 23.7.

¹⁵⁴ *Pamādo rakkhato malāṃ.*

a misdirected mind would bring one greater harm. (Dh 42)

Even if a fool associates with the learned all life long,
he does not know the Dharma [the truth], just as a spoon the soup's taste. (Dh 64)

Even if the wise associates with the learned for but a moment,
he knows the Dharma [the truth], just as the tongue the soup's taste. (Dh 65)

Easily seen are the faults of others, but hard to see are one's own.
Like chaff, one winnows others' faults, but one's own faults,
one hides like a crafty gambler hides an unlucky throw of dice. (Dh 252)

If by giving up a small happiness, one might see abundant happiness,
the wise, seeing the abundant happiness, would give up the small happiness. (Dh 290)

More often, however, the comparison is more implicit, as evinced in these Dhammapada verses:

Whether in a village or the forest, whether in the lowlands or the highlands,
wherever the arhats [worthy saints] live, that place is delightful. (Dh 98)

The irrigators lead water; fletchers bend out arrows;
carpenters bend wood; those true to their vows tame themselves. (Dh 145)

The self is the master of the self; for, who else could the master be?
With a self well-tamed, indeed, one gains a master that is hard to find. (Dh 160; cf 380)¹⁵⁵

Let go of the front, let go of the back; let go of the middle,
having gone to life's far shore.
With a free mind in every way, you return not again to birth and decay. (Dh 348)

Bail out this boat, o monk! Bailed out, it will go lightly for you.
Having cut off lust and hate, then you will go to nirvana. (Dh 369)

The concrete images suggested in such proverbs are *mentally* compared with the thought expressed, making it more real or impressive. Or, when we actually see those images in palpable form, we are able to evoke those qualities or virtues by way of reflection.

3.4.4 The Jātaka as fable. If the action, in addition to being *imagined* or *supernatural* (talking animals, divinities, etc), such as the numerous **Jātaka** or “birth stories,”¹⁵⁶ it is usually called a **fable** or moral apologue. The Jatakas seem to have originally totalled 550,¹⁵⁷ but only 547 (based on the some 2500

¹⁵⁵ See **Ādhipateyya S** (A 3.40) = SD 27.3 (3.1); also **Spiritual friendship**= SD 34.1(5.2).

¹⁵⁶ The full stories are told in the comy (JA), based on the verses and small sections of prose (J), which are canonical: the PTS ed of text and comy are in 6 vols: **Stories of the Buddha's Former Births** (J:C), ed E B Cowell with various translators. This tr however is too free to be useful for a Pali student, and awaits a new critical tr. Freely accessible at <http://www.sacred-texts.com/bud/index.htm>. The long intro (Nidāna,kathā) is the most important comy source on the Buddha legend, tr N A Jayawickrama, **Story of Gotama Buddha**, Pali Text Soc, 1990. See **Ariya Pariyesanā S** (M 261/1:160-175) = SD 1.11(1) & Hinüber 1996: §316.

¹⁵⁷ Culla,niddesa and comys actually mention only “500 Jātakas” (*pañca,jātaka,satāni*, Nc:Be 164; VA 1:28; AA 3:6; DhsA 26), but as noted by K R Norman, this “is probably nothing more than a ‘round number,’ and should not be taken as evidence that at the time of the composition of that text the Jātaka collection was smaller than we possess now.” (1983:79 n316). The SE Asian Buddhists also have their own set of 50 prob apocryphal Jātakas known as **Paṇṇāsa** (or **Paññāsa**) **Jātaka**.

verses, almost all canonical) are found in the Jātaka Aṭṭhakathā (Jātaka Commentary). Alternative versions of some of the longer Jātaka stories are found in **the Cariyā,piṭaka**.¹⁵⁸ A number of individual Jātakas are found scattered in the suttas, of which the best known are

- **the Velāma Jātaka,** in **the Velāma Sutta** (A 9.20.4-5/4:393-396) = SD 16.6; and
- **the Mahā Govinda Jātaka,** in **the Mahā Govinda Sutta** (D 19.29-60/2:230-251) = SD 70.6.

The *canonical Jātaka verses* are arranged more or less incrementally, and recount the Buddha's past lives, illustrating his various virtues and perfections. Of these commentarial stories, some 115 centre around animals (most of whom are capable of human speech) and nearly 40 involve supernatural beings. The Jātaka commentary gives the stories in *prose*, providing the context for the *verses*, and it is these stories that are of interest to folklorists.¹⁵⁹

Many of the stories and motifs found in the Jātaka, such as the rabbit in the moon (**the Sasa Jātaka, J 316**), are found in numerous other languages and media. Stories such as

- | | | |
|--|---------------------------|-------------------------------|
| • the crab and the crane | Baka Jātaka | J 38/1:220-224, |
| • the monkey and the crocodile | Vana-r-inda Jātaka | J 57/1:278-280, |
| • the turtle who couldn't stop talking | Kacchapa Jātaka | J 215/2:175-178, and |
| • the hare and the lion (the sky is falling) | Daddabha Jātaka | J 322/3:74-78. ¹⁶⁰ |

are also found in the Pañca,tantra, a Sanskrit classic in Machiavellianism (technically known as *nīti,śāstra*, "political treatise"), which have widely influenced world literature.¹⁶¹ Many of the stories and motifs are translations from the Pali, but others are derived from popular (vernacular) oral traditions prior to the Pali compositions.¹⁶²

Many of the Jātaka stories appear to be unbuddhist¹⁶³ or unbuddhist in origin. Whatever Buddhist qualities they possess are found in the prose story, and arise from the fact that *the hero is the Bodhisattva*. As Norman has observed, "a number of verses, particularly those in the early *nipātas* (numerical chapters), are intended to teach worldly wisdom (*nīti*), and refer to animal fables and fairy stories in the Sanskrit Pañcatantra and Hitopadeśa."¹⁶⁴

The Jātakas that have come down to us generally follow a fixed structure. It opens with an incident in the "present" (*paccuppanna,vatthu*), on account of which the Buddha relates an event from one of his past lives (*atīta,vatthu*). The verses (*gāthā*) are usually embedded in this past story, but are sometimes found in the present story. Then follows the word commentary to the verses (*veyyakāraṇa*), and, finally, the connection (*samodhāna*), where the actors in the past story are identified with those connected with the Bud-

¹⁵⁸ **Cariyā Piṭaka** (C), the 15th and last book of the Khuddaka Nikāya (Kh), comprises 35 Jātaka-like stories in 3 chapters (*vagga*), illustrating the 10 perfections (*pāramī*). Of the 35 accounts, 32 can be directly related to the Jātaka collection; another, **Mahā Govinda C** (C 1.5), cf Mahā Govinda S (D 19/2:220-251) = SD 70.6; another, **Mahā Loma,haṃsa C** (C 3.15), cf Mahā Sīha,nāda S (also titled Loma,haṃsa Pariyāya (M 12/1:68-83) = SD 49.1: see C:H viii f. On C, see Norman 1983b:94- f.

¹⁵⁹ **Hinüber** thinks that the Jātaka collection (the stories) did not yet exist when the Abhidhamma comys were composed: see 1996:§321. **Norman** notes that "for the most part, the commentator upon the Jātaka collection was making use of older materials, some of it already associated with particular verses, when he composed his stories." (1983b:78). This view is supported by the close parallels between some of the Jātakas and those found in the Buddhist Skt texts (see Mvst:J 2:x f).

¹⁶⁰ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Sky_Is_Falling_%28fable%29#cite_note-18.

¹⁶¹ Jacobs 1888: lviii Intro: "What, the reader will exclaim, 'the first literary link [1570] between India and England, between Buddhism and Christendom, written in racy Elizabethan with vivacious dialogue, and something distinctly resembling a plot'" J P Laut, "Jātaka," in *Enzyklopädie de Märchens* Band 7, Lfg 2/3 1993:498-507. See also Ramesh Krishnamurthy, "Indian tradition," in Mona Baker (ed), *Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation Studies*, 1998:467.

¹⁶² Grant L Voth, "Indian Stories," *The History of World Literature*, Chantilly, VA, 2007.

¹⁶³ See eg the well known **Sasa J** (J 316), on how the otter and the jackal obtain their "gifts" to be made on the precept day (J 316/3:51-56).

¹⁶⁴ Norman 1983b:79. Some of these stories are also found in Aesop's fables and other European literature. On their relationships, see eg Winternitz, *History of Indian Literature* 2, Calcutta, 1933:126.

dha himself.¹⁶⁵ All these stories have their morals: if the stories are fabulous, they would generally point to *worldly virtues* like kindness, generosity, patience, courage and so on. Many of them, especially the longer ones, inspire us to emulate the Bodhisattva's virtues.

It is clear from these fables that they are also *parables*, as they involve natural and historical events, such as those Jātaka stories centering around the Bodhisattva in the distant past. The word *jātaka*, after all, means “birth-story.” The early Buddhists clearly take all such fables as referring to possible states and events. Such stories are characteristically *fabulous* (of the nature of a fable or myth; legendary), that is, they are unlikely, even impossible, to happen in daily life, but they express everyday qualities reflecting universal values and goodness.

Some Jātakas may appear to be fantastic or unnatural, but read as literature, didactic stories and parables, they are clearly meant *partly to entertain, but mostly to educate*. A parable can appear as a terse saying or proverb, or as an elaborate Jātaka story. A parable is especially enjoyable and instructive if we are able to visualize their imageries; for, we are likely to remember better what we see, especially with the mind's eye. As a generic term, parables provide us with a rich array of entertaining and educating tools.

4 A specific theory of Buddhist myth

4.1 DHARMA, COSMOLOGY AND SOCIETY

4.1.1 Person-based myths. Who or what is the “**person**” (*puggala*) in “person-based teaching”? We have discussed in detail the nature of a “person” elsewhere (SD 29.6b). Here, we take “person” to mean “any conscious being capable of some kind of independent action.”¹⁶⁶ This “person” is a living, often-enough self-aware being, capable of communicating with others. When applied to myths, the concept of a “person” also covers *non-humans*, such as animals, demons, deities, divine beings, and technically otherwise *inanimate forces*, such as the wind or a tree, when they are represented as capable to speaking or communicating—in other words, the actors of a myth.

While a person-based myth gives accounts of truth and reality by depicting a *microcosm* of a person, that is, as an individual being, involved in a story, even a cosmic drama, a Dharma-based myth takes a broader sweep relating events of a more *universal* or *cosmic* nature, expressing such ideas by way of words, sayings, or even a short story [3.1.1]. The actors of person-based narratives conduct themselves in a manner that affects situations bigger than themselves, such as their community, society, or even the cosmos.

The best known of the person-based narratives, involving the evolution of our universe and society, are those depicted in **the Aggañña Sutta** (D 27)¹⁶⁷ [4.1.2] and **the Cakka,vatti Sīha,nāda Sutta** (D 26)¹⁶⁸ [4.1.3]. While the Aggañña Sutta is *retrospective*, looking to the past and speaks of the origins, or rather the re-evolution of the universe and society, the Cakka,vatti Sīha,nāda Sutta is *prospective*, looking to the future, even in a prophetic tone, warning how poor governance and personal weakness can lead to moral decline.

4.1.2 The Aggañña Sutta (D 27) is “an extended satire on brahminical ideas, full of parody and puns,” but is a serious discourse which states that the class system of the Buddha's times¹⁶⁹ was really a human invention that started off as a division of labour, but degenerated into class exploitation by the brahmins who manufactured and monopolized religious texts, rituals and truths. The Aggañña Sutta gives in detail what this “foremost knowledge” (*aggañña*), especially that of the “beginning of things.”

However, it is clear that the Aggañña Sutta narrative is Buddhist mythology, and mythology was a common didactic tool in ancient societies. As **Sujato** notes,

¹⁶⁵ See further Norman 1983b:78.

¹⁶⁶ See **The person in Buddhism** = SD 29.6b.

¹⁶⁷ D 27/3:80-97 = SD 3.4.

¹⁶⁸ D 26/3:58-79 = SD 36.10.

¹⁶⁹ R Gombrich, *Theravāda Buddhism: A social history from Benares to Colombo*, 1988:85. See also **Aggañña S** (D 27) = SD 2.19(5).

...there is some history in myth; and inevitably, there is some myth in history. Everyone who writes about history—myself included—has some point of view, some agenda to push. Fact & fable, science & superstition, do not exist in two entirely separate domains. They are complementary ways of seeing the world, and have much to learn from each other. However, it is obvious that the main purpose of myth is not to preserve historical facts. As religious stories, myths deal with moral and spiritual truths, and, importantly, how these truths are lived out in a community. In this essay, then, we should look at the way these stories fulfill classic functions of myth, such as:

- 1) authorizing customs and rituals;
- 2) providing ethical guidelines;
- 3) describing a just society;
- 4) defining a religion in its religious and cultural context;
- 5) reflecting principles of psychology and philosophy.

(Sujato, “Beginnings,” B:14, digital ed)

4.1.3 The Cakka,vatti Sīha,nāda Sutta (D 26), using mythical language, gives us an insight into the early Buddhist view of kingship and governance, especially *how moral virtue is closely linked with socio-economic conditions*. Like the Aggañña Sutta (D 27) [4.1.2], the Cakka,vatti Sīha,nāda Sutta, too, centres on the theme of *how crime arises in society*. Textually, however, this Sutta, as it were, carries on from where the Aggañña Sutta ends, but focussing itself more on a discussion of power, political and spiritual, that is, the proper role of the ruler or the authorities, and, in a somewhat prophetic tone, gives us a vision of future of human society.

The Sutta relates in some detail how karma works in tune with the moral behaviour of society as a whole. It shows how when the ruler (that is, the authorities) fails to remove widespread poverty in time, and introduces reforms too late, the cumulative effects can lead to a general social decline and strife. Help delayed is help denied, and the costs can here very high.

On a positive note, the Sutta relates how when the situation sinks into its lowest level, people realize the futility of violence, give it up, and so keep to the first precept, which in turn gathers moral momentum. This social renewal leads up to a time when the human life-span averages 80,000 years, the time of the world-monarch Saṅkha and the advent of the future Buddha, Metteyya. The Sutta closes with the Buddha detailing the meaning of the monastic’s five blessings of long life, beauty, happiness, wealth and power.¹⁷⁰

The Cakka,vatti Sīha,nāda Sutta is clearly a late discourse, composed probably during Asoka’s time, as it serves as a sort of monastic memorandum to the “world monarch” exhorting him in good governance. No such idea is known elsewhere in early strata of the Pali Canon. This is the only place in the suttas where the future Buddha, Metteyya,¹⁷¹ is mentioned, evincing the fact that the historical Buddha Gotama has passed away, and the Buddhist community is still struggling with the memory and meaning of his passing. While the Mahāyāna tends to deify the Buddha, the more conservative Hinayana monastics worked on the Buddha-lineage, extending it into the near future (in cosmic time), thus promising hope for a world in which the historical Buddha has attained nirvana.¹⁷²

4.2 MIRACLES AND ORIGINS. Most of the first thirteen discourses of the Dīgha Nikāya (forming the Sīla-k,khandha Vagga) speak of meditation as leading to the four dhyanas and various psychic powers.¹⁷³ Such powers arise from the profoundly still and clear mind of a meditator who has attained the fourth

¹⁷⁰ A monastic’s life-span (*āyu*) is the 4 bases of success (enthusiasm, energy, mind and investigation); his beauty (*vaṇṇa*) moral virtue; his happiness (*sukha*) the 4 dhyanas; his wealth (*bhoga*) the 4 divine abodes (lovingkindness, compassion, appreciative joy and equanimity), and his power (*bala*) the destruction of the influxes (sense-desire, existence, views and ignorance), ie awakening to arhathood.

¹⁷¹ See **The Buddha as myth** = SD 36.2(6.2).

¹⁷² D 26/3:58-79 = SD 36.10.

¹⁷³ See **Sāmañña,phala S** (D 2) = SD 8.10(3).

dhyana.¹⁷⁴ However, it is more the exception than the rule that the Buddha or his early disciples would use such powers to convert others. This is especially clear from such discourses as **the Pāṭika Sutta** (D 24) and **the Kevaḍḍha Sutta** (D 11). In both discourses, the Buddha rejects the displaying of miracles (*iddhi, pāṭihāriya*) for the conversion of the masses, as miracles do not attest to the truth of spiritual liberation.

4.2.1 The Pāṭika Sutta (D 24) consists of two parts: the first deals with psychic powers, and the second with the origin (re-evolution) of things. Both topics have been treated elsewhere: *the psychic powers* in **the Kevaḍḍha Sutta** (D 11) [4.2.2] and *the origin of things* in **the Aggañña Sutta** (D 27) [4.1.2]. **The Pāṭika Sutta** opens with the mention that the young monk, Sunakkhatta, has left the order because the Buddha would not perform miracles or discuss the origin of things, so that he thinks that the Buddha has neither such powers nor such knowledge.

The Buddha then lists the psychic powers, and describes the origin of the universe, and ends the discourse by commenting on the spiritual liberation called “the beautiful” (*subha*).¹⁷⁵ The point here is clear: the Buddha uncompromisingly refuses to perform miracles as a show of spiritual power, or to discuss cosmology for its own sake—even though he has such power and knowledge.¹⁷⁶

4.2.2 The Kevaḍḍha Sutta (D 11). Like the Pāṭika Sutta (D 24), in **the Kevaḍḍha Sutta**, too, the Buddha receives a request, this time, from Kevaḍḍha, a young lay disciple of Nālandā, to perform psychic wonders to convert the people of the prosperous city. Although the Buddha accepts the possibility of such powers, he answers that it is not his practice to ask his disciples to display them. Furthermore, instead of the usual six powers,¹⁷⁷ he speaks of only the three powers of psychic wonders, of mind-reading and of education, all of which he has himself attained.¹⁷⁸ Of these, the Buddha declares that the greatest miracle is that of education, that is, “You should think in this way, not in that way. Direct your attention to this, not to that. Let go of this, dwell cultivating that.”¹⁷⁹

The Sutta then closes with the account of a monk, who, using his meditative powers, astrally travels to the various heavens, seeking the answer to the question of *where the four elements disappear without any trace*. Finally, on meeting Mahā Brahmā himself, he is told by the clearly chagrined deity to return to the Buddha and question him, as he is the only one who knows the right answer. The Buddha, before answering the monk, chides him for being a “land-sighting bird”—a bird released from a sea-faring ship, which when unable to find land, returns to the ship [1.5]—and then instructs him to rephrase his question to *where the four elements find no footing*. The answer of course is nirvana.¹⁸⁰

4.2.3 The myth of the journey. One of the best known of Buddhist person-centred parables is that of the path, especially the middle way, or the noble eightfold path. It is also known as the “one-going way” (*ek āyana*),¹⁸¹ or “*the path*” (*esa va maggo*) (Dh 274) to true liberation. In other words, there are many paths, but *this* is the best one (*seṭṭha*), that is, the eightfold path (Dh 273).

¹⁷⁴ See **Miracles** = SD 27.5a.

¹⁷⁵ It is also known as “the beauty element” (*subha, dhātu*): **Satta Dhātu S** (S 14.11/2:150 f) = SD 74.14; ie a form dhyana with its object, viz, a dhyana arisen based on lovingkindness (Pm 2:39) or on a beautiful kasina (SA 2:134; DhsA 77, 191; Vism 15.26/486), which Pāṭika S comy says is a colour kasina (*vanṇa, kasina*, DA 3:830). See **Mettā Sahagata S** (S 46.54) = SD 10.11(3.2)

¹⁷⁶ D 24/3:1-34 = SD 63.3.

¹⁷⁷ *Cha-ḷ-ābhiññā*, ie (1) psychic powers (self-multiplication (becoming many and becoming one again); dematerialization (appearing and disappearing); demolecularization (going through solid objects); earth-diving; walking on water; astral travel; touching the sun or the moon; power over his body up to the Brahmā world); (2) clairaudience; (3) mind-reading; (4) the recollection of past lives (rebirth); (5) the knowledge of redeath and rebirth (karma); and (6) the knowledge of the destruction of the influxes (sense-desire, existence, views and ignorance), ie awakening to arhathood.

¹⁷⁸ Ie *iddhi, pāṭihāriya, ādesanā, pāṭihāriya* and *anusāsani, pāṭihāriya* respectively. On the meaning of “display” (*pāṭihāriya*), see **Kevaḍḍha S** (D 11) = SD 1.7(3). On these 3 miracles, see **Miracles** = SD 27.5a(8).

¹⁷⁹ As in (**Pāṭihāriya**) **Saṅgārava S** (A 3.60.6/1:172) = SD 16.10. See **Kevaḍḍha S** (D 11.8/1:213) = SD 1.7.

¹⁸⁰ **Kevaḍḍha S** (D 11.85/1:222 f) = SD 1.7.

¹⁸¹ D 22.1b/2:291 = M 10.2/1:55 = SD 13; see Intro (3.1-2).

Where there is a path, there are bound to be travellers or pilgrims on it, especially those heading for the “ancient city,” as stated in **the Nagara Sutta** (S 12.65).¹⁸² It is the straight or direct road, an inward journey, to liberation.¹⁸³

This is the super-highway to the city of nirvana, but not everyone of us find ourselves taking this straight road. We might not be sure which one it is, or we might take what we think are convenient shortcuts. Or, even if we are on the highway itself, we might be caught in a traffic jam, or we could be making a long lazy stop-over. Or worse, we might fall way back farther away from our destination.

The (Thīna,middha) Tissa Sutta (S 22.84) gives a similar parable of the two wayfarers, where one is familiar with the way, the other not. The one familiar with the way is, of course, the Buddha, who tells the traveller (the practitioner) to avoid the left road and take the “right” (directionally and spiritually) road, that is, the noble eightfold path. Yet, even as we journey along this right road, warns the skilled wayfarer, there are still the dangers that lurk: “the dense woods” of ignorance, “the vast low-lying marsh” of sensual pleasures, and “the steep cliff” of anger and despair. Only when we carefully avoid these dangers, will we finally and safely arrive at “the pleasant stretch of level ground” of nirvana.¹⁸⁴ [§§25-30]

Our task on the path of spiritual evolution, therefore, is to keep on *moving ahead*. Even if we are progressing slowly, we should not stop, or not stop too long. For, when darkness falls or a storm arises or robbers waylay us, we would face certain dangers. If we travel in the dark, we could easily lose our way, or run into things, or fall off high places, especially when we are unfamiliar with the terrain, the landmarks or the starry skies. The parable of the land-sighting bird [1.5] reminds us not to take too long a detour by being overly intellectual or stubbornly ritualistic or blindly loyal to a guru, and so forget the true teaching. We then lose sight of the path and are taken for a ride.

We have been repeatedly warned by the Buddha and Dharma-hearted teachers not to be distracted by magical shows, entertaining diversions, or ginger-bread houses along the path. It is best that we take an express transport that moves surely, swiftly and safely to our destination. Only then, on reaching our goal, we would alight, refresh ourselves and live blissfully, enjoying the beauty, safety and freedom of the great ancient city.

4.3 THE MYTH OF OTHER REALMS

4.3.1 Heavens, hells and other destinies. The person-centred specific theory of Buddhist myth also deals with places or spaces. Our spiritual journey may not always be on level ground or along a straight line. If we are well-prepared for the journey and navigating rightly, we might soon be spiralling up the mountain to the ancient city. Otherwise, we could be gyrating downhill into a dark valley, a deep mire, wild beasts, or a bottomless chasm. The traveller has to be constantly mindful of his path, the terrain and other travellers.

Along our way, we might meet kind and generous *devas* who feed and care for us, so that our journey is more pleasant and speedy. Or, we could find ourselves amongst other *humans*, delighting in diversion and discourse, lost in religion or philosophy or words, and the journey could be delayed or diverted. Or, we could meet suave *asuras*, who are really devious and violent, worse than Procrustes,¹⁸⁵ in their well-lit tantalizing pleasure-resorts, promising fun, fame and wealth, so that we are distracted and blinded. Or, we could end up in a rut of shopping around, sexual, religious and otherwise, trying to feed ourselves, seeing only dissatisfactions and uncertainties, and so we keep going in a circle with *pretas*. Or, we might simply decide to just stop and lie around in some blinding forest, oblivious of our immediate task, indolent and resigned to *animal* routines of eating, sleeping, sex and play. Worst of all, we could find ourselves in a

¹⁸² **Nagara S** (S 12.65.19-21/2:105 f) = SD 14.2.

¹⁸³ D 1:239-244; Tha 35

¹⁸⁴ S 22.84.25-30/3:108 f = SD 32.12.

¹⁸⁵ In Greek mythology, Procrustes is a brigand who allows unwary travellers to lie on an iron bed. If they were longer than the bed, he cuts off the legs’ extra length; if they were shorter than the bed, he would stretch them until they fit it. Allusions to Procrustes usually apply to someone who tries to force conformity or uniformity in a ruthless or destructive way.

dangerous battle zone of *hell-beings*, and be captured and thrown by them into a stiflingly crowded prison, or be painfully hurt or even be killed in the violent fighting.¹⁸⁶

This is the myth of the five destinies—the devas, humans, animals, the pretas, and the hell-beings,¹⁸⁷ and the myth of the six realms, including the asuras. These are person-based myths, where the often fabulous beings lurk in the shadows of our minds, ever ready to metamorphose themselves into our consciousness, dehumanizing and deluding us. We are simply unaware of these states when we fall into them. If we are really aware of them, we are less likely to fall into any of them. Only in keeping to the basic rules of humanity—the five precepts¹⁸⁸—are we safe from sinking into these subhuman realms.

The most graphic of these states are clearly the depiction of physical suffering in the hell-states as described in such discourses as the Bāla Paṇḍita Sutta (M 129), the Deva,dūta Sutta (M 130), the Mahā Dukkha-k,khandha Sutta (M 13), and the Cūḷa Dukkha-k,khandha Sutta (M 14). They embody the Buddhist myth of pain and suffering, but they clearly not permanent states, but work on the dynamics of karmic conditionality. Above all, they are not necessarily an afterlife state, but may arise within our present day-to-day existence, if our mental conditions allow it. The mythology of the hells is to remind us that *their pains are as real as our thoughts and actions*, so that we should carefully guard and sublimate against them.

4.3.2 Subhuman planes. The stock phrase, “a plane of misery, an evil destination, a lower realm, in hell” (*apāyaṃ duggatiṃ vinipātaṃ nirayaṃ*), is found in a number of places in the Pali Canon,¹⁸⁹ but the terms are not synonyms for “hell,” which is itself, a collective term for “suffering states.” All these four words refer to the four subhuman planes, sometimes including the asuras or “fallen gods” (titans, demons, etc) as the fifth.

The commentary on **Sn 231** (*catuhi apāyehi*, “the 4 states of deprivation”), in fact, glosses it as *cattāro apāyā nāma niraya,tiracchāna,pettivisaya,asurakāyā*, “the four states of misery [deprivation] are the hells, the animal-birth, the ghost realm, the demon world” (KhA 189).¹⁹⁰ It is tempting to collate the four states of misery with the four subhuman realms as follows: *apāya* = ghosts; *duggati* = animal-birth; *vinipāta* = asuras (“fallen” gods); *niraya* = hell; but the suttas do not seem to support this.

In the subhuman planes, habituality, predictability and cyclic processes predominate, so that there is neither positive thinking nor wholesome feeling. They are worlds shadowed and drowned in incessant cycles of craving, ignorance, violence and pain, so that there is no opportunity for the spiritual quest.

Let us now examine the major texts that depict the pain and suffering in these lowest of these states.

4.3.3 The Bāla Paṇḍita Sutta (M 129)¹⁹¹ presents the teachings of *karma and rebirth* in graphic but earthy images that reflect the painful realities of Indian society of the Buddha’s time, that is, especially sufferings and tortures inflicted on war victims, prisoners and criminals. The sufferings depicted in these hell myths deeply influenced the mythology of Asia to this day.¹⁹²

The Sutta begins by explaining that a foolish person (*bāla*), that is, an evil-doer, suffers from fear on account of his past, feels fear in the present, and will do so in the future, too. On account of past evil actions, he suffers *psychological* fears, mainly from memories of his evil done. In the present, he suffers fear on seeing a criminal being tortured by the authorities. And in the future, he will himself suffer hellish pains on account of his own bad deeds

¹⁸⁶ See **(Pañca) Gati S** (A 9.68/4:459) = SD 2.20. In later Buddhist these six realms are graphically depicted on the Tibetan Wheel of Life. See **The body in Buddhism** = SD 29.6a (4.1.4).

¹⁸⁷ **Pañca,gati S** (A 9.68/4:459) = SD 2.20.

¹⁸⁸ See **Veḷu,dvāreyya S** (S 55.75/5:352-356) = SD 1.5.

¹⁸⁹ V 3:5; D 2.97/1:82; S 56.36/5:442; A 2.2.6/1:55; Sn 231.

¹⁹⁰ Cf Sn 377::SnA 368. See also D 3:234, 264; M 1:73; A 4:459; Nc 550; cf S 5:474-77; Vism 552. Also Pañca,-gati,dīpana (ed L Feer, JPTS, 1884:152 ff; tr Feer, *Annales du Musée Guimet* 5:514-28).

¹⁹¹ M 129/3:163-178 = SD 2.22. For shorter accounts on the working of karma, and how suffering in the hells awaits an evil-doer, see **Cūḷa Kamma Vibhaṅga S** (M 135/3:202-206) = SD 4.15 & **Mahā Kamma Vibhaṅga S** (M 136/3:207-214) = SD 4.16.

¹⁹² Graphic representations of these hell scenes can be found in the Haw Par Villa theme park on Pasir Panjang Rd, Singapore, first constructed in 1937.

The parable of the blind turtle shows how immensely difficult it is for a *hell-being* to be reborn as a human being, thus:

“Bhikshus, suppose a man were to throw into the ocean a yoke with a single hole in it.¹⁹³ Then the east winds carry it westwards; the west winds carry it eastwards; the north winds carry it southwards; the south winds carry it northwards. Suppose a blind turtle were to come up from the ocean depths once in a hundred years.

What do you think, bhikshus? Would that blind turtle put his neck through the yoke with a single hole in it?”

“Even if it could, bhante, it would only happen after a very long time.”

“Even then, bhikshus, it is more likely that the blind turtle would put his neck through the single-holed yoke than would the fool, once fallen into a lower world (*vinipāta*),¹⁹⁴ regain the human state, I say! Why is that? Because, bhikshus, in the lower worlds there is no righteous living,¹⁹⁵ no doing of what is wholesome, no performance of merit. Bhikshus, there they eat each other, preying on the weak.” (M 129.24/3:169) = SD 2.22

This passage is often missed, misunderstood or misquoted as referring to the rarity or difficulty of obtaining human birth (*kiccho manussa,paṭilābho*, Dh 182a). The word *paṭilābha* usually means “obtaining or attaining,” that is, the opportunity of being reborn as a human being, but more broadly, it also refers to the difficulties of living a human life: we have to work without end to support ourselves, suffer discomfort, and after a short time face death.¹⁹⁶ *Manussa,paṭilābha*, in other words, simply means “the state of being a human” (*manussattam*).¹⁹⁷ The human lot is a difficult one.

This important passage gives the context regarding the difficulty of gaining human birth for *those who have fallen into one of the subhuman suffering states*, especially the hells. On the other hand, it is also very easy for *celestial beings* to “fall” (*cavati*) from their divine state and be reborn into the human realm, or even lower, into the subhuman planes.¹⁹⁸

Interestingly, the descriptions of the hells in the *Bāla Paṇḍita Sutta* are relatively similar to those found in the Jain texts.¹⁹⁹ This, according to K R Norman, “presumably represents a more popular conception of the doctrine of *kamma*.” (1983b:49). It is also possible, as mentioned above, that such hell myths were based on the sufferings and tortures well known in those times.

4.3.4 The Deva,dūta Sutta (M 130)²⁰⁰ repeats §§10-16²⁰¹ of the **Bāla Paṇḍita Sutta** (M 129) [4.3.3], but elaborates on §17, giving the classic description of *the hells* (M 130.17-30). The Sutta presents *king Yama*, the lord of the hells, as regularly questioning those who have fallen into his realm, as to why they have not heeded *the five divine messengers* (rebirth, old age, disease, suffering, and death) and turn away from evil. In due course, it is said, even king Yama himself seeks to hear the Buddha’s teaching so that he

¹⁹³ **Chiggaḷa S 2** (S 56.47) mentions not knowing the 4 noble truths as reason for the difficulty of attaining human birth (S 56.47/5:455 f). This simile is referred to at Thī 500, Miln 204, DhsA 60. See **The body in Buddhism** = SD 29.6a (4.1.2).

¹⁹⁴ “Lower world,” *vinipāta*, a general term for the 4 lower suffering states: the animal-birth, the realm of the departed, the asura realm and the hells. See Vism 13.92 f.

¹⁹⁵ *Dhamma,carīya*, or practice of the Dharma.

¹⁹⁶ *Nirantaram kasi,kamm’ādāni katvā jīvita,vuttim ghaṭanato’pi paritta-t,thāyitāya’pi maccānam jīvitam kiccham* (DhA 3:235).

¹⁹⁷ See Dh 182; DhA 3:235. *Manussattam* is a common word: eg global search in CSCD.

¹⁹⁸ **Chiggaḷa S 2** (S 56.47/5:455 f) & Thī 500 (the parable is alluded to at Miln 204; DhsA 60) should be understood in this context. Cf **Chiggaḷa S 1** (S 56.45/5:453 f).

¹⁹⁹ Cf Uttaradhyayaṇa Sūtra 19:47-72.

²⁰⁰ M 130/3:178-187 = SD 2.23.

²⁰¹ M 130.10-16, also at A 1:141 f and J 1:174.

is liberated from samsara itself.²⁰² This shows that “king Yama” is not a permanent being, but a karmic role that is filled by various beings in their time. The point is that it is clearly a very unpleasant role to play.

A better known set of existential warnings is that of the three divine messengers (an old man, a sick man, and a dead man: allegories of decay, disease and death)²⁰³ [3.3], described in **the (Yama) Deva,dūta Sutta** (A 3.35) by king Yama himself, and the Sutta closes with Yama aspiring to hear the Buddha’s teaching for the sake of his own liberation.²⁰⁴ Apparently, the “three messengers” account is older, as are *the first three* of the four sights of prince Siddhattha that arouse *samvega*²⁰⁵ in him. On seeing the fourth sight, that of a calm and pleasant-looking recluse, Siddhattha feels joyful faith (*pasāda*), and is moved to emulate him by renouncing the world.²⁰⁶ Siddhattha, in other words, heeds the warnings of the divine messengers.

Pain and suffering occur on a daily basis in our lives, even on a moment-to-moment basis, but we hardly notice them until or unless they occur to us, but even then we quickly enough forget them once they cease. These hell myths serve as graphic reminders that the sufferings following evil and foolishness are real and painful, so that we would be wise to mindfully avoid them. The reality is that *we are judged not by any external power, but by our own actions and hearts*. Ultimately, there is no “judgement,” only that our deeds or **karma**, mental, verbal and bodily, become *habits* responding to *the conditions* we have habituated ourselves with.

“Just as the seeds are sown, so shall the harvest be; | Good comes to the doer of good; evil to the evil-doer— | He who has planted the seed shall taste the fruit” (S 11.10).²⁰⁷ Even as we sow, so we shall reap. This is a popular saw, but a truth that is a *popular* need not be a *universal* truth. For, it were true that “good begets good, evil begets evil,” then we are caught in an endless karmic loop, never able to break free from it. This is fatalistic and deterministic.

For, we often see the good suffering, and the bad prospering. In fact, it is rare that we actually see the good begetting good, and the evil getting their fair due. Indeed, we more often see the good suffering, and the bad prospering. We therefore need to examine this karma myth more closely: what does the Sutta actually say? The Sutta actually attributes these lines to some ancient seers.

The myth behind this popular “sower’s karma” is found in **the Samuddaka Sutta** (S 11.10). There is an impending battle between the devas (the gods) and the asuras (“titans”),²⁰⁸ the latter in this case dwell in the depths of the great ocean. Some virtuous seers who dwell on the ocean shore, fearing that the asuras would destroy their hermitage as has occurred before, request “a guarantee of safety” (*abhaya,dakkhiṇa*) from Sambara, the asura leader. However, Sambara, who detests the seers for being “the hated devotees of Sakra (the lord of the devas)” (*duṭṭhānam sakka,sevinam*), replies, “I will give you only fear!” The terrified seers thus resort to putting a *curse* on Sambara in the form of the verse on the sower’s karma.²⁰⁹ [4.4.3]

An understanding of Buddhist mythology thus helps us, firstly, to be aware of *the roots* of some Buddhist stories and teachings. Secondly, we will then be able to see these stories and teachings in *the right context*. Thirdly, we are then able to contextualize these stories and teachings to *understand our own cir-*

²⁰² See **(Yama) Deva,dūta S** (A 3.35/1:138-142) & **Cūḷa Dukkha-k,khandha S** (M 130.28-30/1:186 f) = SD 2.23.

²⁰³ On the divine messengers, see **Deva,dūta S** (M 130) = SD 2.23(2).

²⁰⁴ A 3.35/1:138-142 = SD 48.10, an account found also in **Cūḷa Dukkha-k,khandha S** (M 130.28-30/1:186 f) = SD 2.23

²⁰⁵ On samvega, see **Mahā,parinibbāna S** (D 16) = SD 9 Intro (7f). On samvega & the 4 sights, see SD 1.11(3).

²⁰⁶ J 1:59; cf AA 1:36; DhA 1:84 f.

²⁰⁷ S 903/11.10/1:227 = SD 39.13; see also **Karma** = SD 18.1(2).

²⁰⁸ “Asuras,” (*asurā*), lit “anti-god,” variously tr as “titan,” “demon”. They were once gods in Tāvātimsa but fell from their state through being intoxicated with drinks. Their attempted return to Tāvātimsa resulted in protracted battles with the gods led by Sakra (S 1:216 ff; J 1:202-204; DhA 1:272-280; SnA 484 f).

²⁰⁹ S 903/11.10/1:227 = SD 39.13; see also **Karma** = SD 18.1(2).

cumstances today. Mythology, as such, keeps the Buddha's teaching alive and efficacious for all time. The Buddha Dharma, after all, is the timeless truth (*sanantana dhamma* or *dhamma sanantana*).²¹⁰

4.3.5 The Mahā Dukkha-k,khandha Sutta (M 13)²¹¹ and the Cūla Dukkha-k,khandha Sutta (M 14)²¹² both have a closely parallel passage containing the Buddha's detailed discussion on *how sense-desire is the cause of wars and crimes*.²¹³ While the Aggañña Sutta (D 27) gives a *cosmological* explanation of the rise of strife, crime, and social degeneration [4.1.2], the Cakka,vatti Sīha,nāda Sutta (D 36) gives them a *social* explanation [4.1.3]. The two Dukkha-k,khandha Suttas (M 13+14) give a *psycho-ethical* explanation for wars, crimes and social decline. The explanations of all the three Suttas are closely interrelated, as they all speak of human nature and worldly conditions. The first is a *diachronic* perspective (over cosmological time), the second, a *historical* perspective (using the battle imagery), and the third, a *synchronic* perspective (imageries of strife and crime), that is, how we tend to think and behave in society in our own times.

Scholars, politicians, or anyone with some strong opinion, might speak elaborately and passionately on the causes of violence, crime and war. Nothing is more simply true than *the myth* behind it all, says the Buddha: they are caused by sense-desires:

Again, bhikshus, with sense-desire as the cause a mass of suffering seen here and now, having sense-desires as the cause, sense-desires as the source, sense-desires as the basis, the cause being simply sense-desires.

Kings quarrel with kings, kshatriyas quarrel with kshatriyas, brahmins quarrel with brahmins, householders quarrel with householders, mother quarrels with son, son quarrels with mother, father quarrels with son, son quarrels with father, brother quarrels with brother, sister quarrels with sister, companion quarrels with companion,

And here, having fallen into quarrels, strife and disputes, they come to blows with one another using fists, clods of earth, sticks and knives—bringing upon themselves death and deadly sufferings.

(M 13.11/1:86 = SD 6.9) = (M 14.10/1:92 = SD 4.7)

The myth of sense-desire gives the simplest, most basic and truest explanation of social strife and personal suffering. And here lies the difference between the worldly disciplines (such as politics, psychology and sociology) and Buddhist spirituality. Unlike the worldly methods, the Dharma goes right down to the basics, the roots of the problem—greed, hate and delusion—and deal with them.

The Buddha's insight is so *radical* (going down to *the root* of things), that it is able to identify even *the source of religion itself*. Why are people religious in one way or another, whether they believe in an external almighty power, or something greater than them? In **the Brahma,jāla Sutta** (D 1), the Buddha declares that all views, philosophical or religious, arise from our "feelings" (*vedanā*)—our likes, dislikes, and ignorance—based on our "contact" (*phassa*), that is, sense-experiences.²¹⁴ Whatever we believe in, rightly or wrong, as far as they involve *thinking*, they are *sense-based*: they try to make sense of our experiences.

All our philosophies and religions—how we think, believe, speak and act—are *sense-based*. When we truly understand how our senses work, how they in turn influence the body and the mind, and what our mind really is, then we would truly rise above philosophy, religion and the limitations of worldly ways, so that we see things directly as they really are, and do so in a blissful and liberated way,

4.3.7 Hellish pains are real. Amongst the hell myths in the world religions, the Buddhist conception of the hells are surely the kindest. The myths typically speak of them as if they are *places*, but we are also reminded, more importantly, that they are really *states of mind*. In Buddhist spirituality, we do not go to hell,

²¹⁰ M 128.5/*3:154 = Dh 5d = J 428 (Be 1:188); S 1:18, 189; Sn 453b = Tha 1229b; J 546 (Be 2:228, 338).

²¹¹ M 13/1:83-90 = SD 6.9.

²¹² M 14/1:91-95 = SD 4.7.

²¹³ M 13.6-17/1:85-88 = SD 6.9; M 14.6-14/1:92 = SD 4.7.

²¹⁴ D 1.105-144/1:39-45 = SD 25.2.

but we *create* our own local or portable reality of hellish sufferings. It is hell, for example, to live painfully in the midst of bombings, battling and battering, or to work in a painfully stressful slave factory.

The Pātāla Sutta (S 36.4) is instructive in telling us not to locate “hell” anywhere, even as an abyss beneath the seas. The Buddha declares that such things are merely *names* for suffering, that is, ideas and stories:

Bhikshus, when the uninstructed ordinary person makes the statement:

“In the great ocean there is a bottomless abyss (*pātāla*),” he makes such a statement about something that is non-existent and false.

This “bottomless abyss,” bhikshus, is rather a designation (*adhivacana*) for painful bodily feelings. (S 36.4/4:206 f) = SD 2.25

The Buddha goes on to explain that when an ignorant worldly person is touched by physical pain, he “sorrow, grieves, laments, beats his breast and falls into confusion.” A wise noble disciple, when afflicted with physical pain, being mindful, does not suffer nor grieve.

Even if the hells are not geographical places into which the evil fall and are tortured, the hellish pains and sufferings *are real indeed*. For, the evil bring upon themselves the sufferings from those very things they fear the most: they create their own sufferings in their own minds and feel them as virtually real. Their ignorance only worsens such virtual sufferings.

The wise who are consistently good, on the other hand, do not fall into the hells. For, they are mindful and morally restrained. In **the Nakula, pitā Sutta** (S 22.1), the Buddha exhorts the aged Nakula to constantly reflect thus, “My body may be sick but my mind will not be sick.”²¹⁵ Sāriputta explains this phrase as referring to “not owning” either body or mind, that is, not identifying with the five aggregates (form, feeling, perception, formations, and consciousness).²¹⁶

Further, in **the Sall’atthena Sutta** (S 36.6), the Buddha explains that the noble disciple (that is, one who is on the path) feels only the “one dart” of *bodily* pain, but not the second dart of *mental* pain. The foolish unawakened, on the other hand, on account of their ignorance and craving, suffers from *both* the darts of bodily pain and mental suffering.²¹⁷ The body, due to its physical nature, is easily oppressed by external situations and changes. The mind, if it is mindful and wise, is able to remain above the physical pain.

Moreover, the body is limited to only four postures (standing, walking, sitting, and lying down), and cannot remain too long in any one posture. So long as we change our postures constantly or whenever necessary, we would find it tolerable or are unlikely to notice any discomfort. However, if we have *mental* suffering, if we are *unhappy*, then our bodies, too, would in some way be affected.

Then we need to “isolate” the suffering, as it were, define it for what it really is, and not make it bigger than it really is. Identify the causes and effects, the conditionality behind the suffering, and the feelings that arise for it. *What* are these feelings? *How* do they behave? Notice how they rise and fall, come and go.

A healthy mind is able to withstand physical discomfort or pain to a considerable extent. If there is no wound in our hand, we might safely carry even poison in it (Dh 124). A weak or negative mind, on the other hand, would find it difficult to do so, and might even worsen it with negative thoughts. *While pain and other difficulties may be unavoidable, suffering is optional*. In other words, it might be difficult to prevent or end physical pain, or conflicts with others, but we can prevent or end mental suffering with proper mind-training (especially meditation and mindfulness). In short, we create our own sufferings, and as such we can remove them ourselves.

4.3.8 Crowd and space. When we are in pain or unhinged, we often need some *space*: we often need to move away from the problem situation. Stress arises when we are burdened and crowded with more tasks and things than we can handle. We need a break; we need space. Stress is more likely to occur in an urbanized and crowded situation than in a open and spacious rustic setting.

²¹⁵ *Ātura, kāyassa me sato cittam anāturaṃ bhavissati* (S 22.14.4/3:1) = SD 5.4.

²¹⁶ S 22.6-25/3:2-5) = SD 5.4.

²¹⁷ S 36.6/4:207-210 = SD 5.5.

The Cakkavatti Sihanāda Sutta (D 26) has a prophecy about ancient India that she would grow into a crowded urbanized country: “This Jambu,dīpa [India], will be crowded with people—it is Avīci,²¹⁸ I say—just like a forest of reeds or rushes.” (D 26.23b/3:75). The word *avīci* is also mentioned in a parallel passage in **the Brāhmaṇa Mahā,sāla Sutta** or **Paloka Sutta** (A 3.56): “One would think that this world is Avīci.” (A 3.56/1:159). These are the only two places in the four Nikāyas where the word is used in this way. Perhaps, for this reason, some scholars think that “‘hell’ does not seem to be its meaning.”²¹⁹ One of the characteristics of the hells, it should be noted, is that it is an intolerably crowded place or situation.

If hell is *crowdedness*, then heaven is *spaciousness*. On a simpler level, we can speak of a wholesome situation, which permits happiness and growth, as being “spacious.” A well-known pericope, declaring the presence of the Buddha in our world, ensures us that there is the opportunity for spiritual renunciation for the sake of self-awakening, in terms of spaciousness, thus:

The household life is stifling, a dusty path. The life of renunciation is like the open air. It is not easy living in a house to practise the holy life completely, in all its purity, like a polished conch-shell. What if I were to shave off my hair and beard, put on the saffron robes, and go forth from the household life into homelessness?

(D 2.40-41/1:62 f, 11.9-10/1:213; M 100.9/2:211; S 16.11.14/2:219; A 10.99.5/5:204)

The purpose of the Buddhist monastic life is to provide aspirants with the ideal conditions for spiritual development so that they can awaken in this life itself. We might live a “couple” life, being married, having a family, or we could live a “single” life of celibacy and spirituality: it is a choice we might make. The monastic life, in other words, is a full-time spiritual alternative to the busy and crowded lay or household life. One “gone forth” is often described as being liberated from crowdedness and enjoying spaciousness. In this connection, **the Sambādh’okāsa Sutta** (A 6.26), records Mahā Kaccāna as exulting thus: “It is marvellous how the attainment of ‘the open’ (*okāsa*) in the closed [stifling, *sambādha*] has been discovered by the Blessed One....”²²⁰

The Buddha is a man of nature. He is born under a tree. He renounces the crowded family life for the spacious forests, where he lives under trees, sits under trees to meditate. He wins full awakening under the Bodhi tree, a holy fig tree; teaches the Dharma in tree-filled monastery-parks; and attains final nirvana under the twin sal trees. The Buddha is a master of spaciousness, in which he embraces all beings, humans and non-humans alike, unconditionally, helping and healing them, showing them the path to self-awakening and liberation. This spirit and myth of the open space is unrivalled in all religious history.

4.4 UNATTESTABLE TEACHINGS

4.4.1 The Buddha’s wager. Most intellectual Buddhists and many “modern” monastics and priests clearly do not believe that the hells are actual places of karmic torture, or as existing in any palpable form. Our unbelief in the hells is probably proportionate to our hidden fears, moral weakness and propensity for committing evil. In fact, most Buddhists do not talk about the hells, much less enjoy hearing about them, as they are not very pleasant states. Understandably, we generally fear that they *might* be true. So we put

²¹⁸ *Avīci* (“uninterrupted”) is the most crowded of the hell states (*niraya*); sometimes called the “great hell” (*mahā,niraya*) (DA 3:855; AA 2:256), and said to be the “lowest” point of the universe (NmA 2:425). The word *avīci*, however, is mentioned *only twice* in the Nikāyas, ie, here (D 26.23/3:75) = SD 36.10 & A 3.56/1:159 = SD,72.3, but it is often mentioned in the Comys (M 1:216, 4:109, 236×3; SA 2:12; SnA 1:41; DhA 1:127, 142, 148, 2:55, 61, 66, 67, 72, 200, 3:47, 64, 120, 151, 181, 209, 334, 416, 4:39, 42; UA 131; ItA 1:120; BA 46; J 5:271; PmA 1:297). It does not appear in the list of hells given in Sn pp 121-127 and S 1:154; but found in It 89 = V 2:203, & DhS §1,-281. It is possible that the term is first used here in a lit sense meaning “without a gap” (*a-vīci*), and later applied to the hell. Cf Vism 449 where it means “disintegration.”

²¹⁹ See T W Rhys Davids (D:RW 3:73 n1) and M Walshe (D:W 602 n801). F L Woodward, in his tr of Brāhmaṇa Mahā,sāla Sutta (A 3.56), renders *avīci* as “the Waveless Deep” (A:W 1:142). On the hells as allegories, see **Devadūta S** (M 130) = SD 2.23 Intro (3).

²²⁰ A 6.26/3:314 f = SD 15.6.

up a brave front and rationalize that they are only symbolic statements or imageries. Self-delusion is the most common and potent of religions.

On a bright note, **the Kesa,puttiya Sutta** (A 3.65), in its closing, assures us that *if we have done no evil, there is nothing to fear of such a possibility*.²²¹ Here again, we see the Buddha's great wisdom and transcendental humour in preserving the popular myth of the hells: it is a litmus test for our attitudes towards good and evil, and towards the Dharma and Vinaya. [4.4.3.2]

4.4.2 The sources of knowledge. It is happily undeniable that many Buddhists are also *humanists*: we give the highest priority to the human experience. Whatever we accept must be properly, or even scientifically, proven, that is, it should be *evidence-based*. But what is "evidence"? It is a "ground(s) for belief"; or better, it is a source of knowledge. Furthermore, what we accept as true should be *verifiable*; if the same conditions are found or put together, we would get the same result or results.

But what are these sources of knowledge? **The Sabba Sutta** (S 35.23) tells us that they are our six senses (the five physical senses and the mind) and their respective sense-objects.²²² Our cognitive awareness, in other words, is of two kinds: a subjective awareness and an objective awareness; that is, *how* our minds construct or make sense of an "experience" (our conception), and *what* we actually experience or what really happened (note the past tense) "out there" (our perception). In either case, the accuracy of our experience—whether conceptual or perceptual—depends on *what* we are looking for (future-oriented) and *how* attentive we are (present-oriented).

The "what" can be problematic, especially when we do not really "know" what we are looking for. Or worse, we know exactly what we are looking, and are merely looking for self-fulfilling evidence. In other words, what we make sense of is simply *projections from our past*. If, say, a scientist were looking for proofs that atoms exist, he is likely to look for such "evidence," and then construct his arguments.

Similarly, in the case of a theologian or God-believer, if he looks hard enough at what his senses and sense-objects provide, and how fired up he is by his feelings that there is an almighty God (of his definition, of course), he would blissfully find what he is looking for: seek and you shall find. Unsurprisingly, in either case (scientific or religious), the seeker is wearing coloured lenses, even blinkers, so that they would find what they are looking for. Understandably, quantum physics reminds that we are also part of what we observe, and the more enlightened theologians have rightly abandoned the traditional proofs of God's existence. The circumspect scientists know that there is so much we do not know about life and the mind. The point is that sense-based experiences have their limits.

Is there anything we can *know* then, especially beyond our physical senses? On a simple level, we can say that we *perceive* whatever meets our physical senses: we see, hear, smell, taste or touch (feel). As long as we are aware what each of these sense-experiences is, we are said to perceive it. On a mental level, we tend to put together such experiences or even conjure up new images from the raw sense-data: we tend to *conceive* ideas. Such ideas are not always false: we, for example, know what we are reading here. However, there is a good chance that we will form our own ideas about what we have read here, whether we have correctly or wrongly understood what is expressed here.

However, if we are careful in our *perceiving* (how we make sense of our sense-experiences) and our *conceiving* (how our minds construct their own realities), then we are likely to understand things better. The great Indian Buddhist philosophers, such as **Dignāga** (c 480-540),²²³ proponent of the Yogācāra school, and his commentator, **Dharma, kīrti** (c 600-660),²²⁴ propose that there are only two sources of reliable cognition, that is, perception (*pratyakṣa*) and inference (*anumāna*).²²⁵

²²¹ A 3.65.16/1:192 = SD 35.4a.

²²² S 35.23/4:15 = SD 7.1.

²²³ See Mac Ency Bsm, sv.

²²⁴ See Christian Coseru 2010: §7. <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/mind-indian-buddhism/>.

²²⁵ The roots canonical of these twofold valid sources of knowledge can be found in **Ñāṇa vatthu S** (S 12.33/2:58 f) = SD 35.1. The 2 are given in **Saṅgīti S** (D 33) as the first two of "the 4 knowledges" (*ñāṇa*), viz: (1) "objective knowledge" (*dhamme ñāṇa*) or sense-based knowledge, (2) inferential knowledge (*anvaye ñāṇa*), (3) knowledge of another's mind (*paricce ñāṇa*; Vbh 315: *pariye ñāṇa*), and (4) conventional knowledge (*sammuti ñāṇa*) (D 33.1.11.-

Dignāga gives a very good and simple reason why we ought to accept only these two sources: there are only two types of objects, those bearing their own characteristic mark (that is, *particulars*) and those whose characteristic is that of universality (that is, *universals*), each corresponding to a specific mode of apprehension.²²⁶ As philosophy scholar, **Christian Coseru** notes:

“What we have here is an attempt to translate the two fundamental categories of particular and universal back to their specific knowledge source: particulars to perception and universals to inferential reasoning. Dignāga, thus, appears to be claiming that all objects of cognition, whether external or internal, cannot be properly understood if separated from the types of cognitive events in which they are instantiated, a view best described as *phenomenalism*.” (2010 §7.1)

Once again, simply, we have only two reliable ways of knowing: through our immediate sense-experiences (perception) *and* through reasoning and logic (inference).²²⁷ Using these two valid means of knowledge, let us now examine the problem of the *verifiability* of two key Buddhist teachings, namely, those of karma and rebirth. The discourses invariably define *full awakening*—both of the Buddha and of other arhats—as comprising of the knowledges of rebirth and karma, such as in the well known set of the “three knowledges” (*te, vijja*)²²⁸ or the “six superknowledges” (*cha-ḷ-abhiññā*).²²⁹ These teachings, however, are *tenets of faith* and are unattestable, except through our self-awakening. Even if the unawakened were to claim to have direct knowledge of them, it is almost impossible for him or others to verify them.

Yet, these knowledges are verifiable by the awakened as *direct knowledge*, and they serve as the twin pillars of Buddhist faith. Moreover, they are clearly defined in the pericope on right view, as found in **the Sāleyyaka Sutta** (M 41) and throughout the Nikāyas and the Abhidhamma, thus:

There is what is given, what is offered, what is sacrificed. There is fruit and result of good and evil actions. There is this world, the next world. There are mother and father, spontaneously born beings. There are brahmins and recluses who, living rightly and practising rightly, proclaim this world and the next after having directly known and realized it for themselves.

(M 41.14/1:288) = SD 5.7²³⁰

11/3:226); **Das’uttara S** (D 34.1.5.8/3:277), which states that these same 4 knowledges “should be made to arise” (*upādetabba*); also at Vbh 315; cf Nett 53 f.

²²⁶ *Pramāṇa Samuccaya Vṛtti* ad 1.2; M Hattori, *Dignāga, On Perception, being the Pratyakṣapariccheda of Dignāga’s Pramāṇasamuccaya*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ Press, 1968:24, 79. See: **Jayatilleke** 1963: 167, 424, 431; **P Harvey**, “The approach to knowledge and truth in the Theravāda record of the discourses of the Buddha,” in Edelglass & Garfield (eds) 2009: 171-185; **R Hayes**, “Sensation, inference, and language: Dignāga’s *Pramāṇasamuccaya*,” in Edelglass & Garfield (eds) 2009: 103-170.

²²⁷ On inference, see **Kesa,puttiya S** (A 3.65) @ SD 35.4a comy (3a(6)). On Buddhist logic & inference, see **Language & discourse** = SD 26.11 (4.2, 7.3, 8, 9): on “The two sources of knowledge,” see (8.2).

²²⁸ **The 3 knowledges** (*te, vijja*): (1) retrocognition (*pubbe, nivāsānussati, ñāṇa*), ie, the recollection of past lives (rebirth); (2) the divine eye (*dibba, cakkhu*) or clairvoyance, ie the knowledge of the redeath and rebirth of beings, faring according to their karma; and (3) the knowledge of the destruction of the mental influxes (*āsava-k, khaya, ñāṇa*), that ends rebirth. (D 3:281; M 1:34; A 1:255, 258, 3:17, 280, 4:421). See **Te, vijja S** (D 13) @ SD 1.8(2.2).

²²⁹ **The 6 superknowledges** (*cha-ḷ-abhiññā*) are: (1) the various psychic powers; (2) the divine ear (clairaudience); (3) mind-reading (telepathy); (4) recollection of past lives of beings faring according to their karma (retrocognition); (5) the divine eye (knowledge of one’s own rebirths); and (6) the destruction of the influxes (full liberation through destroying sense-desire, existence, view and ignorance). See **Miracles** = SD 27.51(7.4).

²³⁰ Also at **Verañjaka S** (M 42.10/1:291); **Apāṇaka S** (M 60.6/1:402, 10+11+12/1:403 f); **Cūḷa Puṇṇama S** (M 110.22/3:24); **Sevitabbāsevitabba S** (M 114.10/3:52); **Mahā Cattarīsaka S** (M 117.7/3:72); **Paṭaliya S** (S 42.13/4:349, 352, 356); **Vipatti Sampadā S 1** (A 3.115.6/1:269); **Vipatti Sampadā S 2** (A 3.116.6/1:270); **Vipatti Sampadā S 3** (A 3.117.6/1:271); **Cunda S** (A 10.176.10/5:268); **Niraya Sagga S 1** (A 10.200.4/5:285); **Niraya Sagga S 2** (A 10.201.4/5:286); **Sāmsappanīya S** (A 10.205.6/5:291); **Saṅcetanika S 1** (A 10.206.10/5:296); Nm 1:188; Dhs 233; Vbh 328; Pug 28. On the def of wrong view (*micchā, diṭṭhi*), see **Sāmañña, phala S** (D 2.23/1:55) = SD 8.10;

Let us now examine how the myths of karma and rebirth can be a wholesome reality, or at least skillful means, in Dharma practice and the realization of nirvana.

4.4.3 Karma

4.4.3.1 A FEW PROBLEMS REGARDING KARMA. Karma refers to voluntary or deliberate actions that may be mental, verbal or bodily, and their fruits or results. On the “active” or doing side, such actions may be done *consciously* (mindfully) or *unconsciously* (mindlessly). In either case, they are likely to be habitual conduct rooted in our latent tendencies.²³¹

On the “passive” or feeling side, we each might experience the same karmic fruit in different ways, depending on our mental state and spiritual attainments. Those sunk deeper in ignorance and delusion, the unawakened, are more likely to feel karmic results more painfully both in the body *and* the mind,²³² and over a longer period.²³³ The wise and the saints, short of the arhats, may feel such karmic fruits in the body, but much less in the mind. The more mindful or awakened they are, the less the results affect them in a negative way. The Buddha and the arhats, on the other hand, may feel bodily pains, whether due to karma or any other conditions [4.3.4], but their minds are totally unaffected as they are liberated.

In other words, not everything that happens to us is due to karma. If this were the case—that whatever we are, have or feel are the results of karma—then it would be pure determinism or fatalism²³⁴ [4.3.4]. Those who reject the teaching of karma, or have difficulty with it, usually fail to see such details, or think that karma work all by itself.

4.4.3.2 SELFLESS KARMA. Nevertheless, there are at least two problems regarding karma that we need to resolve before we can begin to understand how it works. Firstly, Buddhism teaches that there is no abiding self or soul. If this were the case, then each time or moment, we are a different person. As such, if we were to have committed a misdeed in the past, we would not be accountable for it after that, so the argument goes, as we are a different person.²³⁵

We are neither punished nor rewarded by our karma, as there is no one to be punished or rewarded. The agent that acts is not an abiding entity, but our *consciousness* working in tandem with other aspects of our being. This agent is non-physical, but in a physical world, we see it as being governed by conditionality, by causes and effects.²³⁶ Yet this agent (our consciousness) can make choices, rightly or wrongly. With proper training, we learn to skillfully make wholesome choices so that even in the face of bad karmic fruits, we are able to make the best of them, such as learning from them and becoming wiser as a result, not falling into the same painful rut again, or at least making less and less of the same mistakes.

Early Buddhism, however, regards a person or a being as an unbroken stream of consciousness (*viññāna, sota...abbochinna*),²³⁷ like a series of billiard balls, one hitting another, transferring its energy to the next ball. In simple terms, this “energy” is a *continuity* in our being, linked together by our memory and habits. In other words, Buddhism teaches that *there is only thinking, but no thinker; only deeds, but no doer.*²³⁸ In this sense, there is no being, *only becoming*.

Sāleyyaka S (M 41.10/1:287) = SD 5.7; **Sandaka S** (M 76.7b/1:515) = SD 35.7; **Mahā Cattārīsaka S** (M 117.5/-3:71 f) = SD 6.10; these wrong views are refuted in **Apaṇṇaka S** (M 60.5-12/1:401-404) = SD 35.5.

²³¹ On latent tendencies, see **Anusaya** = SD 31.3.

²³² S 22.1/3:1-5 = SD 5.4.

²³³ See **(Akusala Mūla) Añña Titthiya S** (A 3.68) = SD 16.4 & (4.4.3.4) below.

²³⁴ **Sīvaka S** (S 36.21) gives 8 reasons or conditions for our experiences, whether they are pleasurable, painful or neutral, ie: (1) bile disorder (leading to such conditions as nervousness and excitement); (2) phlegm disorders (such as sluggishness and apathy); (3) wind disorders (such hiccups, stitch, and stomach-aches); (4) a combination of these; (5) weather changes; (6) improper care of oneself; (7) assaults (physical trauma); and (8) karmic fruit (S 36.-21/4:230 f) = SD 5.6.

²³⁵ See **The person in Buddhism** = SD 29.6b(5): “If there is no person, who is responsible?”

²³⁶ See A Federman 2010:4 f. Cf David Loy 2008:229 f.

²³⁷ **Sampasādanīya S** (D 28.7(3+4)/3:105) = SD 14.14. Cf **(Karaja, kāya) Brahma, vihāra S** (A 10.208): “this mortal life is but an intermediate state of consciousness” (*citt’antaro ayam...macco*) (A 10.208.2/5:299) & SD 2.10-(2).

²³⁸ Vism 16.90/513. See **Is there a soul?** = SD 2.16 & **Self & selves** = SD 26.9.

4.4.3.3 NOT EVERYTHING IS DUE TO KARMA. Secondly, we have no way of ascertaining whether or not, or if so how, a particular feeling or situation is due to a certain past karma. **The Sīvaka Sutta** (S 36.21), in fact, lists eight reasons or conditions for our experiences, whether they are pleasurable, painful, or neutral, that is, they could be due to: (1) bile disorder (leading to such conditions as nervousness and excitement); (2) phlegm disorders (such as sluggishness and apathy); (3) wind disorders (such hiccups, stitch, and stomach-aches); (4) a combination of these; (5) weather changes; (6) improper care of oneself; (7) assaults (physical trauma); and (8) karmic fruit.²³⁹

Simply put, the Sīvaka Sutta is saying that our sufferings, ill health, or misfortune, are likely to be linked with *physical* conditions (climate, weather and our body), *social* conditions (such as conflicts and violence) or *karmic* conditions. However, the reality is that karma never functions by itself. Karma is the state of our spiritual health, that is, the amount and regularity of our good or bad actions. If we are habitually good, then our wholesomeness would lessen the negative impact of both physical and social stress. And the *good* conditions that we experience are likely to enhance our wholesomeness.

4.4.3.4 KARMA IS DIFFICULT TO FATHOM. The reality is that we cannot be exactly sure how our karmic configurations work: at best, we can only speak of *karmic possibilities and potentialities*. **The Acinteyya Sutta** (A 4.77), in fact, records the Buddha as warning us that so complex and profound is the nature of karmic fruits that we (as unawakened beings) would go mad or become vexed if we were to speculate on them.²⁴⁰ We lack the mental capacity for fathoming such a vast ocean of existential possibilities. Even in our daily lives, the range and depth of thoughts that we can manage is very limited, and when over-think we are bound to suffer at least a bad head-ache, not to mention other ills.

However, it is sufficiently helpful for us to understand bad karma as being deliberate action, including our habits, conscious or unconscious, as long as they are rooted in greed, hate or delusion.²⁴¹ As long as we allow these three unwholesome roots to influence or overwhelm us, we would be accumulating bad karma.²⁴² Thus, to prevent the fruiting of bad karma, we should consistently cultivate the wholesome roots of charity, lovingkindness and wisdom. Indeed, a number of suttas helpfully tell us that if we are consistent in our cultivation of lovingkindness, “any karma done in a limited way neither remains nor persists here.”²⁴³ In short, *we can take charge of our karma*; otherwise, there would be no way out of suffering.

4.4.3.5 THE “AS IF” APPROACH. The closing of **the Kesa,puttiya Sutta** (A 3.65) assures us that *if we have done no evil, there is nothing to fear of suffering*²⁴⁴ [4.4.2]. This assurance extended by the Buddha helps us understand the myth of karma. Buddhist practitioner and psychologist **Susan Blackmore** is helpful in giving us a contemporary insight into this:

How is it possible to live without doing? One answer lies in the simple phrase “as if.” You can live *as if* you have free will; *as if* you are a self who acts; *as if* there is a physical world outside yourself. You can treat others *as if* they are sentient beings who have desires, beliefs, hopes and fears—adopting the intentional stance towards others, and towards yourself. This way of living drops any distinction between real and *as if* intentionality, or real and *as if* free will. (2003:413 f)

This *as if* approach means, I think, that we have some level of understanding that the real world is not what it appears to be, but since that is the way most people view it, we respect and respond to that virtual world in a way that would not mentally or spiritually jeopardize ourselves in anyway, and at the same

²³⁹ S 36.21/4:230 f = SD 5.6.

²⁴⁰ A 4.77/2:80 = SD 27.5a (5.5.2). The Sutta actually mentions 4 “unthinkables” (*acinteyya*): (1) the mental range of the Buddha, (2) the mental range of one in dhyana, (3) karmic fruits, and (3) cosmological questions. On a dubiously light side, this might explain why some of the leading philosophers of recent times end up becoming insane, and some of our philosophy specialists have very flaky behaviour.

²⁴¹ See **(Akusala Mūla) Añña Titthiya S** (A 3.68) = SD 16.4.

²⁴² See **Karma** = SD 18.1.

²⁴³ Eg **Te,vijja S** (D 13.76/1:250 f) = SD 1.8, **Saṅkha,dhamma S** (S 42.8.17/4:422) = SD 57.9, **(Karaja,kāya) Brahma,vihāra S** (A 10.208.1b/5:299) = SD 2.10(2).

²⁴⁴ A 3.65.16/1:192 = SD 35.4a.

time we will be able to healthily relate to others. It is like playing “Let’s pretend” but being mindfully serious about it.

In other words, if we give up the view of an abiding self that thinks and acts, then we are less likely to “own” such actions, as if we could do so. The suffering arises from our *identifying* with such actions and events, that is, to take them *personally*. The Dhammapada advises us that if we harbour negative thoughts such as “He abused me, he beat me, he defeated me, he robbed me,” our hearts are never stilled. Only when we do not cling to such thoughts that we would be appeased (Dh 3-4).

This is not a defeatist attitude: how can we be defeated if our minds are not affected in the way our detractors would rejoice in? The idea is not to perpetuate the past, especially if it is a painful unwholesome past. However, we can *learn* from such a past: if we suffer from such pains, it means that others, too, feel the same. Let us then not bring suffering upon others, too.²⁴⁵

It is the self (“I, me mine,” etc) that wants to own the pain, and make it bigger that it is. Free from the notion of a self, we continue to think and act in a better position to directly see the illusion of self and of suffering. It is this total freedom from the self that we call nirvana.²⁴⁶

4.4.4 Rebirth

4.4.4.1 WHAT IS REBORN? Rebirth is a corollary of karma, a doctrine which says that we (all sentient beings) experience the fruits of our actions, good and bad. The belief is common in ancient India, going back to pre-Buddhist times. Such a belief is found in the early Upanishads (c 700-500 BCE).²⁴⁷ The most important difference between the Buddhist notion of rebirth (and karma) and those brahminical systems (including the Hindu)—and indeed what makes the Buddhist doctrine unique—is that it does not involve any soul or abiding entity.

If there is no absolute self, how does Buddhism resolve the problem of the *continuity* of karma and rebirth from one life to another. The early Indian Buddhist schools offered various possible solutions. One school, **the Pudgala, vāda** (or Vātsīputrīya), went so far as to propose the concept of a *pudgala* (P *puggala*, “individual”), an inexpressible entity (hence the school’s name) that is reborn, life after life. Another school, **the Sarvāstivāda**, held that it is the *gandharva*, a disembodied being that moves through the intermediate state (*antarā, bhava*) between death and rebirth. Like the *pudgala* concept, the *gandharva*, too, is a manifestation of the five aggregates.²⁴⁸

While traditional Theravāda Buddhists tend to reject such ideas, contemporary Buddhists (even Theravāda monastics) who are well versed in the suttas (especially those who give primacy to the Suttas and have ministered to the dying), accept the notion of an intermediate state.²⁴⁹ In fact, it is much more difficult to explain how rebirth can occur “immediately,” except perhaps in the case of an arhat or a spiritually well-cultivated person whose mind is developed enough so that the momentum of the dying moments are wholesome, resulting in a wholesome rebirth.

When asked, “What is it that is reborn?” most Theravāda Buddhists would probably answer, “the consciousness” or “the mind.” They would often speak of the “death consciousness” (*cuti, citta*)²⁵⁰ as conditioning the “rebirth consciousness” (*paṭisandhi, citta*),²⁵¹ and yet they are both the same thing, depending on which side of the being we are referring to: the moment of dying or the moment of rebirth. These, however, are Abhidhamma and commentarial terms, absent from the early texts themselves.

²⁴⁵ This is known as the “golden rule”: see **Veḷu, dvāreyya S** (S 55.7/5.352-356) & SD 1.5(1).

²⁴⁶ See Susan Blackmore 2003:413.

²⁴⁷ Eg Bṛhad Āraṇyaka Upaniṣad 3.2.11-13: see **Karma** = SD 18.1(1.2).

²⁴⁸ **The five aggregates** (*pañca-k, khandha*) comprise a popular basic model of being in the sense-world: see **(Dve) Khandhā S** (S 22.48/3:47 f) = SD 17.1a; see also other suttas and essays in SD 17.

²⁴⁹ See **Is rebirth immediate?** = SD 2.17(3).

²⁵⁰ Kvu 271; Paṭ:Be 1:312 f & passim; DA 2:430; MA 4:174; SA 1:184.

²⁵¹ Paṭ:Be 2:427; DA 2:430; SA 2:31; pMa 3:572. It is often found alongside *cuti, citta* (MA 4:174; SA 1:184).

In this connection, we find the later Theravāda notion of the “birth continuum” (*bhav’āṅga*), an inactive or neutral mode of consciousness, a kind of “subconscious.”²⁵² It is the *bhav’āṅga* that forms a causal link (*paṭisandhī*) from one life to the next. As these are areas which are best described as theoretical and textual, we must remind ourselves that our understanding are at best *theoretical* and our arguments at best *text-based*. The realization of these truths must be left to the direct experience of the awakened mind.²⁵³ In such matters, no dogma can prevail: karma and rebirth are best taken with latitude.

4.4.4.2 BUDDHISM WITHOUT REBIRTH? Some contemporary Buddhists have suggested that belief in rebirth is not an essential part of what they view as constituting Buddhism. As we have seen, both karma and rebirth are essential aspects of the canonical definition of right view [4.4.2]. Is there a resolution or middle ground here?

Karma, as a Buddhist teaching, essentially reminds us *not to blame anyone or any one cause* for the problem or situation we are, were, or will be in. Nothing happens on account of a single cause: there is no first cause, for it begs the question of what lies before that. Things happen because of numerous causes, often too many for us to fathom. Yet it is sufficient for us to be aware of the present moment and deal with that situation at hand over which we have the only and real power to change.

Although rebirth promises better change for us, we cannot take it for granted. We take unnecessary and great risks to postpone our spiritual cultivation to “another life.” For we might not find the right conditions then, even as a human, or worse, we could fall into a subhuman plane. Our daily habits strongly influence the kind of rebirth we will have in due course. It is like speeding in a car and braking over a slippery and cluttered road. Whether we stop safely or not very much depends on the condition of our car and how we have been driving. But once the brakes are applied, we are, as it were, at the mercy of the car’s momentum. Only to this extent, we could say it is “fate.” Yet, we have the capacity for preparing for such eventualities, or even preventing them, if we work hard enough. Fate scorns at the spiritually indolent.

The best known model used in the early texts to explain karma and rebirth is that of dependent arising (*paṭicca,samuppāda*). The fullest expression of this model has the famous twelve interdependent links (*nidāna*):

- (1) Ignorance (*avijjā*): the inability or unwillingness to see the truth of impermanence and the four noble truths.
- (2) Formations (*saṅkhāra*): our mind moves us to act out of this ignorance.
- (3) Consciousness (*viññāna*): here, it is the rebirth-consciousness acts as seeds from which which grow into being.
- (4) Name-and-form (*nāma,rūpa*): we see “things” as if they are discrete by labelling them, so that we begin to think in terms of “I, me mine,” and others, and so on.
- (5) The six senses (*saḷ-āyatana*): These channels of our experience of the world are moulded by those self-notions.
- (6) Contact (*phassa*): All that we experience are only sense-impressions, that is, sense-data arising at our various sense-faculties.
- (7) Feeling (*vedanā*): We react to these sense-contacts, as a rule, based on our past experiences or ignorance, so that we take them to be pleasant (if we like them), painful (if we do not like them), and neutral (if we are unable to relate to them).
- (8) Craving (*taṇhā*): Habitually, we run after what we see as pleasant, trying to accumulate them, and avoiding what we see as unpleasant, and ignoring the rest.
- (9) Clinging (*upādāna*): Our habits only reinforce themselves so that we cling to our past, propelled by our craving.

²⁵² As a rule, I use “unconscious” for the latent tendencies; “subconscious” for the rebirth consciousness; and “pre-conscious” for the motivational mind in connection with conscious actions: see **The Unconscious** = SD 17.8b (6).

²⁵³ On the verifiability of rebirth, see eg Bhikkhu Cintita’s “From Thought to Destiny: IS rebirth verifiable?” <http://bhikkhucintita.wordpress.com/2010/11/05/from-thought-to-destiny-is-rebirth-verifiable/>.

- (10) Existence (*bhava*): We tend to become what cling to, caught in a rut of a false sense of self.
- (11) Birth (*jāti*): And so we are reborn, stuck to a cycle of the fruits of our likes, dislikes, and ignorance.
- (12) Decay and death (*jarā, maraṇa*): All existence and rebirth are marked by change and cycle of changes.

This series is like a flame (our consciousness) lighting a row of 12 candles. Nothing is passed on from the flame to each candle, except the heat (here representing karma). The flame could be blown out at certain crucial weak points in the links, such as when *feelings* arise, when we make nothing of them except to regard them as they really are, as being *impermanent*. The best, of course, is to extinguish *ignorance* itself, so that no more rebirths arise: this is done with insight wisdom that arises from the still clarity of the focussed mind.²⁵⁴

The Irish novelist, **James Joyce**, epitomizes the 12 links of dependent arising in this poetic prose in his second great work, *Finnegans Wake*,

In the ignorance that implies impression that knits knowledge that finds the nameform that whets the wits that convey contacts that sweeten sensation that drives desire that adheres to the attachment that dogs death that bitches birth that entails the ensuance of existentiality.

(James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake*, NY: Viking Press, 1967: 18)

It is clear from the 12-link dependent arising formula that it incorporates both karma (the second link) and rebirth (the eleventh link). The doctrines of karma and rebirth are ubiquitous in the ancient texts and deeply ingrained in Buddhist tradition.²⁵⁵ If we reject karma and rebirth as central Buddhist teachings, we perhaps have the question wrongly put: it is not whether karma and rebirth are essential Buddhist doctrines or not, but rather *what is it that is preventing us from accepting the view or the fact that they are essential doctrines*. All such doctrines are myths or skillful means, provisional teachings that can help us understand ourselves. More important than speculating on the truth of these teachings, they work to inspire us to ask how well do we really understand *ourselves*.

4.4.5 Dependent arising. One of the effective ways of weakening a religion or culture, sapping away its life-force, is to master its myths and re-define them in a convincing new way so that the audience is won over. The Buddha is the myth-master par excellence. Take, for example, how he makes use of the Vedic ideas on cosmogony, *ātman* and fire, and turns them around for the benefit of the Buddha Dharma.

Vedic scholar **Joanna Jurewicz**, in her paper, “Playing with fire: The *pratītyasamutpāda* from the perspective of Vedic thought” (2000), notes that the Buddha must have surely taught at least some of his discourses to educated people, well versed in brahminic thought, who are familiar with the concepts and a general idea of Vedic cosmogony. Much of her instructive paper explains in detail how the terms of the dependent arising have a definite meaning, evoking definite associations. Having explained dependent arising in this manner, the Buddha then astutely turns the table against the brahmins with this clincher:

The act of cutting off the *ātman*—or rather given his fiery nature, the act of blowing him out—deprives all the hitherto well-defined concepts of their meaning and challenges the infallibility of all their associations, exposing the meaninglessness, absurdity even, of all the cosmogonic development they express....

And since fire is the intrinsic character of the *ātman*, *nirvāṇa* can mean not only the liberating recognition of the *ātman*'s absence, but also the refutation of the whole of the Vedic metaphysics, which postulates that fire underlies, conditions, and manifests itself in the cosmogony.

(Jurewicz 2000:100)²⁵⁶

²⁵⁴ See **Dependent arising** = SD 5.16.

²⁵⁵ See **Is rebirth immediate?** = SD 2.17(4) for “Canonical referencess to the intermediate state.”

²⁵⁶ See **Mahā, nidāna S** (D 15) = SD 5.17(2.1).

In the opening to the Vedic purification rites, while the Prastotr sings the opening praises to the Sāman (a name for the universal soul, Brahman), the patron of the sacrifice silently recites: “From the unreal lead me to the real! From the darkness lead me to light! From death lead me to immortality!”²⁵⁷ The Buddha, as it were, in answer to this supplication *actually* points out the real, the light and the death-free to us, and even more so, he declares to us that *prayer is ineffective*²⁵⁸ in such matters: we need to live a life that is conducive to the good that we aspire for.²⁵⁹ Prayers mostly try to reify what we are only see darkly dosed to us in dogmas; mindful living is to turn on the light switch and carefully examine our surroundings and ourselves, so that we rightly know what next must be done. The mythic packaging of rituals and dogmas has been removed by the Buddha to reveal the presence of true reality itself.

5 Language and truth

5.1 BEHIND THE WORDS. To fully understand certain Buddhist teachings, or even Buddhism as a whole, we need to understand the nature of religious language and myth. The Buddha has broken through the bonds of ignorance and barriers of view to directly see true reality, so that he is fully self-liberated. This same reality confronts both the Buddha and the unawakened: the key difference is that the Buddha fully sees this and is thus liberated, but the unawakened is still in a hazy stupor, existing in their own dream-worlds.

The most effective way that the Buddha can convey to us an idea of his awakening experience is to use the language of *myth*. But what is this language? The language and vocabulary of a community reflects its historical and transhistorical experiences. “**Historical**” here refers to what has happened and is happening to life as we know it, to our global community, to *our society and local community*, and on the most basic and most vital level, to each of us as *individuals*. Our language is *historically* shaped by our experiences at various levels of our being, that is, our *worldly* experiences of our schooling, working, relationships and current events.

At the same time, our language (or languages) shape our world-view. The language we habitually use tends to powerfully shape how we think. The world often looks differently in different languages.²⁶⁰ Yet, despite these external and superficial differences, recurrent patterns of our conduct and external events tend to pervade our lives and cultures. These are patterns of *greed, hate and delusion*, woven into the fabric of our lives and histories. These patterns and recurring episodes are the myths that we need to see and understand, for they are the key to the door of our liberation.

In an important sense, *the language or languages* of a community define it, and in defining it, limits it. In other words, language both expresses our thoughts and desires, but at the same time limits our communication, for the simple reason that “the name is not the thing named.”²⁶¹ More significantly, there are many things that cannot be expressed, or not easily expressed, through conventional language. So we need to turn to *the language of myth*. We need to see history and ourselves as parts of a greater scheme of myth.

We can see myth as a “**transhistorical**” reality, that is, a higher level of seeing ourselves and others, of the world *within* and the world *without*, of our minds and the external world. When we try to see the world without the vehicle of daily language, that is, to see ourselves and what is around us *directly* just as

²⁵⁷ BĀU 1.3.28; Patrick Olivelle’s tr, see P Olivelle (tr), *The Early Upaniṣads*, NY: Oxford Univ Press, 1998:45.

²⁵⁸ “Prayer” here refers to any kind of supplication, esp to God or the gods. On “wordless prayer,” see Piya Tan’s Inspiration 48, “God’s temple is within us,” *Healing Words*, 2011:136.

²⁵⁹ **It̥tha S** (A 5.43/3:47) = SD 47.2.

²⁶⁰ See **How Buddhism became Chinese** = SD 40b.2(2.7): How the Chinese language changed Buddhism. See also the works of Guy Deutscher, such as *Through the Language Glass*, Metropolitan Books/Henry Holt, 2010. See his book review, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/09/05/books/review/Bickerton-t.html>; or his website: <http://www.guydeutscher.org/>.

²⁶¹ On the problem of language, see SD 17.4(2-6).

they are, what do we see? This is a sort of “transmundane”²⁶² understanding of the world, the world as myth.

Understandably, one of the most valuable lessons that early Buddhism has to teach us is that of a willingness and ability to unconditionally listen to others, so that we are able to properly understand them beyond their words. We simply need to read between the lines, and listen to the silence in the interstices of the words, to see the myth resonating through them. Wisdom arises in us when we see beyond the wall of words through the window of myth into the garden of truth.

5.2 STORIES. The gap between the historical and the spiritual (or transhistorical) is a huge one, often too wide for an ordinary person to cross over. Indeed, most are contented or compelled to remain or wander about on this side of the chasm.²⁶³ Literature and religion often provide a bridge over this chasm by way of stories, parables, figures and irony. As these fields are complex and diverse, and our purpose here is a study and experience of the Buddha’s teachings, we shall focus our discussion on myth in Buddhism.²⁶⁴

Stories or narratives are accounts, usually of people, especially heroes, who may be historical, legendary or even fabulous, in the case of human-centred circles, such as a secular society (as in politics, education, business, science, sports etc). We have, for example, stories of great scientists and how they “discovered” certain universal principles. An apple, it was famously but falsely believed, fell on the English scientist Isaac Newton’s head, reflecting on which he discovered the laws of gravitation.²⁶⁵

In religious circles, it is well known that religious texts and teachings include accounts of God, gods, demons, the devil, and so on. Although none of the followers of these religions or faiths have met or seen any of these “beings” (in the historical sense), they, as a rule, can only *believe* in their existence, and speak on their behalf (since they cannot speak for themselves), and play a game of “as-if” taken as historical reality.

In other words, the followers of such a religion tend to take their narratives as history, even though such tales are clearly symbolic, legendary or fabulous. This is *the language of myth* which they have mistaken for historical language. This is a key basis for religious intolerance.²⁶⁶ This is like talking about Jack and the Beanstalk, or Hansel and Gretel, taking them to be human history, and missing their significance and morals altogether.

5.3 THE MIDDLE LANGUAGE. The Buddha’s awakening experience is simply ineffable. His is a realization that has broken through the language barrier and risen well beyond all verbal categories. Imagine when we are ecstatically happy, and when someone asks how we feel, we are simply “lost for words,” and can only perhaps say, “I don’t know, I just feel great.” The awakening experience is far, far more ecstatic than this.

Unawakened beings, however, need some kind of language when communicating with one other. As such, the Buddha, in his efforts to transmit his realization of the liberating truth or Dharma, has to rely on the language we are familiar with. To overcome the limitations of conventional language, the Buddha

²⁶² “**Transmundane**” here refers to a view or understanding that is “above or across” the world, but still in some way deeply connected with it, though not unmeshed in it. It is like a bird’s eye-view of thing, but a clearer and more universal understanding of reality. I have reserved “**supermundane**” or “supramundane” (*lok’uttara*) for the various levels of realization on the path (*maggā*) of sainthood.

²⁶³ Cf D 16.1.34/2:89 = SD 9; Dh 85.

²⁶⁴ A helpful intro into this topic is Robert A Segal, *Myth*, Oxford, 2004.

²⁶⁵ As noted by Stephen Hawking, “Isaac Newton was not a pleasant man”: *A Brief History of Time*, 1996 (rev & exp), ch 12.

²⁶⁶ Religious tolerance, on the other hand, is not simply accepting other beliefs (such as cultural Buddhisms) to be equivalent with early Buddhism. The differences must be defined and stated, the similarities celebrated and practised. For Buddhists, even if we do not agree with other Buddhism, we understand them to be the signs of the times, responding to their emotional and social needs. However, the truth and effectiveness of early Buddhism, must be unequivocally proclaimed as a viable and wise choice. The best way to counter false Buddhism is two present true Buddhism to a greater and ready audience by our own examples of inner peace and open wisdom.

often uses another kind of language, that of *imagery and mythology*, that is, parables, metaphors, similes, figures of speech and stories.²⁶⁷ This is the “**middle language**.” [1.2]

The middle language is neither symbolic in the *conventional* sense (its words might be translated but its meaning can only be truly understood through spiritual practice) nor is it *ultimate* (for it has been written down and therefore subject to intellectual interpretation). It is a middle or “third” language, a *tertium quid*, that stands as a bridge between the conventional expression and the ultimate understanding of the Dharma. But the bridge can only be crossed by the wise who knows the Dharma.

The middle language is also a safeguard against the profanation of the sacred through intellectual curiosity and professionalism, and misuse of meditation and psychic attainments by the curious and the ignorant. It has its origin mainly in the fact that everyday language is incapable of expressing the experiences of the spirit, except through parables and paradoxes. This is the language of myth, of deep rumblings and profound stillness of our inner space. If we are willing to sit calmly and wait for the kettle to boil, we might just be rewarded with some insight into this middle language—but we would rather excuse ourselves as we have better things to do.

5.4 WORDS BEYOND WORDS. The “middle language” is *new* in the sense that we need a different way of looking, so that we can see this new dimension of being that is beyond words as we know them. It is new in that it *renews* and *recharges* our lives with a clear sense of purpose and bliss. This language might even appear as a “shock” (*samvega*) at first to those used only to literal and formal uses of words, of sounds without feeling. It is shocking in the sense that it drags us out of the rut of our narrow minds and comfort zones, to look between the words and the lines, to see a bigger picture that is closer to real life.

Some verses of **the Dhammapada** illustrate the Buddha’s use of the middle language. Two remarkable examples are:

Having slain mother and father,
And the two kshatriya kings;
Having destroyed the country with its tax collector—
Ungrieving goes the brahmin! (Dh 294)

Having slain mother and father,
And the two brahmin kings;
Having destroyed the tiger as the fifth—
Ungrieving goes the brahmin! (Dh 295)

Here the “mother” represents craving while the “father,” conceit.²⁶⁸ The two “kshatriya kings” and “brahmin kings” each symbolizes the extreme views of eternalism and of nihilism. The “country” is a simile for the sense-organs and sense-objects; its “tax-collector,” attachment and lust. The “tiger” represents the five mental hindrances, and the “brahmin” refers to the arhat.

Another famous example of the middle language (this time in graphic form) is found in the episode of 7-year-old Prince Siddhattha during **the ploughing festival** when he meditates under a jambu tree. It is said that the shadow of the jambu tree does not move away from him even though it is well past noon! This illustrates the transcendence of time during meditation. Similarly, in Tibetan sacred art, the sun and the moon are often depicted together to represent the *timelessness* of the Dharma.

The middle language is the lifeblood of Buddhist stories and fables. Like secular stories and pious tales, Buddhism too has a wide range of myths about the gods, even God himself (in the form of Mahā Brahmā). Buddhism, however, goes further to include non-humans, that is, animals, even living things

²⁶⁷ See **Dhammapada 97** = SD 10.6(1).

²⁶⁸ The Buddha’s use of mother-father imagery here rings a modern note echoed in modern psychology, eg Erich Fromm. *The Forgotten Language*. NY: Grove Press, 1951.

(trees, etc). Often, in such stories, even non-human actors speak, act and interact in a human way.²⁶⁹ Indeed, they are the living mirror of our human frailties and strengths, trials and triumphs, and awakening.

If any of the world religions is deprived of its mythology—symbolism, analogies, myths and middle language—it would cease to be a spiritual method or even a religion. It would degenerate into a cold mass of meaningless dogmas, rules and rituals, into priestly materialism and religious moneytheism that have to be enforced through blind faith, the spiritless word, and religious guile. Religion then is no different from worldly commerce.

On the other hand, myth should not be taken as being true in themselves. For, then it would be the basis for dogma and blind faith. In Buddhism, myth is a literary device or mind-instrument for, firstly, expressing universal truths about humanity, life and the universe. Secondly, it reminds us that we are caught in a worldly rut of suffering and incompleteness. Yet, we are capable of realizing our full spiritual potential, and should do so, for our own sake as well as that of others.

A myth, in fact, can be quite dramatic and immediate, reminding us of our own goodness, that *the truth is not out there*, but right here in the present moment of our minds. In **the Vatthûpama Sutta** (M 7), the pious brahmin Sundarika invites the Buddha to baptize himself, wash away his “sins,” in the waters of a sacred river. The Buddha replies that even sacred rivers have no power to purify anyone. An evil done cannot be undone. Yet, our goodness and purity are *internal realities*, something that cannot be lost:

For the pure, it is always a holy day!²⁷⁰
For the pure, whose deeds are pure,²⁷²

For the pure, it is always a precept day!²⁷¹
his vow is always fulfilled.

(M 7.20/1:39) = SD 28.12

As the nun **Puṇṇikā** retorts in her Therī, gāthā that if the water were to have such salvific power, then such water-creatures as frogs, turtles, and crocodiles would all go to heaven! Those practising wrong livelihood, such as animal-trappers, thieves, executioners and other evil-doers would be released from their evil by the ablution. And, worst of all, the waters would carry away their merit, too! (Thī 239-244)

The point is that we should stop doing bad deeds and keep to the five precepts. If we are pure in this way, wherever we are, that place is a sacred spot. In other words, purity and holiness is not a thing (eg water) or a place (eg Gayā), but our own wholesome state of mind.²⁷³ The belief that we can be purified by an external agent, such as a river or another being, is an antimyth, an unwholesome narrative.

²⁶⁹ In **Jātaka** stories, eg, we have non-human actors (the past lives of the Bodhisattva): **deity** (J 13, 485); **tree deity** (J 18, 19, 38, 72, 74, 102, 105, 109, 113, 139, 187, 205, 209, 217, 227, 257, 272, 283, 294, 295, 298, 307, 311, 361, 400, 402, 412, 437, 465, 475, 492, 520, 537); **forest deity** (J 48); **mountain deity** (J 419); **air deity** (J 147, 297); **river deity** (J 288, 511); **sea deity** (J 146, 190, 296); **kusa-grass deity** (J 121); **naga** (J 304, 506, 543); **naga king** (J 524); **garuda king** (J 360, 518); **lion** (J 143, 152, 153, 157, 172, 188, 322, 335, 397, 486); **elephant** (J 72, 122, 221, 267, 357, 455, 514); **winged horse** (J 196); **horse** (J 23, 24, 266); **bull** (J 28, 29, 88); **ox** (J 30, 286); **buffalo** (J 278); **stag** (J 11, 16, 359, 483, 501); **deer** (J 12, 15, 385, 482); **antelope** (J 21, 206); **monkey** (J 20, 57, 58, 177, 208, 219, 222, 342, 404, 407, 516); **golden goose** (J 270, 370, 379, 434, 502); **goose** (J 451, 476, 533, 534); **siṅgila bird** (J 321); **mallard** (J 32, 136); **quail** (J 33, 35, 118, 168, 394); **pigeon** (J 42, 274, 275, 277, 375, 395); **partridge** (J 37, 438); **peacock** (J 159, 339, 491); **parrot** (J 145, 198, 255, 329, 429, 430, 484, 503, 521); **crow** (J 140, 204, 292); **vulture** (J 164, 381, 399, 427); **woodpecker** (J 210, 308); **cock** (J 383); **bird** (J 36, 115, 133, 384, 464, 536); **frog** (J 239); **fish** (J 75, 114, 236). *Italicized* refs indicate stories referred to. See John Garrett-Jones 1979:15-19 for a full list.

²⁷⁰ *Phaggu* (Skt *Phalgu*) is a blessed or auspicious constellation, and also the spring season; also refers to *Phāl-guna*, the full moon of Feb-Mar, the *Nakṣatra Phalgunī* (Phalgunī Constellation), an auspicious day for lustration, Qu at DA 1:139. Comy says that brahmins believe that whoever bathes (in a sacred river or ford) on the full-moon day of the month of Phagguna is cleansed of the evil done during the year (MA 1:179).

²⁷¹ Lit, “For the pure, it is always the sabbath [precept day].”

²⁷² *Suci,kamma*, cf Dh 24.

²⁷³ M7.20/1:39 = SD 28.12.

6 Freeing the mind from the body

6.1 THE PURPOSE OF MEDITATION. We have already (albeit briefly) examined the tension between crowdedness and spaciousness [4.3.8], reflecting on the social, economic and political conditions of the Buddha's times in the urbanizing central Gangetic plain of India. This was mostly a physical and social crowdedness, against which the Buddha's teaching offered a spiritual spaciousness in the monastic life. We will now examine a higher and deeper level of spaciousness: that of *inner space*, that is, meditation and its fruits.

The Buddhist life is often said to comprise the “**three trainings**” (*ti, sikkhā*), that is, training in moral virtue (*sīla sikkhā*), in concentration (*samādhi sikkhā*), and in wisdom (*paññā sikkhā*).²⁷⁴ The first, moral training, concerns the disciplining of *body and speech*, keeping them morally restrained by way of respecting life, property, the person, truth and mindfulness.²⁷⁵ This is the training in civility, in accepting others as a part of our daily lives, so that *society* is possible. On a more vital level, such a personal discipline and social harmony are the ideal conditions for mental cultivation, which in its turn is a preparation for the cultivation of insight wisdom, leading to self-liberation.

Here we will focus on the second training, that of *mental cultivation*, that is, meditation and mindfulness. These are central practices in Buddhism, and as such, they tend to be very rich in myth, such as the parables and images relating to meditative training and states, especially those illustrating the mental hindrances [2.2] and the dhyanas [6.3].

A practical summary of the meditation stages or process in early Buddhism would be thus: firstly, that of freeing the body from all discomfort so that it does not trouble us at all, and we can just *sit*; secondly, that of silencing speech, external and internal, physical and mental, so that we *feel*, that is, directly experience the meditation object and related wholesome states; and thirdly, that of fully *enjoying* the freed mind in all its blissful spaciousness. When this inner pilgrimage is fulfilled, it ripens in self-liberation.

6.2 WORKING WITH FEELINGS

6.2.1 To end thought tail-biting, let go. We are the creatures of our senses; our senses are the creatures of our creation. We each live in our own mind-made world, incorporating a very private reality, wearing one of our numerous masks as we think fits the audience. The director and producer of these ongoing stage productions are our thoughts. Each of our physical sense is an open window, an open wound, through which slide endless strings of thoughts, sensitive to the outside world. Very often, we aren't sure which string to tag; so we try to tag them all.

This is called mental proliferation,²⁷⁶ chasing one thought explosion after another. After a while, we sense that these explosions seem to sound the same: we are caught in a rut of recurrent thoughts moved by our likes and dislikes; otherwise, we feel dead in our boredom. The uroborus²⁷⁷ may bite its own tail, but we, when the pain grows greater, tend to bite even harder. And we wonder why the suffering does not stop.

To end thought tail-biting, let go. The sign is everywhere in large bold print in the Buddhist texts, in the Dharma talks. But when we only read or listen *ritually*, then it is as if we are merely worshipping the notices, just as some of us look in awe at the monastic uniforms and worship them, as merely a ritual act. Such a ritual is an addictive drug: we take it whenever we feel a pain, or fear that we would feel pain, but we fail to address the root of the real issue. Maybe it is idol worship; maybe, it is psychological transference.²⁷⁸

²⁷⁴ See *Sīla samādhi paññā* = SD 21.6.

²⁷⁵ These are of course the 5 precepts, on which details, see esp **Veḷu, dvāreyya S** (S 55.7/5:352-356) = SD 1.5.

²⁷⁶ Mental proliferation (*papañca*), see eg **Madhu, piṇḍika S** (M 18) = SD 6.14 Intro (2) & **(Anusaya) Ānanda S** (A 3.32a/1:132 f) @ SD 31.8a(2).

²⁷⁷ This is the mythical snake that bites its own tail, denoting samsaric suffering: see **Yodh'ājīva S** (S 42.3) = SD 23.3 Intro. On the theme of *repetition*, see **Anusaya** = SD 31.9.

²⁷⁸ On transference & defence mechanisms, see **Gadrabha Samaṇa S** (S 3.81) = SD 24.10b. See Jack Engler, 2000: 3 (online), 7 (print).

Why do we find it so hard to let go of the thought tail-biting? The answer is ironic: it is because we feel *as if* we are enjoying the pain! In Greek mythology, **Sisyphus** is a king, the craftiest of men (who kills guests and divulges secrets of the gods). The gods chain him up in Tartarus (an underworld between heaven and earth). Through his wiles, however, he escapes a number of times, and refuses to return to the underworld.

When finally caught, he is made to slave in Tartarus, pushing a huge boulder up a hill, only to watch it roll down again, and to repeat the task for eternity. The French author, Albert Camus, in his essay, *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942), sees Sisyphus as personifying the absurdity of human life, but concludes, “one must imagine Sisyphus happy” as “the struggle itself towards the heights is enough to fill a man’s heart.”

6.2.2 The breath is a door to the mind. An effective way of ending the thought tail-biting is to break the painful cycle by turning to a wholesome thought. Ideally, this is done by carefully observing the relaxed breath. In other words, do **the breath meditation**. The breath is a safe and powerful meditation object that helps us to gradually let go of our distractions. We know this is working when the breath becomes more relaxed and calm, even to the point of becoming so subtle as to be still. The breath, in other words, is a door to the calm mind.

The breath meditation or “mindfulness of the breath” (*ānāpāna,sati*) is a very safe method, even for children.²⁷⁹ After all, even the child Bodhisattva Siddhattha is said to have meditated under a jambu tree and attained the first dhyana, when he is only 7 years old.²⁸⁰ As long as we can comfortably fix our attention on the relaxed breath for 5 minutes or more at a time, we should be able to progress with proper coaching, some patience, in a suitable environment. In due course, as we build up our breath-based mental focus, we are able to sustain a cocoon-like presence of stillness around ourselves so that we move more mindfully and compassionately move in the world.²⁸¹

6.2.3 Lovingkindness is the door to “God’s temple” within us. If we find the breath meditation somewhat difficult, we should instead train ourselves in the cultivation of lovingkindness (*mettā,bhāvanā*).²⁸² Lovingkindness (*mettā*) is *unconditional love*, that is, to openly accept ourselves just as we are, and, starting there, to cultivate an ever greater openness, embracing others, and all living beings just as we would love ourselves. This practice is based on the understanding that there are other beings besides ourselves, that we are a network of living beings intimately interconnected with one another and with nature herself. We are moved by the conviction that since we are our thoughts, our wholesome heart empowers self-healing and promotes healthier communication with others.

On a deeper level, the Buddha teaches this engaging meditation of universal love as a panacea to the antimyth or wrong view of relegating goodness or godliness onto some external agency, especially a father-image or power-figure. This remarkable teaching is laid out in **the Te,vijja Sutta** (D 13) where the Buddha details how the “temple of God” is really within us. Godliness is not to be worshipped, but to be cultivated within us, so that we also embody personal accountability for our actions, and that our goodness can move others to goodness and healing, too.

“God’s temple” is of course the “**divine abodes**” (*brahma,vihāra*), the true dwelling of the highest being, that is, lovingkindness, compassion, appreciative joy and equanimity.²⁸³ This is the truly real heaven, and it is not “up there,” or “out there” light-years away. It is right here in our hearts, when we cultivate *unconditional love* for all beings, including ourselves; when we actively and wisely extend our hands of *compassion* to others when they need it; when we openly and truly *rejoice* in the wholesome success

²⁷⁹ Understandably, the child should be coached by a competent and patient meditator who is able flow with the child’s ability to concentrate, and not to force the meditate on him.

²⁸⁰ **M 36.31/1:246 = SD 49.4, 85/2:93 = SD 55.2, 100.28-29/2:147 = SD 10.9.** See **The miraculous life of the Buddha** = SD 52.1().

²⁸¹ For details on the breath meditation, see **Ānāpāna,sati S** (M 118/3:77-88) = SD 7.13.

²⁸² On the 4 **divine abodes** (*brahma,vihāra*), see **Te,vijja S** (D 13.76/1:250 f) = SD 1.8 & **(Karaja,kāya) Brahma,vihāra S** (A 10.208.1b/5:299) = SD 2.10(2).

²⁸³ That is, *mettā karuṇā muditā upekkhā* respectively: see **Mettā Bhāvanā S** (It 1.3.7/19-21) & SD 30.7(1.2) & **(Nānā,karaṇa) Mettā S 1** (A 4.135/2:128 f) & SD 33.9(2).

and goodness of others, especially their spirituality; and when we keep *a calm heart* realizing that despite all these efforts, there are still those who are untouched by it. We have done our part according to our strength and wisdom, but others still fare according to their karma, and that Dharma work is never finished.

6.2.4 The supreme worship. Even in his last days, the Buddha speaks against anyone worshipping him, warning as it were against looking up to him as a god or God. Even if these might not be his exact words, it is clear that the early Buddhists (at least those who preserved the ancient texts) were against deifying him. **The Mahā,parinibbāna Sutta** (D 16) records how as the Buddha lies lion-like between the twin-sal trees, they blossom forth out of season, and fall on his body; heavenly flowers and sweet sandalwood fall from the sky upon him; heavenly music waft in the air in his homage. In response to these manifestations, miraculous as they are, the Buddha declares that this is *not* the way to worship him.

The supreme worship (*paramā pūjā*) is that *we should practise the Dharma in accordance with the Dharma, properly practising, dwelling in accordance with the Dharma.*²⁸⁴ An important part of this supreme worship is, of course, meditation. Even we close our eyes and calm ourselves in the bliss of meditation, we are truly worshipping the Buddha, as it were. For such a “worship” or practice preserves and propagates the Dharma, which even the Buddha places above himself.²⁸⁵

If *breath meditation* charges up with an inner stillness and clarity so that we mindfully live in the present moment, positively aware of ourselves, of others and the environment, *lovingkindness* empowers us to wholesomely and effectively communicate divine love to others, seeing goodness in others, and inspiring them to actuate their own natural capacity for self-awakening. Lovingkindness is a true appreciation of life and being.

6.3 INNER SPACE AND STILLNESS

6.3.1 World-stopping experience. On a deeper, more personal, level, meditation is the true miracle that really works for us where no prayer, blessing, or intercession by any external agency can do for us. Our minds and hearts reach such a profound peace and bliss that everything else, even the world, even our karma, seem to stop. **The Puggala Paññatti**, for example, calls the streamwinner an “aeon-stopper” (*thi-ta,kappī*):

Should this person, practising for the realization of the fruit of streamwinning, and it were the time for the burning-up of the aeon, it would not burn up until that person realizes the fruit of streamwinning.”
(Pug 1.20/13).

This is the myth of spiritual time, that the mind in a deeply spiritual state, experiences a natural or organic time, not the physical or measured time of the world.

On a higher level of meditation, when the mind is fully free of the body, and is no more dictated or distracted by the five physical senses, when all the five mental hindrances²⁸⁶ have been overcome, it attains dhyana (*jhāna*), the total blissful focus of the mind. The profoundly blissful states are known as the four dhyanas.²⁸⁷

6.3.2 The parables for the four dhyanas. Discourses like **the Sāmañña,phala Sutta** (D 2) use four well known parables to illustrate the nature of these four dhyanas. **The first dhyana** is characterized by a profound zest, joy and mental focus “born of solitude,” that is, having transcended the physical sense-

²⁸⁴ D 16.5.2-3/2:138 & SD 9(7b). On the story of Dhamm’ārāma, see Intro (14). Cf **Cūḷa Saccaka S** (M 35), where in a similar connection, the arhat is said to accomplished in the 3 supremacies (*anuttariya*) (M 35.26b/1:235) = SD 26.5. See further **The teacher or the teaching?** = SD 3.14; also **Paṭhama Jhāna Pañha S** (S 40.1) = SD 24.-11 Intro (1.3).

²⁸⁵ See **Gārava S** (S 6.2/1:138-140) = SD 12.3.

²⁸⁶ **The 5 mental hindrances** (*pañca nīvaraṇa*) are sense-desire, ill wil, sloth and torpor, restless and remorse, and doubt: see **Nīvaraṇa** = SD 32.1 and the chapters in SD 32 in general..

²⁸⁷ For a detailed study on the Buddha and dhyana, see **The Buddha discovered dhyana** = SD 33.1b.

world, with only a hint of thinking and pondering remaining (technically called “initial application and sustained application”).

The Sutta here gives *the parable of the skilled bathman*. Our mind, in the first dhyana, is compared to a ball of soap lather that is thoroughly well mixed so that it does not drip at all. This is an imagery of pervading lightness, of a mind that has transcended the physical time-space dictated by the five senses. The “ball” signifies mental oneness, a mind that is fully focussed on itself, like a mirror looking into another, seeing infinity.

In **the second dhyana**, every hint of thinking has altogether evaporated, leaving only the zest and joy founded on a mental unity “born of concentration,” that is, a fully focussed mind totally free of thought. The parable here is that of the closed lake without any inlet or outlet, fed only by *spring-water welling up from its depths and rain-water falling from the heights*, and the whole lake is pervaded by cool water.

The lack of inlet and outlet channels represents our fully transcending all the five physical senses, so that we are purely *mental* beings. The physical body as we know it, as it were, has ceased to exist, at least for the duration of the dhyana. We are sustained by our mental energies (the spring from the depths) and enjoying only profound bliss and beauty (rains from the heavens). This is the most artistic of experiences we can ever imagine, where truth (the submarine springs) and beauty (the rains) are our constant and real sources of inspiration. We are fully thought-free, thoroughly blissful, like the lake pervaded by the cool water. So real and blissful is such beauty that we can only look on, as it were, in “noble silence,” which this state is also known as.

The third dhyana is free from exuberant zest, leaving only *a calmly profound joy* in a fully focussed mind. The mind is now fully blissful, free from its last vestige of sense-activity as we know it. For this reason, the ancient saints speak of our dwelling in this state “happily...in equanimity and mindfulness.” It is useful to note here that “mindful” refers not to any thought (the last vestiges of thinking and pondering are all gone), but only to fully *feeling* every moment of bliss.

Knowing has been suspended: there is nothing to know, as all sense-activity have ended. There is only *feeling* (loosely, in the artistic sense) or direct experience of the reality before us. To use simpler images, it is like being mentally transfixed on the beauty of a glorious sun-set or entranced by a profoundly beautiful piece of music.

The parable of the lotus pond illustrates how *various kinds of lotuses arising and growing fully immersed, “from root to tip,” in the cool waters*. It is as if we are reborn, recharged by the profound bliss. We are unconditionally happy for ourselves, a happiness that does not depend on any external source, no more bound and defined by the senses. It is bliss in the true sense, not of the word, but of feeling.

The fourth dhyana is free of even happiness as we know it. For, to be happy is to be happy *with* something, an object, as it were: we are happy *with* the profound stillness of the third dhyana. But in the fourth dhyana, every trace of a sense of otherness ceases. *We are* blissful; in fact, there is not even a “we”—there is only *bliss*. Imagine, for example, we are plagued by an incessantly noisy surrounding, and we wish all the din would stop. Finally, after a long painful while, the din finally dies down: imagine the bliss.

The parable of the fourth dhyana is that of the white-shrouded man, “sitting covered from head to foot with a white cloth,” so that no part of him is uncovered. While all the other three parables centre around *water* (which we can take to represent purification, in the sense of being free of the mental hindrances),²⁸⁸ this fourth parable is that of *a large spotless piece of body-enveloping white cloth*.²⁸⁹

At this point, we are truly in touch with our real self, our individuality: we really know our mind, our true “self.” We are in direct contact with the radiant mind (*pabhassara,citta*)—we *are* the radiant mind—

²⁸⁸ On the 5 mental hindrances, see (2.2).

²⁸⁹ The cloth simile is also found in a stock passage on moral purity of the noble ones, “unbroken, untorn, unmixed, spotless, liberating, praised by the wise, untarnished, giving rise to concentration,” where “unbroken” (*akhaṇḍehi*) and “untorn” (*acchiddehi*) refer to a fully whole piece of cloth, ie, it is undamaged or soiled in anyway: see eg **Pañca Vera,bhaya S** (S 12.41/2:68) = SD 3.3. See also **Cundī S** (A 5.32/3:36). Cf UA 268. For details, see Vism 1.143-161/51-58, 7.101-106/221 f.

completely free from mental impurities and in profound spiritual peace. It is in this connection that the Buddha declares:

Monks, this mind is radiant, and it is freed from adventitious impurities [that “arrive” through the sense-doors].

The instructed [wise] noble disciple understands things as they really are.

Therefore there is mental development for the instructed noble disciple, I say!

(A 1.6.2/1:10; also 1.5.10/1:10)²⁹⁰

7 Heroism

7.1 TRUE COURAGE. All myths, especially full-length ones, have a hero (*vīra*), a word which literally means “a strong man (especially in the moral sense).”²⁹¹ The Buddha²⁹² or the arhat²⁹³ is often described as a hero. The deeds of a hero, or, better, a heroic deed, is called *virīya*, “effort, energy,” that is, the “state of a strong man.”²⁹⁴ “The deeds of a hero” refers to the compassion and wisdom of the Buddha and the arhats; “a heroic deed” is what we ourselves, emulating the Buddha and the arhats, are capable of. In our spiritual efforts, we are *heroes* when exerting ourselves in moral virtue, mental concentration, and wisdom. We are men²⁹⁵ of action—in body, mind and spirit—who do not rely on external succour, yet would accept any assistance or advice humbly, should it help us in spiritual progress.

These are the four divine abodes, *the hallmarks of a true leader*, that is, one who unconditionally accepts others, compassionate to others in their weaknesses and failures, appreciative in the success and goodness of others, and even-minded in the face of difficult tasks. Just as the High Gods (*brahmā*) are fearless, even so a true leader fearlessly cultivates these positive emotions and infuses such godliness in others, too. Such an individual is one with intrepidity or moral courage (*vesārajja*).²⁹⁶

These divine abodes are called “immeasurable” (*appamāṇā*, *appamaññā*) because they empower us to reach out to immeasurable beings.²⁹⁷ This means that true leadership begins with not measuring others in physical numbers or in a material way, but in *vision, commitment, effort and wisdom*. Spiritual work is beyond statistics, for truth and goodness cannot be measured, and the true Dharma hero is one who is unconcerned with numbers and limitations, but with realities and abilities.

Lovingkindness or unconditional love is a manifestation of true courage: it comes from our *heart* (Latin *cor*) and lives in our *breath*. For, the breath is the door to our heart, where true courage lies. As we look on our breath with patience and lovingkindness, it becomes more still and subtle. It is difficult to feel our *courage* (which literally means “the heart”) when we are distracted by the world (which here refers to the activities of the five senses). The more mentally focussed we are, the wider the breath-door to our heart opens. A true Dharma practitioner or worker thus has a boundless heart, brimming with intrepidity or fearlessness (*vesārajja*).²⁹⁸ He is a true hero.

²⁹⁰ See **Dhyana** = SD 8.4(8).

²⁹¹ Cognate with Latin *uir* (*vir*), meaning “(adult) male,” and from which we get “virile” (capable of sexual propagation or growth); also related to Latin., *virtus*, “virtue.”

²⁹² **Vīra**: D 2:39, M 1:169, 2:93, 146, S 1:137, 233 f, A 2:28, 3:296, Dh 418, 422, Sn 349, 547, 573, 1102, Tha 528; **mahā,vīra**: D 2:287, S 1:15, 63, 121, 193, Sn 543, Tha 527, 1154, 1241; Thī 293, 335, B 4, Ap passim; Vv 92.

²⁹³ **Nara,vīra**: Tha 736 (*nara,vīra*), Ap 2:471, 490.

²⁹⁴ D 3:113, 120 f, 255 f; S 2:132, 206 f; Sn 79, 184, 353, 422, 531, 966, 1026.

²⁹⁵ “Men” is used in the inclusive sense of “men and women.”

²⁹⁶ “**Intrepidity**” (*vesārajja*), which basically means “free from *sārajja*”; but is grammatically an abstract formation from *visārada*, often referring to the Buddha’s or an arhat’s perfect self-confidence or intrepidity, which are detailed in **Mahā Sīha,nāda S** (M 12.22-28/1:71 f). There are the 4 confidences, viz: (1) the highest knowledge, (2) the state of having all the influxes destroyed; (3) recognizing of obstacles, and (4) recognition and teaching the way to awakening; see also D 1:110; M 1:380; A 2:13, 3:297 f, 4:83, 210, 213; Pm 2:194; Nc 466; DA 1:278; KhpA 104; VvA 213; J 2:27; DhA 1:86.

²⁹⁷ DhA 192-197; Vism 263-270.

²⁹⁸ See **Sārajja Sutta** (A 5.101/3:127) = SD 28.9a(3).

7.2 THE HEROIC LIFE. The Pali word for “nervousness” or “fearfulness” is *sārajjā*, and its opposite is *vesārajjā*, “moral courage, intrepidity.”²⁹⁹ To be nervous means to be nose-led by our “nerves,” that is, our physical body, putting undue importance to our physical being and appearance. When we are attached to physical things, we *fear* losing them, as they are by nature *impermanent*, a truth which we are either unwilling or unable to accept.

In the **Soṇa,daṇḍa Sutta** (D 4), we see how the kiasu³⁰⁰ brahmin Soṇa,daṇḍa’s fear of losing face is motivated by his desire for respect and patronage of his peers, without which his status and wealth would diminish. After all, he is the lord of Campā, a fief given to him by the rajah Bimbi,sāra.³⁰¹ He is clearly nose-led by “social fearfulness” (*sārajjā*).³⁰² Suffice it here for us to note that according to **the Sārajjā Sutta** (A 5.101), the opposite of social fearfulness is intrepidity (*vesārajjā*) or true confidence.

The (Anicca) Cakkhu Sutta (S 25.1) and the nine discourses following it are all reflections on the *impermanence* of our senses, external sense-objects and other aspects of our being, either through *faith* (that all existence is impermanent) or through *wisdom* (by way of careful investigation), we are assured of streamwinning, the first step in the path to awakening *in this life itself*, that is, we would be “incapable of dying without having attained the fruit of streamwinning.”³⁰³ It is as simple as that.

This is surely the most empowering teaching, but we seem to have forgotten it, overwhelmed instead by the myth of wealth and greatness, or caught up in working under some respectable a seth³⁰⁴ or a professional,³⁰⁵ or worse, fully faithful to a guru or a master, or accumulating merit to meet the future Buddha. The truth is that we have forgotten the present Buddha’s teachings in the Suttas, blinded by the false myth that they are too difficult or boring to be learned or mastered. The point is that we are letting ourselves wallow in our own defilements. We have forgotten we are capable of heroic deeds, of self-awakening and awakening others to this fact.

7.3 THE BUDDHA’S HEROISM IS STILL WITH US. Despite the Buddha expressly reminding us immediately after his awakening and just before his final nirvana [3.4.1], that we should take only the Dharma, no one and nothing else, as our guide and refuge, many who come after him seem not to heed this vital advice. After the Buddha’s death, we begin worshipping him, turning him into a deity, and making images of him, but often failing to reflect what they really stand for.

²⁹⁹ On *sārajjā* and *vesārajjā*, see **Piṇḍolya S** (S 22.80) @ SD 28.9a(3). On the Buddha’s 4 intrepidities, see **Mahā Sīha,nāda S** (M 12.22-28/1:71 f) = SD 49.1.

³⁰⁰ Kiasu (traditional Chinese: 驚輸, *jīngshu*; Hokkien *kiaⁿ-su*) is a local variant of overseas Fujianese (a Chinese dialect) word that literally and pejoratively means “afraid of losing” (Mandarin Chinese: 怕輸 *pàshū*). Its widespread use, esp in Singapore and Malaysia, reflects a common attitude, amongst locals, of not losing out in a highly competitive high-cost-of-living society (resorting to such antics as piling up too much food on one’s plate in a buffet, or camping overnight to be sure of getting the free ticket to the National Day Parade, or displaying a “handicapped” sticker on one’s car to “chope” (reserve) a space in a parking lot), or to the extent of parents imposing heavy study regime upon their children to make them reach the very top above the rest. Growing up with this attitude, these students often become ambitious business-people, desiring to be on the top in wealth and prestige, regardless of whether or not this reflects their true graces and capabilities. Kiasu has been recorded in the Oxford English Dictionary.

³⁰¹ D 4/1:111-126 = SD 30.5.

³⁰² See **Piṇḍolya S** (S 22.80) @ SD 28.9a(3).

³⁰³ S 25.1/3:225 & SD 16.7(1.1.3). The other 9 discourses of **Okkanti Vagga** (the Chapter on the Descent), ie, ch 25 of the Saṃyutta Nikāya are: **(Anicca) Rūpa S** (S 25.2), **(Anicca) Viññāṇa S** (S 25.3), **(Anicca) Phassa S** (S 25.4), **(Anicca) Vedanā S** (S 25.5) = SD 17.3(4.5a), **(Anicca) Saññā S** (S 25.6) = SD 17.4(10), **(Anicca) Saṅkhāra S** (S 25.7), **(Anicca) Taṇhā S** (S 25.8), **(Anicca) Dhātu S** (S 25.9), and **(Anicca) Khandha S** (S 25.10) (S 25.1-10/3:-225-229). All these suttas make a distinction between 2 types of individuals—the faith follower (*saddhā'nusārī*) and the truth-follower (*dhammānusārī*), who enter into “the certainty of rightness” (*sammatta,niyāma*), ie, the transcendent noble eightfold path, or the path of streamwinning (*sotāpatti,magga*). See also Gethin 2001:133-138.

³⁰⁴ Skt *śreṣṭhī*, P *seṭṭhī*. The traditional definition of *seṭṭhī* is given in the PED as “foreman of a guild, treasurer, banker, “City man,” wealthy merchant, V 1:15 f, 271 f, 2:110 f, 157, S 1:89...etc.” *Seth* is a modern Hindi word for a wealthy entrepreneur, a successful businessman or any wealthy person of means.

³⁰⁵ A professional here refers esp to anyone, incl monastics, with professional qualifications, who are looked up to for their status rather than their spirituality.

The Buddha is truly dead to us if we merely worship him. He has instructed us that the supreme worship, the best way to honour him, is to practise the Dharma “in accordance with the Dharma,” that is, just as he has taught it [6.2.4]. It is only through realizing the Dharma to which the Buddha himself has awakened so that we would really know him, that he is really beyond life and death. For that is what nirvana is.

Many of us, especially those faith-inclined, even refuse to accept that a fully self-awakened Buddha could die (despite his numerous reminders), and so we fall into a protracted death-denial, egged on by our “perfect” guru. We imagine the Buddha is still around, perhaps in some cosmic form, able to grant us succour and success, if we perform the right rituals, fervently pray to him, or invoke his name millions of times. We have gone into the business of perpetual mourning of a teacher who is truly beyond life and death. [1.8.1]

God and gods die when they are no more worshipped; *the Buddha and the Bodhisattvas die when they are worshipped*. The Buddha is a cosmic hero, who has not only blazed the trail through the jungle of ignorance to the ancient and vibrant city of Nirvana, but has left us detailed maps, clear directions, even guides, for the journey to that city. But some of us would rather carelessly doodle our fancies and frivolities on these precious maps, we make jokes of the directions, and flirt with the guides. The day comes when we realize, too late, that we are really stuck in our own wasteland, left behind by the wise and the noble who are well on their way to the journey’s end.

The reality is that *we are meant to be heroes*—beings of effort and energy who assert themselves—to walk this path and helping others along the way.

8 Conclusion

8.1 TO UNDERSTAND BUDDHIST MYTH IS TO UNDERSTAND DHARMA. We have examined Buddhist mythology using the framework of the three trainings (*ti, sikkhā*), how we should live morally virtuous lives, priming our body and speech to embrace others as a wholesome community [1], how the cultivated body works as the basis for a cultivated mind, so that we discover our true spiritual strengths [2-4], and how, on their account, we become heroes, liberating ourselves from the slavery and tyranny of greed, hate, delusion and fear [5-7].

We have examined the nature of myth, especially Buddhist myths [1-2] and how they work in Buddhism as a specific or special theory [3]. Then, we looked at how myths are helpful in the infusion of social wellbeing, as a general theory [4], and how myth works with language [5], so that we are able to free ourselves from physical limitations and mental bonds [6]. Finally, we see how myths inspire spiritual courage and wisdom, making heroes of us [7].

The mythology of a religion preserves its vision and capacity for clarity, outreach, transformation and timelessness. The myths work to put the teachings in their proper perspective as intended by our teacher, the Buddha, so that their power to change and heal is efficacious to this day and forever. To understand the myths of the Buddha Dharma is to understand Buddha Dharma itself.

8.2 THE SPIRIT OF BUDDHIST MYTH. Buddhist myths are, as a rule, instructive and constructive. Conversely, there may be myths that are unwholesome, exploitative and delusive. In such cases, as in the worship of the six directions, the Buddha would *demythologize* them by redefining them in proper perspective so that they work well as models of social, individual and spiritual growth. These six directions, for example, are remodelled by the Buddha as the six sets of reciprocal social duties.³⁰⁶

Myths, in other words, should not be taken at face value. If we do so, we are taking them merely as linguistic constructs, clever and entertaining use of words. A myth is more than the sum of its words. The words are like poetry, or musical notes, or tints of a painting, that are meant to be enjoyed just as they are. Yet, unlike poetry, music and art, myths need to be read alongside the prose of the teaching so that its spirit is teased out. They are like the trees that make a forest, but we need to sit under the tree in blissful stillness to truly enjoy the forest’s beauty and freedom.

³⁰⁶ D 31/3:180-193 = SD 4.1.

8.3 BEYOND MYTH. Buddhist teachings, deprived of its myths, become a dry and dead textbook bereft of illustrations and diagrams. The myths themselves are not the Dharma, which has neither shape nor form. As long as *language* is used to express the Dharma, myths have their essential functions, that is, to reveal and convey the true teaching to be put into practice and teased into realization.³⁰⁷

Buddhism can only be *demythologized* through our gradual and ever fuller understanding of what they try to convey. The Dharma demythologized *in this way* leaves us with the Buddha's own direct experience of true reality. The Buddha demythologized is still the Buddha, only closer to us, not some idol of dead material or in some exotic paradise. But Māra mythologized becomes a mere symbol of our moral weakness, decay and death. Heaven and hell are not merely places we are destined for in some future time, but real present realities that we ourselves work at.

As long we depend on our senses to define and direct their lives, we have a need for myths to remind ourselves of the limitations of our sense-experiences, even of our words and language. Buddhist mythology helps us rise above the limits of our bodies, speech and minds, bringing them to sublime levels of bliss and peace, and if we fully understand these myths, we awaken to self-liberation.

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³⁰⁷ See see **Language and discourse** = SD 26.11.

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