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Paṭhama (Tathāgata) Acchariya Sutta

(Tathāgata) Acchariya Sutta 1

The First Discourse on the Marvellous (the One Thus-come) | A 4.127/2:130 f

Theme: Four marvels attending the Buddha's advent & Buddhist developments

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1 The Acchariya Suttas

1.1 RELATED SUTTAS

1.1.1 Similar titles. There are four discourses in the Aṭṭhaka Nipāta (the book of eights) in the Aṅguttara with the title of **Acchariya Sutta**, that is,

Paṭhama (Tathāgata) Acchariya Sutta	(A 4.127/2:130 f)	Marvels attending the Buddha's conception, birth, awakening and first teaching [SD 36.15];
Dutiya (Tathāgata) Acchariya Sutta	(A 4.128/2:131 f)	Four spiritual marvels attending the Buddha's presence [SD 21.11]
(Ānanda) Acchariya Sutta	(A 4.129/2:133)	Ānanda's fourfold charisma
(Cakkavattia) Acchariya Sutta	(A 4.130/2:134)	Ānanda's charisma is like that of a wheel-turner [SD 36.10(2.1.2)]

The **Paṭhama (Tathāgata) Acchariya Sutta** or **(Tathāgata) Acchariya Sutta 1** (A 4.127) is a short and straightforward discourse that simply declares that each of the four key events of the Buddha's life—his conception [§1b-e], birth [§2], awakening [§3], and the first discourse [§4]—is attended by a marvellous lighting up of the whole physical universe. The brightness and glory of this light outshine all lights, even the divine glory of all the heavens.

1.1.2 Four key events. Of the marvels of universal light attending the four key events of the Buddha's life, accounts of the first two appear almost verbatim in **the Mahā'padāna Sutta** (D 14) and **the Acchariya Abbhūta Sutta 1** (M 123), that is, the Bodhisattva's conception (D 14.1.17; M 123.7) and his birth (D 14.1.28; M 123.21).¹ While the Mahā'padāna Sutta (D 14) relates these marvels in connection with Vipassī Buddha,² the first of the past seven Buddhas, the Acchariya Abbhūta Sutta (M 123) relates the marvels attending the birth of our own Buddha.

While the Dīgha reciters speak of these marvels being “the nature of thing” (*dhammatā*) for any Buddha, the Majjhima reciters call them “marvellous wonders” (*acchariya, abbhūta*). These marvellous events are here listed in this comparative table:

	Dīgha 14 (SD 49.8) (<i>dhammatā</i>)	Majjhima 123 (SD 52.2) (<i>acchariya, abbhūta</i>)
(1) The Bodhisattva's sojourn in Tusita	—	§§3-5 3:119 f
(2) The Bodhisattva's descent into the womb	§ 1.17 2:12	§ 6 3:120
(3) <u>The Bodhisattva's conception: lights</u> ³	§§1.17 2:12	§ 7 3:120
(4) The Bodhisattva's conception	§§1.18-20 2:12 f	§§8-11 3:120 f
(5) The Bodhisattva's gestation	§§1.21 2:13 f	§§12 3:122
(6) Mahā Māyā's death; reborn in Tusita	§ 1.22 2:14	§§13 3:122
(7) The gestation takes 10 lunar months	§ 1.23 2:14	§ 14 3:122
(8) The Bodhisattva's birth	§§1.24-29 2:14	§§15-20 3:122 f

¹ D 14.1.17/2:12 & 1.21/2:13 = SD 49.8; M 123.7/3:120 & 21/3:123 f = SD 52.2. Cf **Jātaka Nidāna**, where these events are briefly mentioned, but with additional miraculous events (J 1:51-53)

² **The 7 Buddhas** are Vipassī, Sikhī, Vessabhū, Kakusandha, Konāgamana, Kassapa and Gotama (V 2:110; D 14.-1.10/2:5 f; S 12.4-10/2:5-10; cf Tha 490 f; J 203/2:147). See **Mahā'padāna S** (D 14) @ SD 49.8 (2).

³ As in **(Tathāgata) Acchariyā S 1** (A 4.127.1b-e/2:130 f).

(9) <u>The Bodhisattva's birth: lights</u> ⁴	§§1.30	2:15	§§21	3:123
(10) The prognostication: the 32 marks	§§1.31-33	2:16 f	—	

From this table, we have some idea that both the Dīgha reciters and the Majjhima reciters have a common legend or hagiography of the events immediately preceding the Buddha's birth up to the early days of his infancy. While the Dīgha reciters' account begins with the Bodhisattva's descent from Tusita (or the conception) and ends with the prognostication of the 32 marks (D 14), the Majjhima reciter's account begins with the Bodhisattva's sojourn in Tusita and ends with the nativity (M 123). It is likely that both these traditions drew from a common earlier hagiographical source.⁵

1.2 THE CAUSES OF GREAT EARTH TREMORS. The four marvellous events listed in **the (Tathāgata) Acchariya Sutta 1** also appears in **the Mahā,parinibbāna Sutta** (D 16) list of the eight causes of great earth tremors (*aṭṭha mahata bhūmi,cālassa hetu*),⁶ thus:

3.13 “Ānanda, there are **these eight reasons and conditions for the occurrence of great earth tremors**. What are the eight?

(1) Here, Ānanda, the great earth rests on water; the water on wind; the wind on space. And when the mighty wind moves, it disturbs the water, and through the disturbance of the water, the earth trembles.⁷

This, Ānanda, is the first reason, first condition, for the occurrence of a great earth tremor.

(2) Furthermore, Ānanda, a recluse or brahmin of great power, accomplished in mental powers, or a devata of great power and great glory, but whose earth-consciousness is weakly developed, but his water-consciousness is immeasurable, and he makes the earth shudder and shake violently.

This, Ānanda, is the second reason, second condition, for the occurrence of a great earth tremor.

(3) Furthermore, Ānanda, when the Bodhisattva, having left Tusita heaven and, mindfully and fully aware, descends into the mother's womb, this earth shudders, trembles and shakes.

This, Ānanda, is the third reason, third condition, for the occurrence of a great earth tremor.

(4) Furthermore, Ānanda, when the Bodhisattva, mindfully and fully aware, leaves the mother's womb, this earth shudders, trembles and shakes.⁸

This, Ānanda, is the fourth reason, fourth condition, for the occurrence of a great earth tremor.

(5) Furthermore, Ānanda, when the Tathāgata awakens to the supreme full self-awakening, this earth shudders, trembles and shakes.⁹

This, Ānanda, is the fifth reason, fifth condition, for the occurrence of a great earth tremor.

(6) Furthermore, Ānanda, when the Tathāgata turns the peerless Wheel of Truth, this earth shudders, trembles and shakes.¹⁰

This, Ānanda, is the sixth reason, sixth condition, for the occurrence of a great earth tremor.

⁴ As in **(Tathāgata) Acchariyā S** (A 4.127.2/2:131).

⁵ For further details, see under the respective suttas: **D 14**/2:1-54 = SD 49.8; **M 123**/3:118-124 = SD 52.2.

⁶ D 16.3.13-20/2:107-109 = SD 9.

⁷ This is interesting if we understand “water” as magma, “wind” as gas, and “space” as some kind of hollow-ness. (Of course, it is possible, even likely, that the Sutta composers has in mind a flat earth. Either way, the Sutta's message remains just as meaningful.) There seems here also what we would today call the tectonic movement of the earth, causing earth tremors and earth-quakes.

⁸ This refers to the nativity, that is, when the Bodhisattva is born at Lumbinī (J 1:52).

⁹ This refers to the great awakening at Buddha,gayā (J 1:76). See **Ariya,pariyesanā S** (M 26.18/1:167), SD 1.11 (2003).

¹⁰ This refers to teaching of the first discourse at the Deer Park, Isi,patana (V 1:10-12; S 56.11/5:420-424; DA 1:2; J 1:92). See **Dhamma,cakka-p,pavattana S**, SD 1.1 (2003).

(7) Furthermore, Ānanda, when the Tathāgata, mindfully and fully aware, relinquishes the life-formation, this earth shudders, trembles and shakes.

This, Ānanda, is the seventh reason, seventh condition, for the occurrence of a great earth tremor.

(8) Furthermore, Ānanda, when the Tathāgata enters into parinirvana, [109] the remainderless nirvana-element, this earth shudders, trembles and shakes.¹¹

This, Ānanda, is the eighth reason, eighth condition, for the occurrence of a great earth tremor.

These, Ānanda, are the eight reasons and conditions for the occurrence of a great earth tremor.¹² (D 16.3.13-20/2:108 f) = SD 9

This episode on the eight causes of great earth tremors also forms a discourse of its own, called **the Bhūmi, cāla Sutta** (A 8.70).¹³ **The (Tathāgata) Acchariya Sutta 1** (A 4.127) only lists the third to sixth reasons for a great earth tremor, but they are given more fully than in these two suttas.

2 Significance of the Sutta

2.1 THE (TATHĀGATA) ACCHARIYA SUTTA 1 (A 4.127) simply declares that each of the four key events of the Buddha's life—his conception [§1b-e], birth [§2], awakening [§3], and the first discourse [§4]—is attended by a marvellous lighting up of the whole physical universe. The brightness and glory of this light outshines all lights, even the divine glory of all the heavens.

From what we have examined above, regarding the appearances of the four marvellous events of the (Tathāgata) Acchariya Sutta 1, we can now attempt to work out a simple chronology to have some idea of its date or age. Due to the brevity of the listings of the eight causes for great earth tremors [1.2], they probably form the oldest of the lists we have here. Generally, the shorter the list is, the older it is likely to be. Moreover, a document such as **the Mahā, parinibbāna Sutta** (D 16) is likely to be compiled very soon after the Buddha's passing by those who have memories of his parinirvana.¹⁴

2.2 NIKĀYA HAGIOLOGY. The next stage of development in the Buddha legend is probably represented by **the hagiological accounts** in the Dīgha and the Majjhima [1.1.2]. Here we have only accounts of the events immediately preceding the Buddha's birth up to the early days of his infancy. These works probably mark the beginning of attempts to compose a fuller legend or hagiography of the Buddha.

2.3 MYTHOLOGICAL MEANING. Another point to note is the legendary and fabulous nature of the events. They are clearly not meant to be taken as historical events, but refer to a deeper *mythological* level of meaning.¹⁵ “Mythological” here means its meaningful appeal to the deeper levels of our being. Simply put, the arising of the Buddha has universal and spiritual implications. The Buddha is a world teacher, whose teachings and methods have come down to us quite intact, enough for us, if we try hard enough, to experience the Buddha's personality and awakening: in short, to be awakened ourselves.

2.4 A FULLER LIFE OF THE BUDDHA. In due course, the Mahāyāna theologians introduced a more complete Buddha biography and a standard tradition of **“the Twelve Acts of the Buddha”** (Skt *dvadaśa,*

¹¹ According to Tibetan beliefs (based on the early Buddhist teachings on the primary elements), in a dying person, the “earth element” dissolves first (the body loses strength), then the “water element” dissolves (loss of control of bodily fluids), then the fire element dissolves (mouth and nose dry up; body loses warmth), and then the air element dissolves (difficulty in breathing). See for example Sogyal Rinpoche, *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*, 1994:251-253.

¹² **Milinda, pañha** (Miln 113-119) discusses the *ninth* cause of a great earth tremor, ie, when Vessantara made his great offering and the earth shook seven times (J 1:74, 547). Nāgasena actually evades the answer by recounting Vessantara's virtues. This question, I think, can be resolved by the fact that the 8 causes of a great earth tremor form a canonical list while the Vessantara J is commentarial.

¹³ A 8.70/4:312 f.

¹⁴ For a background to this, see **Mahā, parinibbāna S** (D 16) @ SD 9 (3+4).

¹⁵ On the nature of mythology, see **Myth in Buddhism** = SD 36.1.

buddha, kārya), that is, those performed by a “projected body” (*nirmāṇa, kāya*) buddha, such as Shakya-muni,¹⁶ which are as follows:

- (1) The descent from Tusita heaven,
- (2) The conception,
- (3) The nativity (birth),
- (4) Skill in the arts,
- (5) Sense-pleasure in the palace,
- (6) The great renunciation,
- (7) The 6-year austerities,
- (8) At the foot of the Bodhi tree,
- (9) Overcoming Māra and his hosts,
- (10) The full awakening,
- (11) Turning the Dharma-wheel, and
- (12) The great parinirvana.

2.5 BUDDHA, CARITA. The most complete literary account of the Buddha’s life is the 2nd-century **Buddha, carita** of Aśva, ghoṣa, a Sanskrit poem in 28 cantos, of which only the first 14 are fully extant, with cantos 15 to 28 surviving in parts. In 420, Dharma, rakṣa made a Chinese translation, and in the 7th to 8th century, a very accurate Tibetan translation was made.¹⁷

2.6 DEIFYING THE BUDDHA. However, the legendary form and fabulous style of such accounts and stories show that they are meant to glorify the Buddha as a sort of divine being, even a supreme being. This legendary Buddha is more than, *even other* than, the historical Buddha: the tale-spinners see him as a supreme teacher and liberator, even saviour, from beyond time and space, who when his task is done, returns to the beyond. This seems to be a docetic form¹⁸ of the primordial Buddha like Samanta, bhadrā or Vajra, dhara, or the eternal Dharma, kāya. This is the image of the Buddha we see in the Mahāyāna.

3 Later Buddhisms: an extremely short history

3.1 MAKING BUDDHAS OF ALL BEINGS. The term Mahāyāna generally denotes a widespread liberal spirit that followed the rise of early Indian Buddhism. It refers to a wide range of disparate reformist, revisionary and assimilative attitudes, activities and works of various individuals and diverse schools that re-interpreted fundamental Buddhist teachings and ideals, or responded to challenges from outside.

As a movement, there is evidence that it arose in the 2nd century BCE. However, it can be assumed that even earlier such reformist ideas have crystallized, incorporating the ideas of existing schools. In its earliest centuries, the Mahāyāna mostly involved practitioners from the mainstream themselves, who were generally dissatisfied with the settled urbanized monasticism which they perceived as having lost touch with its ancient roots of the contemplative forest tradition.¹⁹

Texts such as **the Ugra Pariṣcchā** are representative of the Māhayāna of this early period.²⁰ One of the earliest appearances of the term Mahāyāna is in this text, but there is no doctrinal difference between it and the early schools. Mahāyāna then simply refers to the rigorous emulation of the historical Buddha as a bodhisattva seeking to become a fully-awakened buddha (Nattier 2003:194 f). This early period (especially 100 BCE to 100 CE) is sometimes called the “proto-Mahāyāna.”²¹

¹⁶ See eg Lobsang Dhargyay, “The twelve deeds of the Buddha—A controversial hymn ascribed to Nagarjuna,” *The Tibet Journal* 9,2 summer 1984.

¹⁷ See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Buddhacarita>.

¹⁸ See **How Buddhism became Chinese** = SD 40b (3.3).

¹⁹ See Daniel Boucher, *Bodhisattvas of the Forest and the Formation of the Mahāyāna*, Honolulu: Univ of Hawai’i Press, 2008:64-84 (ch 4).

²⁰ For a scholarly tr, see Jan Nattier, *A Few Good Men: The Bodhisattva Path according to “The Inquiry of Ugra (Ugrapariprocchā),”* Honolulu: Univ of Hawai’i Press, 2003:41-47 (date and provenance).

²¹ See Shizutani 1974:274; Nakamura 1980:152; Deleanu 2000:66.

Later Mahāyāna is well populated with cosmic buddhas, divine bodhisattvas and new paradises. However, despite such great divinities, Mahāyāna is actually very this-worldly. The Mahāyānist envisioned these holy beings as being compassionately stuck with our world, omnipresently heeding our cries and giving us succour. A well known bodhisattva vow is that of not “entering nirvana” until “all beings” are liberated.²² Barring religious word-play,²³ simple logic tells us that this is an impossibility—“all” here surely must include the beings of the past, the future and the present—hence, such a bodhisattva would *never* attain nirvana, but remain with us forever. This is actually a comforting thought for those who need comforting. Indeed, such a bodhisattva’s aspiration is perhaps the noblest we can ever make, that is, to make buddhas of all beings.²⁴

3.2 THE PHILOSOPHICAL PERIOD. In due course, as Buddhism gained respectability and affluence, especially when it is state-sponsored, such as in the Kushan empire (30-375 CE),²⁵ there was a rise in Buddhist philosophy, predominantly in epistemology and logic.²⁶ This was the age of the Perfection of Wisdom (*prajñā, pāramitā*), which presented the wealth and depth of Buddhist philosophy in the form of the printed word. It was largely a *book-based tradition* that promoted Buddhist scholasticism. The new learning inspired Buddhist scholars to see early Buddhism in new ways, innovative developments that reached the peak in **Nāgārjuna** (c150-250)²⁷ and his Madhyamaka philosophy,²⁸ whose best known proponent was perhaps **Candra, kīrti** (c600-650).

Other great Mahāyāna philosophers of this age included **Asaṅga** (5th century)²⁹ and his brother **Vasubandhu** (fl 4th century),³⁰ who were the key figures contributing to the rise of the Yogācāra school (4th century). The Buddhists were also leaders in Indian logic, and the greatest of these logicians were **Dignāga** (c 480-540 CE) and **Dharma, kīrti** (c 7th century).³¹ It was truly an age of Buddhist philosophy, when the great treatises (*śāstra*) eclipsed even the early teachings (*sūtra*), which, in the later polemical texts, were degraded as being an “inferior vehicle” (*hīna, yāna*). These Buddhists began to use the term “the great vehicle” (*mahā, yāna*) for themselves.³²

So radical were such changes that the great philosophical and apologetic work, **the Saṃdhi, nirmocana Sūtra** (late 2nd century), proclaimed the doctrine of the three wheel-turnings. The first Dharma-wheel turning was, of course, that of the Buddha himself. The second was the teaching of the great Mahāyāna

²² Theologically, we can say that these bodhisattvas are already in nirvana (enlightened), but they have “postponed” such their final entry. This is of course a strictly Mahāyāna doctrine, not found in early Buddhism.

²³ Such aspirations and vows arose mostly in the context of philosophical Mahāyāna of the Prajñā, pāramitā (1st cent BCE-500 CE). It was an exciting time when Buddhist philosophers and writers experimented what they could do with words, esp the printed word, stretching the limits of words and language to their extreme, as if in a transcendental tourney of verbalizing enlightenment. For example, when the Mahāyāna writers say “all beings,” they probably understand that there are really *no* “beings” to be saved: if we understand Suchness or Emptiness, it seems, we can say or do what we like with words. The task now is to ensure that all beings understand this noble intention, and to get them to benefit from it.

²⁴ Eg “I will place all beings into Suchness [true reality], and I will lead to Nirvana the whole immeasurable world of beings” (Aṣṭa, sāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā, tr E Conze 1973:163). A well known Chinese Mahāyāna prayer is: “I vow to liberate all beings, without number” (眾生無邊誓願度 *zhòng shēng wúbiān shì yuàn dù*). See also P Williams 1989:49-54; for refs, see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bodhisattva_vows.

²⁵ See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kushan_Empire.

²⁶ See <http://www.rep.routledge.com/article/F001>.

²⁷ See <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/nagarjuna/> & also http://www.thezensite.com/ZenEssays/Nagarjuna/The_problem_of_historical_Nagarjuna.htm.

²⁸ See <http://www.iep.utm.edu/b-madhya/>.

²⁹ See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Asanga>. See also **Language and discourse** = SD 26.11 (7).

³⁰ See <http://www.iep.utm.edu/v/vasubandhu.htm>. See also **Language and discourse** = SD 26.11 (7).

³¹ See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Buddhist_logic. See also **Language and discourse** = SD 26.11 (9).

³² See Jeffrey Samuels’ informative and interesting paper on “The Bodhisattva ideal in Theravāda Buddhist theory and practice,” 1997. On Mahāyāna, further see **The Buddha as myth** = SD 36.2 (7.3.4).

Bodhisattva highlighted by Nāgārjuna's Madhyamaka. And the third turning was that of the Yogācāra.³³ The later schools, however, in the true spirit of Mahāyāna, revised this list to highlight their own.³⁴ For those who follow the early teachings, however, there is only *one* Dharma-wheel turning, that is, that of the Buddha himself. The wheel, once invented, need not be re-invented.

3.3 THE MAGICAL PERIOD. Even as the philosophical developments were taking place amongst the Mahāyāna elite of India, another new form of Buddhism was sweeping the grassroots of society. It was a complex form of Buddhist doctrines and practices, based on texts known as **Tantra**, the oldest of which went back to the 3rd century. This was essentially a response to the popular magical and theistic systems of Hinduism, especially Saivism.³⁵

Unlike the philosophical Mahāyāna which was mostly restricted to the leisurely wealthy, educated classes and royalty, Vajrayāna was more appealing to the masses with its magical prayers, mantras and rituals, some of which, like the Saṅghāta Sūtra (popular in NW India and central Asia), promise that even the worst of karmic evils could be removed by merely reciting a few lines of from it!³⁶ This Buddhism might be more “powerful” than early Buddhism, but it was certainly *not* that of the Buddha.

The Vajrayāna had its own elite and virtuosi, that is, the “accomplished ones” (*siddha*), Tantric masters who were said to be totally in harmony with their environment that they were under no constraint whatsoever and, as free agents, were able to manipulate the cosmic forces both inside and outside themselves. In fact, a classic siddha had the demeanour of a madman or outcaste who had abandoned all moral constraints. They asserted that enlightenment could be attained through special secret guru-centred rituals and visualization exercises.

Amongst the famous Tantric masters was **Atīśa** (980/990-1055), the patriarch of Magadha and teacher at Vikramaśilā. One of the most colourful monk-scholars of Nālandā was **Naropa** (1016-1100), who resigned as abbot of Nālandā (some sources say Vikramaśilā) in 1057 to seek his predestined Tantric master, and so becoming a major figure in this phase of Buddhist history. Both went to Tibet to propagate Buddhism there.

3.4 THE BUDDHISM OF THE PROFESSIONALS

3.4.1 Ancient texts uncovered. In our own time, concurrent with the rise of computers and the internet, we see an explosion of Buddhist knowledge. I remember, as a teenager who was very interested in Buddhism some 50 years ago, I had great difficulty finding a proper book or writing that could provide me with some kind of coherent study of Buddhism. Today, we are spoilt for choice: we have more titles in print and other media than we could possibly finish reading in a life-time. If we carefully select the Buddhist materials, there is much to benefit us in terms of a better understanding of what the Buddha has taught, or what we conveniently might call “early Buddhism.”

Ancient Chinese manuscripts discovered in Cave 16 of the Mògāo 莫高 Caves in Dūnhuáng, Chinese Central Asia, in 1908, provided exciting new insights into the true history of Chinese Buddhism.³⁷ Even more exciting is the discovery of the 1994 Gandhāra manuscripts, dating from about the 1st century CE.³⁸ Since then, scholars have been publishing a growing number of detailed studies of these valuable ancient

³³ Interestingly, the current rise of Buddhism in the west and westernized society is sometimes dubbed the fourth or fifth turning of the wheel: see foll n.

³⁴ The Vajrayāna, eg, revised this list and declared their vehicle as embodying the fourth wheel-turning, and in China, the Huayan 華嚴 *huáyán* or Avataṃsaka school regarded the *tathāgata, garbha* doctrine as the fourth turning: see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Three_Turnings_of_the_Wheel_of_Dharma.

³⁵ The Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara and the mantra *Om maṇi, padme hūm*, eg, scholars have noted, have roots in Saivism: see **Myth in Buddhism** = SD 36.1 (1.8.2): The Vajrayāna myth.

³⁶ See **Cult Buddhism** = SD 34.5 (1.2.3.2).

³⁷ See **How Buddhism became Chinese** = SD 401 (5.2.5).

³⁸ For overview, see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gandh%C4%81ran_Buddhist_Texts; for a scholarly biblio: http://gandhari.org/a_bibliography.php; how the MSS were obtained: <http://multi.stanford.edu/features/heritage/>; Amod Lele, “What the Kharoṣṭhī fragments don’t imply for us,” 2011: <http://loveofallwisdom.com/tag/paul-harrison/>

fragments that give us a better historical sense of the early history of Buddhism before the rise of Mahāyāna.

3.4.2 Buddhism as profession and vocation

3.4.2.1 CURATORS OF BUDDHISM. Interesting and valuable as scholarly studies of Buddhism may be, they all have a shelf-life. Scholars, as a rule, are *professionals*: their teachings and writings have a price. Although there are those who do *profess* the Dharma in the old sense,³⁹ their success is often measured by how well they construct their own Buddhisms or throw light on certain aspects of a particular Buddhism.

No scholar has a final say on Buddhism. Some, the more published ones, however are more quoted than others. However, every new generation of scholars tends to debunk older theories and scholarships, the debunking sometimes occurs within the same generation itself. Not all scholars, even the best, are always right, but they are generally amenable to correction.⁴⁰ This is academic progress.⁴¹

Scholars are always interested in new or controversial ways of looking at Buddhism, and often exchange views, even if they do not always agree, on the subject. Whether such approaches are archaeological, buddhological, historical, legal, literary, medical, philological, psychological, scientific, sociological or interdisciplinary, they are always of some value to informed and open-minded Buddhists, providing a better focus on Buddhist history and realities. Indeed, such disciplined studies are valuable in debunking what the Buddhists themselves have constructed of Buddhism that are outdated, false, or exploitative.

3.4.2.2 BUDDHISM FOR LIFE OR A LIVING? Buddhists generally have a high regard for those who specialize in Buddhist studies, even if they are not avowed Buddhists. It is rare that a Buddhist would even ask another, even in a Buddhist gathering, if he is a Buddhist. There seems to be common wisdom that if you are *there*, then you are at least for that moment a “Buddhist,” that is, a practitioner or one sympathetic to Buddhism. That’s good enough. After all, actual Buddhist practice, such as meditation, is a very personal matter. For such reasons, it is understandable that Buddhists are generally very tolerant.

In fact, Buddhists who love suttas generally have a great admiration for **professional scholars** of Buddhism. Most “sutta Buddhists” (as we might loosely call them) are laymen who need to earn a living to support themselves and their families, but have a great love for the Dharma, too. They regard the professional Buddhism scholars as very fortunate on two counts. The first is that they are *well trained* in the field so that they often produce valuable insights into Buddhism. Secondly, they are *paid* for studying and teaching Buddhism, so that their work is both a profession and a vocation.

Here I have used “vocation” in the old sense of “calling.” And if such scholars are avowed Buddhists, they are given even greater respect, because they are now members of a global Buddhist community, but enjoying the status of a teacher. Lay Buddhists who have a great love for the Suttas understandably would like to emulate these academic specialists of Buddhism. If such “**vocational Buddhist scholars**” could in some way dedicate their lives or a significant part of it to specializing in Buddhist studies with a high academic standard, and are also committed to Buddhist practice, they would be even more valuable to the Buddhist community.

One important difference between the scholars and the practitioners of Buddhism, however, is that while the scholars generally strive for *conceptual excellence*, using ideas and events to present their reconstruction of Buddhism, the more serious practitioners would strive for the deconstruction of Buddhism itself, aspiring towards *experiential realization*, that is, the transcendence of ideas and events, in a quest of inner peace and liberation. The final difference, we might say, is that the scholar, on reaching the end of their shelf-lives, may retire to their gardens or arm-chairs, but the faithful relentlessly move on with Buddhism right to the end. For them, learning Buddhism is not a job, but life itself.

³⁹ See esp (ed) R Jackson & J Makransky, *Buddhist Theology*, London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2000.

⁴⁰ See eg how K R Norman rectifies himself: “Pāli lexicographical studies IX,” JPTS 16, 1992:83 f = *Collected Papers* 5, Oxford: PTS, 1994:77 f; also see Sn:N2 287 620 & Dh:N 158 n396, where he changes his opinion on the tr of *bho,vādi*.

⁴¹ In Dharma studies, we do try to rectify errors of past teachers and teachings by checking with the suttas and our own contemplative experiences, but more importantly, the insights of our forebears are to us like doors or windows looking into the Dharma garden.

3.4.3 Constructing Buddhisms

3.4.3.1 BUDDHIST USERS. An open-minded and learned scholar who truly loves Buddhism is a great blessing for those who love the Dharma. Those who take Buddhist studies merely as a profession may not be so sympathetic to Buddhism nor magnanimous to Buddhists. Their views of Buddhism, too, might be quirky and short-sighted. They might even privately view Buddhists as lesser creatures, merely specimens for their study, and Buddhism only something they write about for the benefit of their personal careers. Such prospectors tend to measure people: “What are you worth to me if I were to speak with you?” This is an asura attitude.

On an even less felicitous level, we have the matter of how a professional or scholar uses Buddhism. Often enough, we would hear of a scientist or scholar saying something like, “These ideas or methods come from Buddhism; it is a Buddhist practice (eg meditation); but we will *not* mention Buddhism here; we will use it in a *non-Buddhist* way.” The prospectors might even go on to copyright such ideas, claiming them as their personal legal property. A related example here is an attempt at copyrighting yoga.⁴²

On the other hand, if we used scholarly works, and were to say: “These ideas and writings are from scholar X, but we will not mention X, and we will use in it the way we like,” it is very likely that scholar X would cry piracy, and demand that we give him due credit. My point is that there is nothing wrong—it is indeed noble—to give Buddhism due credit. Oh yes, there is also the matter of karma, whether we believe in it in a Buddhist way or not.

3.4.3.2 THE “NOT-BUDDHIST” BUDDHIST. Another curious matter is that of certain scholars whose life’s work and success have centred around Buddhism, but they publicly claim they are “*not* Buddhist.” In fact, some of them actually profess other religions. Yet, they go on to teach or give talks on Buddhism. This is understandable if we see Buddhism here as an academic subject. Even then, this would be like someone giving music lessons, but who tells his music-loving students that he has no love for music!

However, there are bona fide professionals who have good reasons to take such a “non-Buddhist” stand. They want to state that they do not have anything to do with ethnic Buddhisms, which are steeped in hierarchy, rituals and exoticism. More importantly, however, I think, they do not want to be associated with scandalous Buddhisms⁴³ that are common in the US, for example. Such a stand is surely a very wise one, which we might even see as a gentle but healthy protest against such religious aberrations.

More commonly, I think, the “not-Buddhist” scholars have an interest in Buddhism probably because it is a relatively new academic discipline, just as rich as Christianity, if not richer, in its history and culture. The Buddhist elite are amongst the world’s richest and are generally tolerant and generous people, willing to employ or sponsor anyone, especially academic specialists, who can tell them more of their faith or authenticate it with their scholarly enterprises. Such scholars of Buddhism remain “not-Buddhist” probably because they see Buddhism a religious construction, albeit one of the richest and most effective.⁴⁴

3.4.3.3 BIBLICAL BUDDHISM. Some scholars are experts in certain areas of Buddhist studies, but are avowedly *not* Buddhist.⁴⁵ Interestingly, such non-Buddhist scholars of Buddhism, mostly Catholics, as a

⁴² The system here is yoga as taught by Bikram Choudhury, self-styled Holly “yoga teacher to the stars”: http://www.usatoday.com/tech/news/2006-06-28-yoga-usat_x.htm. In order to stop self-styled yoga gurus from claiming copyright to ancient yoga postures (*asana*), like Choudhury’s Hot Yoga (a set of 26 sequences practised in a heated room), Indian authorities have documented 1,300 asanas and uploaded on the country’s Traditional Knowledge Digital Library (TKDL), making them public knowledge (<http://www.tkdlib.org> & http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Traditional_Knowledge_Digital_Library); see also http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2011-02-06/india/28355602_1_hot-yoga-patanjali-tkdlib

⁴³ See **Bad friendship** = SD 64.17 & **The Three Roots Inc** = SD 31.12.

⁴⁴ In 2010, the renowned buddhologist Jan Nattier, specializing in Chinese Buddhism, stated, at the end of her lecture, in Tel Aviv Univ, on “Stages of the Path,” that she is an agnostic. On “the not-Buddhists,” see **Buddha as myth** = SD 36.2 (4.2.3.2).

⁴⁵ K R Norman once unequivocally wrote that he is “*not* a scholar of Buddhism, and do not have any great interest in the subject, and know little or nothing about it” and describes himself as “a scholar of Pali” and “a consultant” on “Buddhism, based upon Pāli sources” (1990:38 = 1993:90).

rule, specialize in Mahāyāna Buddhism rather than early Buddhism.⁴⁶ Perhaps they perceive Mahāyāna teachings as leaning more towards theism, such as teachings on docetic or divine buddhas and bodhisattvas.⁴⁷

Another important reason for such interfaith love affairs is perhaps that while early Buddhism is simple, practical, and mostly a contemplative teaching, Mahāyāna has a plethora of religious, textual, philosophical, hagiographical, ritual, and cultural developments for the academics to more profitably explore. Many Mahāyāna texts are great literary works or documents reflective of the tides of the times, the religious and worldly needs that the Buddhist genius has addressed. Mahāyāna, in other words, is more biblical, more book-based, than early Buddhism.

3.4.3.4 COULD A SCHOLAR EVER *KNOW* BUDDHISM? Some scholars claim that there is no way we can salvage the “early Buddhist teachings” or the *original* Buddha Word. Surely they speak for themselves, because practitioners of early Buddhist meditation are enjoying the ancient texts like finding an Indian Rosetta stone.⁴⁸ Through their calm mindfulness, they have an ever more lucid and more coherent of what the early texts are meaning to convey.

Surely, we cannot, by *academic means* alone, define or discover the early teachings. Textually and doctrinally, Buddhism has grown beyond the Bodhi tree and India. People have made all things of Buddhism, and this is what is of interest to the professional scholars—that Buddhism is not what it *should* be, but what it *is*, or better, what it has become or what people today make of it. This professional interest is understandable as it is a more profitable approach than searching the scriptures and then closing our eyes in quest of dhyana and nirvana. However, if our purpose is self-awakening, surely we need to go back to the source and examine it carefully. This is still possible, since our interest is Buddhism as a contemplative training, and this is what concerns us here.

The practitioner’s interest lies in the mental training that the Buddha repeatedly exhorts and explains in the suttas, not always in great detail, but sufficient enough to benefit those who have some training in mental calm and insight. The point is that the Buddha has never intended Buddhism to be a religion,⁴⁹ nor does its scripture in itself provide a complete practical training. They are like manuscripts of great classical compositions. We benefit most by consulting some living maestros on how to perform and interpret these musical pieces for our most profound musical bliss.

The Buddhist texts are like the musical notations on the music sheets. Scholars count, analyze and compare their musical symbols, methods, form, style, motifs, influences, history, even the kind of paper used. It is the maestros who free the beautiful living sounds from the dry dead sheets. Indeed, to enjoy such music, we have to go beyond words and thought into the realm of feeling. This is the immeasurable Buddhism of inner stillness and clarity.

3.5 BEYOND BUDDHISM

3.5.1 Beyond Buddhism of our past. Buddhist teachers and practitioners who follow the contemplative teachings have no difficulty with such scholarly enterprises. We should respect what the scholars have to tell us: they have dedicated their lives to seeking truths in Buddhism. There are scholars who have a

⁴⁶ Well known Catholic priests who were experts in Buddhism incl the Thomist priest Étienne Lamotte (1903-93) in Mahāyāna, the Jesuit priest, Heinrich Dumoulin (1944-95) in Zen, and Thomas Merton (1915-68) in Buddhist meditation and mysticism. Paul Williams, a specialist in Mahāyāna philosophy, on the other hand, was a Buddhist himself for many years, but has since converted to Roman Catholicism, about which he wrote about in his book *The Unexpected Way* (2002). Yet he continued with his career as a Buddhist scholar. Williams’ thesis for his book is “why there is something rather than nothing”: see my response in *Healing Words: Simple Joys 2*, Singapore: The Minding Centre, 2011: ch 22.

⁴⁷ See **How Buddhism became Chinese** = SD 40b (3.3).

⁴⁸ The Rosetta stone is an ancient Egyptian granodiorite stele with Ptolemy V (196 BCE) decree issued at Memphis. It was inscribed in *three scripts*, the upper text in Ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics, the middle in demotic script, and the lowest Ancient Greek. As the three sections essentially present the same text, it served as a key to the modern understanding of Egyptian hieroglyphs.

⁴⁹ Here, I’m not judging the worth of religion or *a* religion, but simply stating the original intentions of the Buddha as attested in the early texts.

deep respect for Buddhism and who are practising Buddhists themselves. With their minds in academia and their hearts in the Dharma, their teachings are even more valuable to our own understanding of Buddhist scriptures and society.

Yet, even *the Buddhism of the scholars* changes, because ideas and views change. So we need to be ever mindful of such changes, of watching and learning from new developments in academia. Indeed, Buddhism is about *change*; Buddhism itself *is* change. As practitioners, we need to regularly look at ourselves to see if we have risen like a lotus from and above the mud of our greed, hate, delusion and fear. We need to look within to see if we have cultivated some strength of stillness to weather the inclemencies and storms around us. And in all this only *we* can work it out for ourselves: neither scholar nor scripture can help us here.

3.5.2 Beyond building Buddhism. We often feel drawn to opulent temple walls and pillars, and crowded temple halls, listening to public talk after public talk, but *have our lives really changed?* We must look at the impermanence in these rich walls and proud pillars. We might think that these walls and pillars are the result of immense good karma that the temple-owners have accumulated. So we are drawn to them: we then become cowherds counting the cows of others (Dh 19).

But these are *not* our karma: we have to work out *our own* good karma. And this we do by looking within, seeking and building our own goodness. Then, we will see that the trees, the streams, the mountains and the stars are even more beautiful and blissful than man-made structures. We might even catch a glimpse or enjoy a vision of the Buddha meditating radiantly under the Bodhi tree.

Dhammapada 49 sings of how a true renunciant does not harm his supporters. If we reflect deeper on this verse, we would learn, too, that it exhorts us to be like busy bees flying from flower to flower collecting precious nectar which benefits us as well as the flowers, helping them to cross-pollinate. We study a sutta here, listen to a Dharma teaching there, spend silent moments of daily reflection, sitting longer when we can, and joyfully seeing goodness in others—soon we begin to see how the jig-saw pieces of the Dharma in our minds fall into their rightful places.

It's vital to know the Buddhist basics, that is, early Buddhist teaching and meditation, before we can ever really sink the depths and see the true colours of the rich tapestries of later Buddhist sutras, sastras, tantras and teachings. It is wise to regularly remind ourselves that Buddhism is not about buildings, images, beings, groups, uniforms, noise or texts, but it is about self-understanding, inner peace and a joyful acceptance of self and others.

Meantime, let us spend a moment reflecting on this sutta. The arising of the Buddha in our universe is no small miracle.⁵⁰ The key events of the Buddha's early life are retold in the tradition of legend and myth that often colour the lives of great men. The Buddha is no ordinary great man: he is the supreme unique being of clear light that clarifies all religious fictions and dispels the heart's darkness. The Buddha's light, that is the Dharma, will continue to shine throughout the universe, letting all beings who can see to see themselves in true light.

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The First Discourse on the Marvellous (the One Thus-come)

A 4.127/2:130 f

1a Bhikshus, with the arising of the tathagata [one thus come], the arhat [the worthy], the fully self-awakened one, four wonderful and marvellous things occur.

⁵⁰ See further **Miracles** = SD 27.5a.

What are the four?

(1) The Bodhisattva's conception⁵¹

1b Bhikshus, when the Bodhisattva, falling from the Tusita host, mindfully and fully knowing *enters* his mother's womb,⁵²

then, in the world with its gods, with its Māra, with its Brahmā, this generation with its recluses and brahmins, its rulers⁵³ and people,

there appears a boundless glorious radiance surpassing even the divine glory of the gods.⁵⁴

1c Even in the abysmal dark, the blinding darkness of the space amongst the worlds,⁵⁵ where even the lights of the moon and the sun, so mighty as they are, cannot penetrate,⁵⁶

a boundless glorious radiance appears, surpassing even the divine glory of the gods.

1d And those beings that have arisen there, too, on account of that light, perceive one another, saying:

“It appears, sirs, that there are other beings, too, that have arisen here!” [131]

1e Bhikshus, with the arising of the tathagata, the arhat, the fully self-awakened one, this is the first wonderful and marvellous thing that occurs.

(2) The Bodhisattva's birth⁵⁷

2a Furthermore, bhikshus, when the Bodhisattva, mindfully and fully knowing, *leaves* his mother's womb,⁵⁸

2b then, in the world with its gods, with its Māra, with its Brahmā, this generation with its recluses and brahmins, its rulers and people,

there appears a boundless glorious radiance surpassing even the divine glory of the gods.

2c Even in the abysmal dark, the blinding darkness of the space amongst the worlds, where even the lights of the moon and the sun, so mighty as they are, cannot penetrate,

there, too, a boundless glorious radiance appears, surpassing even the divine glory of the gods.

2d And those beings that have arisen there, too, on account of that light, perceive one another, saying:

“It appears, sirs, that there are other beings, too, that have arisen here!”

2e Bhikshus, with the arising of the tathagata, the arhat, the fully self-awakened one, this is the second wonderful and marvellous thing that occurs.

⁵¹ This whole section except for §1d appears in **Mahā'padāna S** (D 14.1.17/1:12) = SD 49.8, **Acchariya,abbhūta S** (M 123.7/3:120) = SD 52.2; cf **Nidāna Kathā** (J 1:51).

⁵² *Yadā, bhikkhave, bodhisatto tusitā kāyā cavitvā sato sampajāno mātu, kucchim okkamati.* As in **Mahā,parinibbāna S** D 16), where it is given as the 3rd reason for a great earth tremor (D 16.3.15/2:108) = SD 9.

⁵³ *Deva*, here in the sense of “devas by convention” (*sammati, deva*), ie kings. The other 2 types of *deva* are “gods by rebirth” (*upapatti, deva*) and “gods by purification” (*visuddhi, deva*), ie the Buddhas, Pratyeka Buddhas and arhats (Nc 307 KhA 123).

⁵⁴ *Appamāṇo ulāro obhāso pātubhavati atikkammeva devānaṃ devānubhāvaṃ*

⁵⁵ Comy ad M 123: Amongst every three world-systems, there is a space measuring 8,000 yojanas (56,000 mi = 90,123 km). It is like the space amongst three cart-wheels or almsbowls touching one another (MA 4:177). The beings are reborn in this great interworld hell (*lok'antarika mahā, niraya*) on account of having done some very serious offences against their parents or righteous recluses and brahmins, or because of some habitual evil deed, such as destroying life, etc. The hell-beings there are like huge 3-*gāvuta* (5.25 mi = 8.45 km) high long-clawed bats clinging onto trees (MA 4:178).

⁵⁶ *Yāpi tā lok'antarikā aghā asaṃvutā andha, kārā andha, kāra, timisā yattha 'p'imesaṃ candima, sūriyānaṃ evaṃ mah'iddhikānaṃ evaṃ mah'ānubhāvānaṃ ābhā nānubhonti.*

⁵⁷ This whole section except for §2d appears in **Mahā'padāna S** (D 14.1.30/1:15) = SD 49.8, **Acchariya,abbhūta S** (M 123.21/3:123) = SD 52.2; cf **Nidāna Kathā** (J 1:52 f) on same episode but without any mention of lights.

⁵⁸ *Puna c'aparaṃ, bhikkhave, yadā bodhisatto sato sampajāno mātu 'kucchimhā nikkhamati.* As in **Mahā,parinibbāna S** D 16), where it is given as the 4th reason for a great earth tremor (D 16.3.16/2:108) = SD 9.

(3) The Buddha's awakening

3a Furthermore, bhikshus, when the tathagata *awakens* to the supreme full self-awakening,⁵⁹

3b then, in the world with its gods, with its Māra, with its Brahmā, this generation with its recluses and brahmins, its rulers and people

there appears a boundless glorious radiance surpassing even the divine glory of the gods.

3c Even in the abysmal dark, the blinding darkness of the space amongst the worlds, where even the lights of the moon and the sun, so mighty as they are, cannot penetrate,

there, too, a boundless glorious radiance appears, surpassing even the divine glory of the gods.

3d And those beings that have arisen there, too, on account of that light, perceive one another, saying:

“It appears, sirs, that there are other beings, too, that have arisen here!”

3e Bhikshus. with the arising of the tathagata, the arhat, the fully self-awakened one, this is the third wonderful and marvellous thing that occurs.

(4) The Buddha's first discourse

4a Furthermore, bhikshus, when the Tathagata *turns* the supreme Dharma-wheel [wheel of truth],⁶⁰

4b then, in the world with its gods, with its Māra, with its Brahmā, this generation with its recluses and brahmins, its rulers and people,

there appears a boundless glorious radiance surpassing even the divine glory of the gods.

4c Even in the abysmal dark, the blinding darkness of the space amongst the worlds, where even the lights of the moon and the sun, so mighty as they are, cannot penetrate,

there, too, a boundless glorious radiance appears, surpassing even the divine glory of the gods.

4d And those beings that have arisen there, too, on account of that light, perceive one another, saying:

“It appears, sirs, that there are other beings, too, that have arisen here!”

4e Bhikshus. with the arising of the tathagata, the arhat, the fully self-awakened one, this is the fourth wonderful and marvellous thing that occurs.

5 Bhikshus. with the arising of the tathagata, the arhat, the fully self-awakened one, these four wonderful and marvellous things occur.

— evaṃ —

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⁵⁹ *Puna c'aparam, bhikkhave, yadā tathāgato anuttaram sammā, sambodhiṃ abhisambujjhati*. As in **Mahā, parinibbāna S D 16**), where it is given as the 5th reason for a great earth tremor (D 16.3.17/2:108) = SD 9.

⁶⁰ *Puna c'aparam, bhikkhave, yadā tathāgato anuttaram dhamma, cakkam pavatteti*. As in **Mahā, parinibbāna S D 16**), where it is given as the 6th reason for a great earth tremor (D 16.3.18/2:108) = SD 9.

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