

## Kindness and Compassion as means to Nirvana in Early Buddhism\*

The best lectures have the quality of detective stories. The lecturer holds her audience's attention (my use of the feminine pronoun alludes of course to the initiator of this series, Wendy Doniger) by relaying to them all sorts of colourful and intriguing facts, preferably interlarded with jokes, and while they are laughing and gasping they wonder where all this is leading, until in the last few minutes the lecturer, like a conjuror, produces the rabbit from his top hat in the shape of an unexpected but telling conclusion, a new and convincing way of interpreting his topic. As my friend Lee Siegel has wisely said, "I try to say something both true and interesting, but if I can't manage that, I'll settle for one of them."

Even were I capable of presenting such a tour de force, the circumstances of this lecture would have prevented it. The efficient organisers asked more than a year ago not only for the title of my lecture, but for a short resumé of my subject to accompany its announcement. So the rabbit is not only out of the hat but has been lying exposed to your inspection like game on a butcher's slab: the rules of this game preclude surprise.

In this situation I have tried to keep interest alive and to tickle the jaded palates of the many connoisseurs of Indology here today by making a bold claim. As my title and resumé announce, I wish to argue that the conventional view of the Buddha's message and his place in the history of world religion is wrong: that far from preaching that the only solution to life's problems lay in eliminating emotion, he was the person who found a way to salvation *through* emotion, albeit emotion purified of selfishness; that the common accusation that early Buddhism is inherently selfish could hardly be wider of the mark; and that it was the Buddha who introduced love and compassion into Indian religion. This claim is at least interesting, so I have met Lee Siegel's minimum requirement. But is it also true?

My conclusion – I would even say discovery – that the Buddha considered the cultivation of kindness and compassion to be a way (though, please note, not the *only* way) to reach salvation, nirvana, is mentioned, though not given great prominence, in a book I published late last year called *How Buddhism Began*.<sup>1</sup> Predictably, it has already been criticised<sup>2</sup> by the voice of orthodoxy (in this case that of the learned and admirable Bhikkhu Bodhi), repeating the arguments which have obscured my discovery from the world for so many centuries. My position is quite simple, and it will not take very long to tell you of the texts and the reasoning on which I base my view. It has however become clear to me that what needs to be done at some length, even if it is not so much fun, is to justify my approach and explain how I can dare to reach so radical a conclusion and defy established wisdom.

The first thing I have to justify is the mere fact of defying received opinion. Can an outsider tell people about their religion? In academic circles, especially in North America, this has become a suspect activity. The motives for this suspicion are not unworthy. Until recent times our western universities and academies were generally dominated by the locally prevalent form of Christian orthodoxy; the study of religion meant Christian theology; and if other religions were mentioned at all, it was generally to be castigated for their errors. Adherents of non-Christian religions were not invited to present their views, and what is called comparative religion, a subject only about a century old, was frequently vitiated (as still sometimes happens even today) by asking inappropriate questions of other religions, questions based on category mistakes and other misunderstandings. In the United States, a multi-cultural society with an egalitarian ideology, the view has gained ground that

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\* Pali texts are cited in the editions published by the Pali Text Society.

<sup>1</sup> *How Buddhism Began: The Conditioned Genesis of the Early Teachings*, London 1996.

<sup>2</sup> Review in *Journal of Buddhist Ethics*, 4, 1997, pp.292–6.

people should be allowed to describe their own beliefs and values rather than have those beliefs and values ascribed to them.

This very proper view has however led to some muddled thinking. The ideas and practices of living informants are generally the subject matter of the social sciences, which are far more popular and widely practised in the United States than history or philology. But the history of a faith community or the interpretation of their sacred texts can legitimately raise two quite different kinds of questions. We can ask what their history or their texts *mean to them*, and use their responses as our data – though it is often too readily assumed that those responses will be uniform, that the informants we happen to ask can stand for the entire group. But historians and textual scholars, once they are equipped with the tools of their trade, such as the knowledge of languages, can legitimately ask quite different questions: what did historical events *mean to the original participants*; what did texts mean to those who composed them, or to their earliest audiences? To such questions we are under no obligation to accept the answers of those who stand in the relevant tradition, even though we must be ready to learn from them, as indeed from anyone at all who has anything relevant to tell us.

Besides the widespread ethical distaste for privileging the opinions of what Americans call Caucasian males, intellectual fashion within the narrower circles of religious studies has swung against what is sometimes called “the search for origins”. This is a reaction to the theological preoccupation, which began in the middle of the 19th century, with trying to sweep away later accretions to Christianity and search for the “historical Jesus”. After a while it was observed that for both theoretical and practical reasons this had gone too far: subjects of more immediate relevance, such as what brought people into church, were not receiving sufficient attention. On the other hand, until about the 1950s the few scholars who studied non-Christian religions tended to be more comfortable at their desks with their dictionaries of classical languages than in following religious traditions through the centuries down to modern times – after all, one had to start somewhere. My own academic career began in this reactive mood. I was interested in Theravada Buddhism, and in 1959 began to learn Pali and read secondary sources, but the available material gave me little feeling for what living Theravada Buddhists were like, so I made it my doctoral project to go to Sri Lanka and find out. I was lucky in my timing. The anthropology of Buddhism (especially Theravada Buddhism) was just taking off, and within a few years Gananath Obeyesekere, Melford Spiro and Stanley Tambiah were publishing their great monographs in the field. Thus my first book, *Precept and Practice*,<sup>3</sup> was praised for innovating in what later came to be regarded as a politically correct manner. I was doing the right sort of thing.

But I am restless, if not downright perverse. In the eighties I found that now everyone was doing the right sort of thing, so perhaps it was time to go back to old-fashioned philology, and try to join what seemed to me to be a valuable tradition. Perhaps I might even say “rejoin”, as my initial training was in Latin and Greek. The main defect of this tradition, at least as it has been practised in Britain, seems to me to be its naive positivism. Scholars became virtuosi at emending texts on the basis of their understanding of the author’s way of writing, be it grammar, metrics, style or meaning, and they have been meticulous in the collection, recording and analysis of evidence; but sometimes this very virtuosity may lead them astray so that they forget about the hermeneutic circle (if they have ever heard of it) and appear to be unaware that their very knowledge of the rules of the relevant metre, or whatever else is in focus, is based on no more than probabilities established by generations of scholars and editorial decisions. This belief that at least close adherence to the texts will provide a bedrock of certain knowledge is a fallacy. It may well not vitiate the actual work produced, but it does do harm when it inhibits the scholar from

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<sup>3</sup> First edition Oxford 1971. Revised edition published as *Buddhist Precept and Practice*, Delhi 1991.

being willing to extrapolate from the evidence, from forming hypotheses, in other words from making informed guesses, which can be debated and thus advance the subject.

In turning to the Pali texts, therefore, my aim has been to cultivate the philologists' fine ear for discrepancies and discordances, as well as their scrupulous regard for evidence, while venturing at the same time to put forward ideas which do not have the authority of the established tradition. The tradition and I have the same corpus of evidence, namely the texts, first and foremost the texts in Pali, the language of the scriptural canon of Theravada Buddhism; but I feel free to reinterpret those texts. In 1989<sup>4</sup> I reinterpreted the evidence in Pali chronicles to argue that the date of the Buddha's death was not 543 B.C., as held in the modern Theravada tradition, or for that matter 483 B.C., a version of that tradition emended by some modern scholars, but about 405 B.C.; and it is worth noting that nobody has yet found a flaw in my argument. In exactly the same way, I think that some of the Pali texts which record the Buddha's sermons have been misinterpreted by tradition, and feel free to say so until my arguments have been refuted.

The exegesis of the Pali canon has not yet advanced much beyond where the exegesis of the Bible stood in the middle of the 19th century, though the Buddhist sources are less complicated. For our purposes it is sufficient to say that there are two relatively homogeneous bodies of source material: the canonical texts, which purport to record the words of the Buddha, and the commentaries, preserved for us in the same Pali language, on those texts.

Let me deal with the commentaries first. Those on the Buddha's sermons are all ascribed to one man, Buddhaghosa, whom we know to have been active in Sri Lanka at the very beginning of the fifth century A.D.. Buddhaghosa also wrote a huge book, called *The Path to Purity (Visuddhi-magga)*, which summarises Theravada Buddhist doctrine in so masterly a fashion that it has remained authoritative to this day. Sometimes the other commentaries refer to *The Path to Purity* for amplification on a topic. Even so, I do not myself think that they are all the work of Buddhaghosa; but that need not concern us today. To what extent Buddhaghosa (with possible colleagues) is the author and to what extent he is the editor of the commentaries may never be fully known, but it is beyond dispute that he often explicitly cites older commentaries, mostly written in Sinhala. These have all been lost, but obviously they take us back earlier than the time of Buddhaghosa himself; one scholar who studied them, E. W. Adikaram,<sup>5</sup> thinks that they were closed in the second century A.D.. What the evidence seems to show beyond doubt is that they were not closed earlier than that. According to tradition (embedded in those same commentaries), their substance goes back to the communal rehearsal of the doctrine held just after the Buddha's death, and was brought to Sri Lanka in the middle of the third century B.C. by the group led by Mahinda, the missionaries who introduced Buddhism into the island. Tradition also holds that the texts, including the commentaries, were first written down in Sri Lanka in the first century B.C.. The commentaries were probably recorded in Sinhala.

What emerges from all this is that on the one hand the Theravadin tradition of exegesis claims that it stretches right back from the texts we now have to the time of the Buddha himself, a period of about eight hundred years, and I see no reason to consider this implausible. But this is entirely different from positing that over those eight centuries, while the commentaries were transmitted orally (and there is no reason to think that during oral

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<sup>4</sup> The article was published in 1992 as "Dating the Buddha: A Red Herring Revealed", in *The Dating of the Historical Buddha/Die Datierung des historischen Buddha*, Part 2, (*Symposien zur Buddhismusforschung*, IV,2) ed. Heinz Bechert, Göttingen, pp. 237-259. But in 1989 I sent my article to more than a hundred scholars and began to present my argument in lectures round the world.

<sup>5</sup> *Early History of Buddhism in Ceylon*, Colombo 1946.

transmission they had the fixity imparted by writing), were translated and edited, nothing of importance was added, lost or otherwise changed. For that there would surely be no parallel recorded in human history. Nor was there any cultural scruple to inhibit changing the commentaries, for they do not even have the sanctity of being ascribed to the Buddha himself.

What of the texts which are so ascribed? The ones that concern us are the sermons of the Buddha, who lived, I think one can now agree, in the fifth century B.C.. The first firm evidence for the use of writing in India dates from the middle of the third century B.C..<sup>6</sup> The texts that record the Buddha's sermons are for the most part narrations in which the Buddha plays the leading role, though in some cases the sermon is ascribed to a leading monk. The tradition holds that the texts of the sermons were formulated at the council held soon after the Buddha's death. They were formulated by Ānanda, the monk who had been the Buddha's personal attendant during the latter half of his forty-five-year preaching career. When Ānanda had formulated the texts, they were rehearsed by all the monks attending the council, thus beginning the tradition of oral preservation of the teachings.

Each Buddhist tradition preserves its own version of exactly what happened at this first council and there is little agreement on the details. However, all do agree that there was an event of this kind, and I do not see how any coherent body of literature could have come into being without some such event. Again, however – and on this point all modern scholars agree – there are certainly texts in the Pali canon which do not go back to the first council. Few of the texts which are so certainly late are among the sermons; but there are even a few sermons which mention people whom we know to have lived after the Buddha.

The body of sermons preserved in Pali is very large: the Buddhists themselves count them as 17,505,<sup>7</sup> a greater number than appears to have come down to us. Most of them are short, and the corpus is full of repetitions and redundancies. Even so, it is a massive body of (mainly) prose literature. Either at the outset or very early on, the body of sermons was divided into four collections and monks and nuns specialised in learning by heart one of the collections (or another part of the canon) in order to preserve it.

The majority of the sermons, though by no means all, are preserved in translations made from Indian languages into Chinese, mostly around the time of Buddhaghosa, eight centuries after the Buddha. The Indian originals of these translations had been separately preserved by other Buddhist traditions or "schools". The systematic comparison of these Chinese versions with the Pali versions is still in its infancy; but overall it is clear that despite many discrepancies the degree of agreement is impressive, indeed astonishing.

The corpus of the Buddha's sermons is rich and varied, and it is not always *prima facie* obvious that he is everywhere saying the same thing. Since he preached for forty-five years and was evidently a man of supreme intelligence and originality, it would indeed be astonishing, unparalleled, and to my mind disappointing if over that span he had done nothing but repeat himself, or indeed had never changed his mind. Needless to say, however, his followers were not all of such high calibre. Despite the Buddha's explicit disclaimer, they ascribed to him omniscience from the moment of his Enlightenment, so that a change of mind was not admissible. By the same token, he could not be inconsistent. The Buddha was famous for adapting the expression of his message to his audience – a trait which became known later as his "skill in means" – and commentators used this fact to explain that apparent discrepancies were due to variations in expression made for homiletic purposes; they were merely metaphorical, or some other form of indirect expression.

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<sup>6</sup> Harry Falk, *Schrift in alten Indien: ein Forschungsbericht mit Anmerkungen*, Tübingen 1993.

<sup>7</sup> *Sumaṅgala-vilāsinī* I, 22–23.

What we have in the texts, of course, is not a perfect record of the Buddha's intentions, let alone of his actual words, but records of what various monks (and perhaps nuns) believed him to have said and meant. The collection of sermons cannot possibly be ascribed in its entirety to Ānanda or any other single monk. Many monks figure in the texts themselves as interlocutors with the Buddha and with each other, and the texts must in most cases reflect their testimony. These monks and their successors were not merely of diverse character and intelligence; they had been converted as adults from other beliefs and practices, backgrounds which must have coloured their understanding. It is hard for me to conceive how in this great mass of texts we should not hear, even if muted, various voices giving their own opinions of what the Buddha had meant to say. But of course we can fail to hear them if we are determined to be deaf.

As has happened in every learned religious tradition, the exegetes homogenised and systematised the founder's message. The brahminical exegetical tradition made explicit the principle that revealed texts, *śruti*, had only one purport; this was called *eka-vākyatā*. No such principle was explicitly formulated in Buddhism, but one cannot too often stress that in ancient India the brahmin culture was hegemonic and deeply influenced all other traditions – anthropologists, observing this in modern times, have dubbed it “sanskritization”.<sup>8</sup> I contend that in more ways than have yet been explicated, Buddhism was sanskritized over the centuries of its development in India, and this commentarial homogenization could be seen as an instance of that process.

This homogenization is the first of three defects which I find in the Pali exegetical tradition. The second is excessive literalism, a failing that the Buddha himself foresaw and warned against. Once the texts had been formulated, their words were carefully preserved and a technical significance was often ascribed to some quite normal and innocent expression; I have provided several examples of this in my recent book.

The third deficiency in the commentaries, from our point of view, is that they have largely lost the memory of the Buddha's historical context. I have been at pains to show that important aspects of the Buddha's message are formulated in terms set by the early brahminical scriptures, especially *the Bṛhadāranyaka Upaniṣad*, both where he agrees and where he disagrees with the brahmins, and that we lose a whole dimension of his meaning if we are unaware of this context and argument.

All these three shortcomings in the traditional Buddhist interpretation of the Buddha's sermons – homogenisation, literalism, and ignorance of the Upaniṣadic background – are relevant to my argument in this lecture. Moreover, at least the first two of them are to be found within the canonical corpus itself. It is not merely legitimate but necessary for the student of the Pali canon to employ the same alert eye as any other textual critic in order to spot discrepancies. Of course, one must not be hasty in jumping to conclusions: an obscurity or difficulty is not necessarily a discrepancy. One must never forget the editorial principle of *lectio difficilior potior*: it is the difficult reading which is likely to be the original, the easy one an attempt by the tradition to smooth over the difficulty. But the sort of discrepancy I have in mind is when a word or expression in a text sounds odd and seems hard to interpret, but then we find it in another text where it fits the context perfectly; one may then hypothesise that the latter context is the original one and the other is secondary, a later creation.

Such a critical approach is no exact science but a matter of judgement; but this is not to admit the charge put by some conservatives, that any stratification of the canonical texts is “arbitrary”. Where however I do think that the conservatives have a point is that it turns out that one cannot simply label whole texts as early or late. Passages long or short (Biblical scholars call them “pericopes”) move from text to text, as one might expect in an orally

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<sup>8</sup> The term was coined by M. N. Srinivas.

preserved tradition, so that if what can be shown to be a relatively early or late passage appears within a large formal unit, a sermon or a chapter, it does not follow that that whole unit can thereby be labelled correspondingly early or late.

In one of the obscurest of my many obscure articles I gave a fine illustration of the hermeneutics I have just enunciated. The article is called “Three Souls, One or None: the Vagaries of a Pali Pericope”,<sup>9</sup> and concerns an expression, a set of phrases nine words long, which occurs in five texts in the Pali Canon. In only one of these does it make perfectly good sense – a text<sup>10</sup> in which a brahmin is criticising Buddhists. Once lifted out of that original context, the expression looks very strange, as it seems to suggest that ascetics can “blow out” a self – whereas the Buddhist position is that one has no such “self” in the first place. Not only do the commentaries on this expression in its secondary contexts have trouble in explaining it: their explanations are themselves discrepant. This seems to be an undeniable case in which neither the canonical corpus nor the commentarial corpus ascribed to Buddhaghosa can be made to yield homogeneous authorial unity; in other words, people who did not fully understand the expression have used it in the creation of canonical texts, and other people who did not understand it have given more than one interpretation of it in the commentaries.

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I have explained my method; let me now apply it. In the Pali canon<sup>11</sup> there is a poem called the *Metta Sutta*, a title which one could translate “The text on kindness”. In fact I think that in this and similar contexts the Pali word *sutta* derives from the Sanskrit word *sūkta*, literally “well spoken”, which is a way of referring to a Vedic hymn.<sup>12</sup>

Be that as it may, the Pali text both exemplifies and extols having kind thoughts towards the whole world. It has traditionally been used by Buddhist meditators, and in modern Sri Lanka it has become for Sinhala Buddhist schoolchildren a kind of functional equivalent to the Lord’s prayer, because they recite it every day at school, usually (I believe) at the end of the school day just before going home.

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<sup>9</sup> *Journal of the Pali Text Society*, vol. 11, 1987, pp. 73-8.

<sup>10</sup> *Aṅguttara Nikāya* I, 168ff.

<sup>11</sup> *Sutta-nipāta* I, 8 = vv. 143–152.

<sup>12</sup> There is an early Upaniṣad called the *Maitrī Upaniṣad*, and the Sanskrit word *maitrī* is the equivalent of the Pali word *mettā*. The Upaniṣad is not about kindness, but it is possible that the Pali title is an allusion to it.

The form of the title requires some further comment. Firstly, it is commonly known as the *Karaṇīya-metta Sutta*. *Karaṇīya* is the first word of the text; it means “to be done”, so that that form of the title means “the ‘kindness should be practised’ text”. Secondly, the noun *mettā* in Pali is feminine with a long *a*, so why is the final *a* in this title short? I think it comes from the Sanskrit adjective *maitra*, “friendly”. Within the poem, the word only occurs in verse 8, and here too I think it is adjectival: *mettaṃ mānasaṃ* I take to mean “friendly thought”.

On this analogy, in the next verse (9) I also see *brahmaṃ* as a *vṛddhi*-ed adjective, from Sanskrit *brāhmya*.

The text has been shown to be in a very archaic metre<sup>13</sup> (which the commentators did not identify), and its expression is sometimes rather clumsy. The first half-verse consists of a sentence which the most learned of modern translators, Prof. K. R. Norman, renders into English as follows:<sup>14</sup>

“This is what is to be done by one who is skilful in respect of the good, having attained the peaceful state.”

This translation follows the commentary (which in this case is ascribed not to Buddhaghosa but to Dhammapāla). The text then lists a string of virtues, before changing direction with the famous words, “May all beings be happy and secure.”

“The peaceful state” is, as the commentator rightly tells us, *nibbāna*, the Buddhist’s religious goal. But if that is so, why is the person who has attained *nibbāna* being told what he has to do? Surely he has no more duties? Surely, in fact, Buddhist doctrine holds that one who attains this state must already be perfectly moral, to the extent that he is no longer capable of anything wrong in thought, word or deed?

It was in fact, if my memory serves me, Prof. Norman who first pointed out to me the solution to this puzzle. The Pali word which he has translated “having attained” is an absolutive, a grammatical form which usually has the meaning “having done” (where “done” stands for any verb); but in Pali the infinitive, which is most commonly used to express purpose,<sup>15</sup> can be used as an absolutive. So here that same semantic assimilation would be operating in reverse, and the introductory verse is saying what one has to do *in order to attain* nirvana.

Various virtues are then listed. But most of the poem prescribes how one should love all living beings as a mother loves her own child. “Towards the whole world one should develop loving thoughts, boundless: upwards, downwards, sideways, without restriction, enmity or rivalry. Standing, walking, sitting or lying, one should be as alert as possible and keep one’s mind on this. They call this divine living in this world. Not taking up ideas, virtuous, with perfect insight, by controlling greed for sensual pleasure one does not return to lie in a womb.”

This conclusion to the poem surely corroborates that the whole poem is about how one may become enlightened, not how one will behave after so becoming. Moreover, it is natural to interpret “not returning to lie in a womb” as meaning that one will have escaped altogether from the cycle of rebirth, which is to say that one will have attained nirvana. A scholiast familiar with the full development of Buddhist cosmology could object that there are forms of life, higher than us in the universe, in which rebirth is not via a womb but spontaneous.<sup>16</sup> Thus it is possible to interpret the end of the poem, if it is taken in isolation, as referring only to escape from the grosser forms of rebirth. But there is no such scope for ambiguity in “the peaceful state”, the phrase at the beginning of the poem. So it seems clear that the purport of the whole poem is that kindness is salvific.

The poem does not clearly state that kindness *alone* will produce salvific results. There is a list of other virtues mentioned at the beginning, and the last verse too speaks of other qualities of great importance, notably insight and self-control. I believe I can prove to you

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<sup>13</sup> L. Alsdorf, *Die Āryā-strophen des Pali-Kanons*, Mainz 1968.

<sup>14</sup> *The Group of Discourses* vol. II, Oxford 1992, p. 16.

<sup>15</sup> E.g. *daṭṭhu*, *Sutta-nipāta* v. 424.

<sup>16</sup> Ordinary gods (*deva*), however, though born spontaneously, are bound at the end of their finite lives to be reborn in a lower state of existence.

in this lecture that that is in fact the purport of the poem; but I certainly cannot from this poem alone disprove the traditional view of kindness as a less than salvific virtue.

What is that traditional view? There is a set of four states of mind which the Buddha highly commends: kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy and equanimity. How the four relate to each other we can learn from Buddhaghosa: one becomes “like a mother with four sons, namely a child, an invalid, one in the flush of youth, and one busy with his own affairs; for she wants the child to grow up, wants the invalid to get well, wants the one in the flush of youth to enjoy for long the benefits of youth, and is not at all bothered about the one who is busy with his own affairs.”<sup>17</sup> These four states have two names: they are called “the boundless”<sup>18</sup> and the *brahma-vihāra*. A *vihāra* came to be the word for a Buddhist monastery – hence the name of the Indian state of Bihar. It means “monastery” because it means “a place to stay”. The noun derives from a verb which simply means “to spend time, to stay”, and the noun can just mean “staying”. What about *brahma*? *Brahman* is a name for the religious goal of the brahmins, the monistic principle posited in the Upaniṣads, texts which convey *brahma-vidyā*, “knowledge of brahman”. As the monistic principle, *brahman* is neuter, but there is also a masculine Brahman, a supreme god, whom we might regard as a personification of the neuter principle, though historically the development may have been the reverse. The Buddhist term *brahma-vihāra* thus carries an inescapable reference to brahminism, for it means “staying with *brahman*”. Whether one regards that *brahman* as personal or impersonal, masculine or neuter – since the form of the word allows either interpretation – for a brahmin “staying with *brahman*” is the ultimate goal, the state of salvation.

The Buddha regularly took brahminical terms and gave them a new meaning. The very word “brahmin”, *brāhmaṇa*, he said should not refer to a person born in a particular family but to someone with certain virtues.<sup>19</sup> One famous sermon, the *Kūṭadanta Sutta*,<sup>20</sup> is mainly devoted to teaching a brahmin that a true sacrifice (*yañña*) does not involve killing any animals, but various kinds of moral action. Indeed, the Buddha even took the brahmin term for ritual action, *karman* in Sanskrit, and said that for him *kamma* (the Pali equivalent) was purely a matter of intention, good or bad.

This last example is particularly telling, because it involves making a word mean its virtual opposite, since *karman* derives from the verb meaning “to do, to act”. Yet there is no canonical text or commentary that spells out how the Buddha is taking a brahminical term and using it to mean the opposite. We simply have the Buddha’s statement, “By *kamma* I mean intention,”<sup>21</sup> and the whole edifice of thought built on that foundation.

The tradition is not unaware that the Buddha was often arguing and competing with brahmins; there is a lot of straightforward evidence for that in the canon. When the Buddha attains Enlightenment but is reluctant to preach, the story goes that Brahma himself comes and begs him to favour the world by telling them about the way which he has discovered.<sup>22</sup> The Buddha himself, however, tended to express his disagreements with Brahminism more subtly, and indeed sometimes more humorously.

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<sup>17</sup> *Visuddhi-magga* IX, §108, trans. Ñyānamoli (sic) *The Path of Purification*, 2nd ed., Colombo 1964.

<sup>18</sup> *appamāṇa*. However, in the *Metta Sutta* the (synonymous) word is *aparimāṇa*, perhaps because of the exigency of the metre. See Alsdorf, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

<sup>19</sup> E.g. *Soṇadaṇḍa Sutta* (*Dīgha Nikāya sutta* IV); *Sutta-nipāta* v. 136.

<sup>20</sup> *Dīgha Nikāya sutta* V.

<sup>21</sup> *Aṅguttara Nikāya* III, 415.

<sup>22</sup> *Vinaya* I, 5–7.

The four *brahma-vihāra* occur in several canonical texts, but the *locus classicus* is the *Tevijja Sutta*.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, some of the vocabulary and phraseology of the *Metta Sutta* comes straight out of the *Tevijja Sutta*. In that prose text, the Buddha introduces the four *brahma-vihāra* in a narrative context. Two young brahmins are arguing about the direct way to what they call “companionship with Brahma”, and decide to ask the Buddha. This leads to a long conversation, in which the Buddha makes fun of brahmins for claiming to teach the way to a goal they have never seen; he compares this, among other things, to declaring one is in love with a beauty queen without having the faintest idea what she looks like, who she is or where she lives. He contrasts the brahmins who claim to know all their sacred texts, the three Vedas, with the picture they draw of Brahma, whom they claim they will join because they resemble him, and says that on the other hand it is a Buddhist monk who resembles Brahma. His account of the monk’s way of life culminates in his saying that the monk permeates every direction with his kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy and equanimity. Thus it appears plausible that at death such a monk “goes to companionship with Brahma”, he says. Convinced by this, the two young brahmins convert to Buddhism.

The traditional interpretation of this text agrees with what I have said about it so far, but takes a literal view of what is meant by companionship with Brahma. Fully developed Buddhist cosmology holds that above the world in which we human beings are at home there are six heavens inhabited by gods; and above them again are heavens of a more rarefied kind inhabited by Brahmas, who are thus super-gods. Even above these heavens there are planes inhabited only by meditating minds. Most, perhaps all, of this cosmology can be unpacked by the historian as a reification of various metaphors. That Brahma is above ordinary gods is a brahminical tenet found in the Upaniṣads, including the very texts to which we can show that the Buddha was reacting.

The fully developed Buddhist cosmology does appear within the canon, but I am extremely sceptical about whether it can be ascribed to the Buddha himself. I am sceptical not only because of the way that the details can be accounted for as a historical development; to show such interest in the structure of the universe goes against the Buddha’s explicit message. The world, he said, lies within this fathom-long human carcass;<sup>24</sup> indeed, there are many texts in which he discourages speculation about or even interest in the physical universe; we should concentrate on our experience of life here and now.

The Buddha says to the two young brahmins that a monk who has boundless kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy or equanimity is, like Brahma, without grasping (*apariggaho* – a word that can also mean “without possessions”) and in full control (*vasavattī* – a word that when applied to a god comes close to meaning omnipotent, but for a monk refers to self-control), and so at death may well (*thānaṃ etaṃ vijjati*) go to join Brahma. There are three possible ways of interpreting this. First, that of the Theravada tradition, which takes it literally to mean that the monk is reborn in Brahma’s company, in other words in one of the Brahma worlds posited by its cosmology. I have shown in my recent book<sup>25</sup> that the canonical texts go into further detail but reach inconsistent conclusions, a fact which must itself arouse suspicion.

The second interpretation, of which we have no actual record, would be that of a brahmin, such as the Buddha’s original audience, who took it literally in the sense of their own cosmology, the teaching of the *Brhadāranyaka Upaniṣad* to which the Buddha is responding. That text says that those who have achieved gnosis, the realisation that in

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<sup>23</sup> *Dīgha Nikāya sutta XIII*.

<sup>24</sup> *Samyutta Nikāya I, 62*.

<sup>25</sup> *How Buddhism Began*, pp. 85–6.

essence they are *brahman*, when they die pass beyond the sun to the lightning, and then are conducted to the worlds of Brahman, where they remain. This itself, of course, is interpreted by the brahminical tradition as a metaphorical expression for merging into *brahman*, but that is not how the *Upaniṣad* puts it.

The third interpretation, mine, is that the Buddha was using the brahminical way of putting things as a metaphor for what he saw as the highest goal, the attainment of final emancipation from the round of rebirth. He was using the brahminical description of their *summum bonum*, which was itself couched in metaphorical terms, to describe his own *summum bonum* in precisely analogous metaphorical style. In doing so he was adapting the style of his message to the understanding of his audience, using that “skill in means” (*upāya-kaūśalya*) for which he became so famous.

In all gnostic religions salvation is bound to be a two-stage process: to have the salvific realisation, one has to be alive, and then the ultimate solution comes when life ends. The ideal Upaniṣadic monist understands that he is Brahman, and then becomes Brahman at death; one can neatly express this by bringing out the range of meanings in the English verb “realise”, and saying that he “realises” his true nature by insight while alive, and makes it real at death. In Buddhism this same dual character of nirvana is expressed by saying that the blowing out of the fires of greed, hatred and delusion while one is still alive leaves a residue of fuel (*sa-upādi-sesa nibbāna*), while the death of such an enlightened person is *nibbāna* with no such residue (*an-upādi-sesa*): there is simply nothing left which could again be ignited with the passions.

So far I have discussed what the *Tevijja Sutta* has to say about this second, final stage of liberation. The monk whose sympathies are boundless is so like Brahma, the Buddha is telling the young brahmins, that at the death of his body his individuality completely disappears, the boundless having merged into the boundless. But what about the first stage, the moment of realisation?

Here the text provides the most powerful argument of all for my interpretation. I have already published in my book a closer examination of the Pali wording than is suitable for presentation in a lecture of this character; but there is no problem about presenting my main conclusions, even if I have to leave out the detailed evidence.

Why exactly are these four states called “boundless”? The brahmin ideology held that everyone had the duty to perform certain acts. Primarily the texts were concerned with the duties of brahmin males, and the acts they had to perform were ritual acts. Correct performance of such acts kept one on the rails, as it were, and entailed good results, such as health and prosperity, until at death they ensured rebirth in a heaven. However, just as acts were finite, their results too were finite. The very terminology reveals that agriculture supplies the model: the act is a seed which, if all goes well, produces a harvest – but not an infinite harvest.

Of all the four states, from kindness to equanimity, the Buddha says that when they have been developed, the karma which is finite (*pamāṇa-katam*) no longer remains. No more finite results. That can only mean freedom from rebirth.

But why am I beating about the bush? Each of these four states is called *ceto-vimutti*, “liberation of the mind”. Does one need, could one have, anything more explicit?

I think not. But unfortunately the tradition disagrees with me, and obfuscates the whole issue. There are several terms in the canon for the goal, for nirvana, and *vimutti*, “liberation”, is one of the commonest. Sometimes this word is qualified as *ceto-vimutti*, “liberation of the mind”, or *paññā-vimutti*, “liberation by understanding”. Often these two

expressions are found together. In my recent book<sup>26</sup> I have examined the canonical use of these terms in great detail and shown that though they have a slightly different meaning they originally have the same referent: there is, I claim, just one “liberation”, and that is the realisation of nirvāna.

The developed, homogenised tradition, however, disagrees; it claims that there are two grades of *ceto-vimutti*, one of which is permanent and therefore the same as *paññā-vimutti*, “liberation by insight”, and the other of which is temporary, not the real thing. On the one hand, then, the tradition turns *ceto-vimutti* into a technical term, while on the other it claims that it is an *ambiguous* technical term.

The passage which most clearly envisages forms of *ceto-vimutti* which fall short of attaining nirvana is in the *Mahā-vedalla Sutta*.<sup>27</sup> This text is ascribed to Sāriputta, whom tradition holds to have been the greatest master, virtually the founder, of *abhidhamma*, the systematisation of Buddhist doctrine (*dhamma* in the singular) and classification of doctrinally posited entities (*dhamma* in the plural). Near the end of the sermon, Sāriputta mentions the possibility of coming out of (literally “arising from”) *ceto-vimutti*,<sup>28</sup> in terms which show that it is considered a meditative state. He is then asked whether various *ceto-vimutti* are different terms for the same referent or not. His initial reply suggests that what differentiates them is merely the mental route by which they are attained. However, he then resorts to word-play and says that the irreversible (*akuppā*) *ceto-vimutti* will always be free from passion, hatred and delusion; those “liberations of the mind” which are not free of them are inferior. In other words, those “liberations” are temporary states, not true liberation.

How did this strange use of language come about? I think it can be no coincidence that the first kind of temporary “liberation” with which Sāriputta deals in this passage is precisely the “boundless” one, and indeed that he quotes the *Tevijja Sutta*. We thus have before us, I believe, an example of early Buddhist debate. In my book I traced the stages of the process by which *ceto-vimutti* came to be differentiated from *paññā-vimutti*; but I did not say much to explain *why* this differentiation came about. I now think that the *Tevijja Sutta*, the very problem we are discussing, may lie at the root of this development. If one assumes that the monk who has cultivated infinite kindness literally goes to join Brahma when he dies, it follows from Buddhist cosmology that he has not been liberated and that the release of his mind can only have been temporary. Thus the *Tevijja Sutta*, if it is not to contradict itself within a few lines, must be taken by the literal-minded interpreter as proof that the word *ceto-vimutti* does not refer to definitive liberation.

There is also a more general reason why it may have been denied that *vimutti* in the *Tevijja Sutta* could refer to liberation. When the Buddha’s teachings were systematised, nirvana had to be clearly defined, and the leading definition was that it was the same as the total elimination of passion (or greed), hatred and delusion. Those who adhered to this (quite unexceptionable) formulation were reluctant to accept that an account of nirvana which made no mention of eliminating passion, hatred and delusion could really be saying what it purported to say. Among such literalist interpreters, evidently, was Sāriputta, or rather the person who put those words into his mouth while formulating the *Mahā-vedalla Sutta*.

Developed Buddhist doctrine insists that the final step to liberation as taught by the Buddha consists of a gnosis with a specific content, an insight into the nature of the

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<sup>26</sup> *Op. cit.*, pp. 116–120.

<sup>27</sup> *Majjhima Nikāya sutta* 43.

<sup>28</sup> *Majjhima Nikāya* I, 297, lines 4–8.

phenomenal world as being impermanent, dissatisfying and without essence. According to this view, there is a progression: morality, concentration, understanding; and each of these three factors is a pre-requisite for the next. The four boundless states are classified as forms of concentration, not of understanding, so they cannot be part of the culminating gnosis.

I am unconvinced by the rigidity of this view, even though it is fundamental to the Theravadin tradition. I am not denying for a moment that it may well go back to the Buddha himself; but then so may other formulations with an equal claim to authenticity. For example, take the noble eightfold path. This is enunciated in what is supposed to have been the Buddha's first sermon. It does not follow the progression "morality, concentration, understanding", but ends with the stage of "right concentration". The fact that concentration comes eighth on a path, which must be a metaphor for a progression, has to be explained away by the exegetes with tortuous argument. Or take another example. Another text<sup>29</sup> has the Buddha say that where there is morality there is understanding, and vice versa, and that they purify each other just like the process of washing one's hands. This is in fact first said by a brahmin called Soṇadaṇḍa, but he is enunciating a position to which he has been driven back by the Buddha and the Buddha repeats his words to approve them.

All these formulations, I repeat, seem to me to have an equal claim – a perfectly good one – to authenticity. I suspect that if someone had taxed the Buddha with thus being inconsistent in his account, he would have told them not to be silly. Similarly, I very much doubt that it was the Buddha who classified the four boundless states as coming into the category of concentration as opposed to morality or understanding. Why should they not be considered to come into all three categories?

Let me summarise my interpretation of the *Tevijja Sutta* in terms which show how the boundless states may be considered to partake of morality, concentration *and* gnosis. According to the Upaniṣads, every significant act brings its result, but that result is finite. To escape this finitude requires gnosis; gnosis leads one to join *brahman*, that which pervades the entire universe as consciousness.<sup>30</sup>

The Buddha answers that the Buddhist monk pervades the universe with his consciousness, but it is an ethicised consciousness. In enlarging his mind to be (metaphorically) boundless, he emulates the brahmin gnostic who identifies with universal consciousness, and goes one better, showing the brahmin what he really should be doing. This moral activity is a kind of activity not envisaged by brahminism, for it has transcended finitude; it is at the same time a meditation, a harnessing of the mind, and a gnosis, a limitless illumination, albeit not so expressed in the usual apophatic terms.

In my book<sup>31</sup> I have supplied further corroborative evidence for my interpretation of the *Tevijja Sutta* by discussing another text<sup>32</sup> in the Pali canon in which King Pasenadi consults the Buddha and the Buddha recasts something said in the *Bṛhadārāṇyaka Upaniṣad* to make it mean that one should be kind, substituting an ethical for a metaphysical message. However, rather than repeat what I have published elsewhere, let me amplify my argument in a different direction.

There are quite a few indications in the Buddhist tradition that the literalism of the Theravadin tradition has left infinite kindness and compassion with too humble a role, that

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<sup>29</sup> *Dīgha Nikāya* I, 124.

<sup>30</sup> The *Bṛhadārāṇyaka Upaniṣad* does not seem to suggest that the world does not exist or is an illusion. It is just less real than brahman.

<sup>31</sup> *Op. cit.*, pp. 62–4.

<sup>32</sup> *Samyutta Nikāya* I, 75.

the spirit of the tradition is uncomfortable with the letter of the texts as it interprets them. It is well known that in the Mahāyāna the Buddha has both infinite wisdom and infinite compassion; they complement each other exactly like morality and understanding in the *Soṇadaṇḍa Sutta*. The same is however said by Buddhaghosa in the *Visuddhi-magga*, when he expounds the Buddha's quality as "perfect in knowledge and conduct". "He knows through omniscience what is good and harmful for all beings, and through compassion he warns them of harm and exhorts them to do good ... so that his disciples are on the good way, not on the bad way like the disciples of those imperfect in knowledge and conduct, who do things like mortifying the flesh."<sup>33</sup> There is a long commentary on this, which says things like: "It was through understanding that he felt revulsion for the round of rebirths, and through compassion that he bore it. It was through understanding that he fully understood others' suffering, and through compassion that he undertook to counteract it... It was through understanding that he himself crossed over, and through compassion that he brought others across."<sup>34</sup>

Even more striking is the way in which Buddhaghosa ends chapter IX of the *Visuddhi-magga*, the chapter on the four *brahma-vihāra*. Constrained no doubt by canonical texts, he has just explained exactly how high in the universe each of the four states in turn can take you. However, he then says that they "bring to perfection" all the other good qualities of a Buddha, here called a "Great Being". He writes: "For the Great Beings' minds retain their balance by giving preference to beings' welfare, by dislike of beings' suffering, by desire for the various successes achieved by beings to last, and by impartiality towards all beings."<sup>35</sup> And he goes on to apply this to each of the Ten Perfections, the moral qualities which every Buddha is held to bring to their highest pitch. In effect, Buddhaghosa is bypassing the problem of exactly what role the four divine states play in the spiritual development of an ordinary practitioner and saying that for a Buddha they are fundamental.

But what about the ordinary Buddhist practitioner? I suppose the most famous of all Pali canonical texts is the *Dhammapada*, the collection of more than 400 single stanzas on morality. I find it strange that number 368 has not attracted more attention. It says: "The monk who dwells in kindness, with faith in the Buddha's teaching, may attain the peaceful state, the blissful cessation of conditioning."

As philologists of Sanskrit or Pali will know, one need not attach much weight to the fact that the verse says "may attain" (in the optative) rather than "will attain" in the indicative. Moreover, in the version of this verse preserved in the *Mahāvastu*,<sup>36</sup> a text of another school which is generally considered old, i.e. to date from before the Christian era, the verb *is* in fact in the indicative (*adhigacchati*). The verse is in fact saying that kindness is salvific, and it is surely no coincidence that the term for nirvana, "the peaceful state", is the same as that used at the opening of the *Metta Sutta*. Thus the author of the *Dhammapada* verse apparently interprets the *Metta Sutta* to mean that it is kindness which will get one to nirvana. Tradition holds, of course, that the author of both poems is the Buddha himself.

In my published summary of this lecture, I referred to the common misconception that the Mahāyāna came into being as a protest against the alleged selfishness of Theravada Buddhism, and mentioned that a similar accusation already appears in the Pali Canon in the

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<sup>33</sup> *Visuddhi-magga* VII, § 32, trans. Ñyānamoli.

<sup>34</sup> *Paramattha-mañjūsā* 192, quoted in translation by Ñyānamoli, p. 215.

<sup>35</sup> *Visuddhi-magga* IX, § 124, trans. Ñyānamoli.

<sup>36</sup> *Mahāvastu* ed. É. Senart, vol. III, Paris 1897, p. 421, lines 18–19.

mouth of a brahmin. This occurs in a text to which I have already referred.<sup>37</sup> A brahmin called Saṅgārava says that brahmins who carry out and institute sacrifices are thereby gaining a merit which benefits more than one body. (Presumably he means that they benefit both the priest and the clients, and also that they can affect more than one life, since they take one to heaven after death.) By contrast, says Saṅgārava, a person who renounces the world and acquires self-control benefits himself alone. To this the Buddha replies that by preaching the truth that he has discovered he puts hundreds of thousands of beings on the same path, and he gets Saṅgārava to agree that he thus benefits very many people.

The Mahāyāna emphasises the virtue of compassion, the second in the set of four boundless states, while the Theravada tends rather to speak of the first, kindness. This is hardly more than a purely verbal difference. Moreover, Mahāyāna exegesis presents as the supreme case of compassion the fact that the Buddha took the trouble to preach the truth that he discovered, thus enabling living beings to find an escape from suffering. In a series of lectures at Oxford, Prof. Takasaki Jikido showed that this interpretation of the Buddha's supreme compassion is consistent throughout the history of Indian Buddhism. He did not cite the conversation with Saṅgārava, in which the word compassion (*karuṇā*) is not specifically mentioned; but it carries the same message.

I am not denying that the Mahāyāna as such, by recommending that everyone aim to attain both omniscience and perfect compassion, laid enormous stress on altruism; nor am I denying that the Theravada tradition as displayed in doctrinal texts has comparatively little to say about kindness and compassion. However, I hope to have demonstrated that there are texts in the Pali canon which not only commend kindness but value it so highly that it can be a means to attaining nirvana.

Is this kindness what Christians mean by “love”, or is it merely benevolence? This is an important question, but I doubt whether it admits of a definitive answer. The two texts I have mainly discussed, the *Metta Sutta* and the *Tevijja Sutta*, refer only to thoughts; I quoted the *Metta Sutta* saying “One should keep one’s mind on this.” This is perhaps not surprising if one recalls that the Buddha assumed that anyone who took his message seriously would become a monk or nun and try to live in meditative seclusion. Monks were exhorted, for instance, to tend each other when they were ill, and the Buddha set the example in this. On the other hand the tradition is so conservative that I think it is true that wherever the words kindness and compassion are mentioned in the texts, the reference is to thought, not to acts of kindness – other than preaching.

I would, very tentatively, sum up my impression of early Buddhist kindness as follows. The texts I have cited, and many many others, show a strong preference for negative expression: the monk who dwells with Brahma is free from hatred, free from ill will. The Buddha’s advice to King Pasenadi is that everyone loves themselves, so “one who loves self should not harm others”. It is this, non-harming, that the early texts continually emphasise, rather than positive acts of goodness. Moreover, in the systematic presentation of the Theravādin *abhidhamma*, kindness (*mettā*) is actually defined negatively, as absence of hatred (*adoso*),<sup>38</sup> while on the other hand it is said to be a component of every morally wholesome (*kusala*) thought,<sup>39</sup> and therefore not necessarily directed at any object.<sup>40</sup> This shows on the one hand that even the systematisers had to leave a fundamental role for kindness, while on the other that they rendered “kindness” somewhat bloodless.

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<sup>37</sup> See note 10 above.

<sup>38</sup> *Dhamma-saṅgani* § 1056.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.* § 1054.

<sup>40</sup> I am greatly indebted to Sarah Shaw for drawing my attention to this text.

If one compares Buddhism with Christianity, one notices that Buddhism has no place for righteous anger, and that the Buddhist religious tradition, nobly exemplified in our day by the Dalai Lama, unflinchingly preaches non-violence and pacifism. But let us, here in this Academy, not confuse what Buddhists do with what the Buddha said or meant. The evidence for the latter is clouded and fragmentary. Nevertheless, I feel confident that he was the great ethiciser of Indian religion and hence of a large part of the world, and that he preached an ethic not only of self-restraint but also of love.

Richard Gombrich