



Miraculous Transformation and Personal Identity: A note on The First *anātman* Teaching of the Second Sermon

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1. In the first *anātman* teaching of the Second Sermon the Buddha states that various psycho-physical phenomena (the five aggregates) are ‘not *ātman/attā*’ (*anātman/anattā*) since they are beyond a person’s command. Collins has thus described this teaching as an ‘argument from lack of control’.¹ The *Mahāvagga* of the Pāli Vinaya reports this teaching as follows:

Vin I, 13.18: rūpaṃ bhikkhave anattā. rūpañ ca h’ idaṃ bhikkhave attā abhaviṣṣa, na y idaṃ rūpaṃ ābādhāya saṃvatteyya, labbheṭṭha ca rūpe: evaṃ me rūpaṃ hotu, evaṃ me rūpaṃ mā ahoṣī ti. yasmā ca kho bhikkhave rūpaṃ anattā, tasmā rūpaṃ ābādhāya saṃvattati, na ca labbhati rūpe: evaṃ me rūpaṃ hotu, evaṃ me rūpaṃ mā ahoṣī ti. vedanā anattā, vedanā ca h’ idaṃ bhikkhave attā abhaviṣṣa...

‘Form, *bhikkhus*, is not *attā*. For if form were *attā* it would not incline towards affliction, and with regard to it one would succeed with the thoughts ‘let my form be thus’ or ‘let not my form be thus’. Since form is not *attā*, *bhikkhus*, it inclines towards affliction and with regard to it one does not succeed with the thought ‘let my form be thus’ or ‘let not my form be thus’.

Feeling is not *attā*, for if feeling were *attā*, *bhikkhus*...’.

The versions of this teaching contained in Buddhist Sanskrit texts are more or less identical:

From the *Mahāsāṃghika Mahāvastu*:

III.335.12: rūpaṃ bhikṣavo anātmā, vedanā anātmā, saṃjñā anātmā, saṃskārā anātmā, vijñānaṃ anātmā. idaṃ rūpaṃ ce bhikṣavaḥ ātmā abhaviṣyat, na va rūpaṃ ābādhāya duḥkhāya saṃvarteta, ṛdhyāc ca rūpe kāmakārikatā: evaṃ me rūpaṃ bhavatu, evaṃ mā bhavatu. yasmāc ca bhikṣavo rūpaṃ anātmā, tasmād rūpaṃ bādhāya duḥkhāya saṃvartati, na cātra ṛdhyati kāmakārikatā: evaṃ me rūpaṃ bhavatu, evaṃ mā bhavatu. iyaṃ vedanā ce bhikṣavo ātmā abhaviṣyat...

From the *Mūlasarvāstivādin Saṅghabhedavastu*:

I.138.10: rūpaṃ bhikṣavo ’nātmā. rūpaṃ ced bhikṣava ātmā syān, na rūpaṃ ābādhāya duḥkhāya saṃvarteta, labhyeta ca rūpasyaivaṃ me rūpaṃ

¹ Collins (1982: 97).



bhavatu, evaṃ mā bhūḍ iti. yasmāt tarhi bhikṣavo rūpaṃ anātmā, tasmād rūpaṃ ābhādāya duḥkhāya saṃvartate, na ca labhyate rūpasyaivaṃ me bhavatu, evaṃ mā bhūḍ iti. vedanā, saṃjñā, saṃskārā, vijñānaṃ bhikṣavo 'nātmā. vijñānaṃ cet bhikṣavaḥ ātmā syān...

From the (Mūlasarvāstivādin) *Catuṣpariṣat Sūtra*:

15.2 (Waldschmidt p. 162): (rūpaṃ bh)ikṣavo 'nātmā. rūpaṃ ced bhikṣava ātmābhaviṣyad, rūpaṃ na vyābādāya duḥkhāya saṃvarteta, labhyeta ca rūpa)sya: evaṃ me rūpaṃ bhava(tv, evaṃ mā bhūḍ iti).

15.3: (yasmāt tarhi bhikṣavo rūpaṃ anātmā, tasmād rūpaṃ vyābādāya duḥkhāya saṃvartate. na) ca labhyate rūpa)sya: evaṃ me rūpaṃ bhavativ, evaṃ mā bhūḍ iti).

15.4: (v)edanā, saṃjñā, saṃskārā, vijñānaṃ bhikṣavo 'nātm(ā. vijñānaṃ ced ātmābhaviṣyad...

Despite the discrepant wording of the different texts, especially with regard to how the teaching is abbreviated and repeated for each of the five aggregates, all state that the five aggregates are 'not *ātman/attā* (*anātmā/anattā*)' since they are not in a person's control. As in the case of the second *anātmān* teaching of the Second Sermon, the similarity between the different texts suggests that this teaching was more or less fixed before the first schism between Sthavira and Mahāsāṃghika, i.e. at some point in the early, pre-Aśoka period of Buddhism.

The first *anātmān* teaching of the second Sermon is particularly difficult to understand, however, in spite of its obvious importance. It states that two consequences follow if the constituents of the phenomenal person (the five aggregates) constitute an *ātman/attā*: first, these constituent parts would not be subject to affliction and suffering; and second, a person would be able to change them as he wishes. This teaching presupposes, then, the notion of an *ātman/attā* consisting of the five aggregates which is beyond suffering and controllable by simply thinking. Since the *ātman* is envisaged as a composite being made up of five aggregates, it does not seem to fit the simple English definition of the word 'soul', i.e. 'the principle of thought and action in man, commonly regarded as an entity distinct from the body; the spiritual part of man in contrast to the purely physical' according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*. For an *ātman* that partly consists of 'form' cannot be said to be immaterial, and the 'soul' is not generally understood to be something that can be changed at one's whim.

If the modern concept of 'soul' does not correspond to this ancient Buddhist conceptualisation of the *ātman/attā*, neither does an important ancient understanding of the *ātman*. Since it is presupposed that the *ātman/attā* of this teaching can be changed by mere thought, this *ātman/attā* cannot be understood in an early Upaniṣadic sense. The *ātman* of the early Upaniṣads – particularly the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* – is an unchangeable, nondual essence;² it is

² E.g. BU IV.3.32 states that the *ātman* is the 'highest bliss' (*parama ānanda*), BU IV.5.22 states that the *ātman* is nondual consciousness (*vijñānaghana*), BU IV.5.11 states that it is macrocosmic (*mahābhūta*), and BU IV.5.12 likens the person who unites with the *ātman* in deep sleep to a 'single ocean' (*salila eko*), a state equated with the 'world of *brahma*' (*brahmaloka*). BU IV.5.15 states that the *ātman* is the subject of perception, and goes on to

something that cannot be changed at all, let alone at a person's whim. 'This does not look anything like the *ātman/attā* of the teaching, although another aspect of the Upaniṣadic *ātman* is more akin – the notion that it is an inner controller. Since the Buddhist teaching points out that there is no control and hence no *ātman/attā* in the five aggregates,' Collins has suggested the teaching criticises the Upaniṣadic notion of the *ātman* as the inner controller, i.e. a 'microcosmic reflection of the macrocosmic force of the universe (*brahman*)'.³ But this is misconceived. The teaching does not imagine the consequences of there being an inner *ātman/attā* controlling the five aggregates: it does not begin by stating 'if there was an inner *ātman* (= microcosmic reflection of *brahman*) controlling form...'. Instead it imagines what would happen if the *ātman/attā* was constituted by the five aggregates. In other words, the teaching depicts the *ātman/attā* as the controlled rather than the controller, and if so this teaching cannot be concerned with the early Upaniṣadic notion of the *ātman* as an inner controller identical to the cosmic principle (*brahman*).

If the term 'soul' does not fit the understanding of *ātman/attā* in this teaching, and if the teaching is not a critique of the Upaniṣadic *ātman* as a nondual essence or inner controller, it would perhaps be preferable to take the term *ātman/attā* in the sense of 'self'. 'Although the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the term 'self' in a number of ways, its simple philosophical definition – 'That which a person is really and intrinsically he (in contradistinction to what is adventitious)' – seems to fit. For the teaching considers whether the five aggregates constitute a person's true identity in the sense that they might not be subject to affliction, i.e. that they might not be at risk of being affected by adventitious changes. But if this definition seems to make most sense of the term *ātman/attā*, we must also note the teaching goes beyond it by assuming that a 'self' made up of the five aggregates should be able to be controlled by mere thought.' If so, the *ātman/attā* of this teaching would seem to be some sort of divine 'self' i.e. an intrinsic identity that has the added bonus of miraculous transformation and freedom from suffering.' But why point out that the human is not to be thought of as a sort of 'divine' self? It could perhaps be argued that this makes sense in the ancient Indian context, for some early religious texts suggest that gnosis leads to the attainment of a god-like status. In the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*, for example, it is stated that religious knowledge confers divine powers on an individual.⁴ Moreover, the gods in traditional Indian mythology often have the property of miraculous self-transformation, e.g. the legend of Viṣṇu transforming himself into a boar in order to destroy the demons,⁵ or Viṣṇu, in his fifth incarnation as a dwarf (*vāmana*) expanding to enormous dimensions in order to traverse the cosmos in three steps. Given these beliefs, the notion that a person could transform himself into a being with god-like powers is perhaps understandable.

ask 'By what means might one perceive the perceiver?' (BU IV.5.22: *vijñātāram are kena vijānīyād*). According to Bronkhorst (2007: 233), BU IV.5.15 'introduces the notion of the immutability of the self'.

³ Collins (1982: 97).

⁴ See CU VII.25.2, where the person who realises the *ātman* 'obtains freedom of movement in all worlds' (*tasya sarveṣu lokeṣu kāmacāro bhavati*).

⁵ The myth is found in the the Bombay edition of the Mokṣadharmā at Mbh XII.209.13ff (for a translation see Wynne 2009: 318).

This interpretation is not without problems, however. As we have seen, the first *anātman* teaching argues against conceiving the human being as a godlike self with powers of individual transformation. But it is also presupposed that the *ātman/attā* of this teaching is an immortal being: this is the implication of the claim that if the five aggregates were the *ātman/attā*, they would not be subject to affliction (in the Pāli version: *ābādha*) or affliction and suffering (in all the other versions: <vy>*ābādha* and *dukkha*). For a ‘self’ made up of five aggregates beyond suffering implies, in the Buddhist context, a self beyond the deleterious effects of change, i.e. an immutable and immortal being. It is hard to make sense of this according to the ancient Indian texts. As far as I am aware, no early Indian text claims that human immortality is possible. Hindu gods do not have physical bodies, and other early Brahminic texts make it clear that a human being cannot go to heaven without abandoning the physical body.⁶ If the textual record is to be believed, there was no reason for the argument against human immortality to be made. It is of course true that the texts only give a limited perspective on ancient India, and it is quite possible that many ancient beliefs were not recorded in them. But at the same time the textual record must be respected. We must therefore explore all other possible explanations for the peculiar argument made by the teaching. If these explanation are not compelling, we might then return to the possibility that the teaching argues against a belief that was not recorded in the textual evidence, i.e. that a human being can become immortal.

That the first an *anātman* teaching of the Second Sermon is a peculiarity requiring explanation is support by the fact that it is found in only two other canonical Pāli texts: the *Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta* and the *Cūlasaccaka Sutta*.⁷ Since the former is a verbatim repetition of the Second Sermon preserved in the *Vinaya Mahāvagga*, it means that the Pāli canon records only two instances when this teaching was given by the Buddha. If this is to be believed, it would seem that the Buddha delivered this teaching only twice in his forty-five year teaching career: once at the very beginning and once subsequently. Even if the ascription of this teaching to the Buddha is not accepted, it is odd that a teaching placed in such an important textual position – the Second Sermon – was not made more use of by the composers/compiler of the early texts. The first *anātman* teaching of the Second Sermon is, therefore, conceptually odd and textually odd: not only is it a peculiar idea, it is also odd that the idea is expressed so infrequently throughout the early texts. Why is this?

2. The peculiarities concerning the content and textual distribution of the first *anātman* teaching of the Second Sermon start to make sense once it is realised that it contradicts some important early Buddhist beliefs. The teaching denies the possibility of attaining powers of bodily and mental transformation, but in the early Buddhist texts it is taken for granted that such powers can be achieved

⁶ A good example of this belief can be seen in the Mokṣadharmā at XII.199 (of the Bombay edition, for which see Wynne 2009: 207ff), where a Brahmin ascetic is given the reward of an immediate ascent to heaven for his practice of Vedic intonation (*japa*). He will not go, however, since he does not want to abandon his body.

⁷ For the teaching in the the *Cūlasaccaka Sutta* (M I, 231.17ff), see section seven below; the *Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta* is found at S III, 66.26.

through various meditative practices. According to the standard account of the Buddhist path contained in the *Silakkhandhavagga* of the Dīgha Nikāya, a *bhikkhu* attains a number of supernatural abilities after realising the fourth *jhāna*.⁸ First he attains a knowledge and vision into the relationship between mind and body, then he attains the ability to emanate a ‘mind-made’ body from his own body, and after that he is said to attain a set of six supernatural powers that in the *Saṅgīti Sutta* are termed ‘higher knowledges’ (*abhiññā*): various supernatural powers (*iddhi*), the ‘divine ear’, the ability to read other people’s minds, and finally the three knowledges, i.e. of his past lives, of the workings of karma and rebirth in the cosmos, and finally of the destruction of the corruptions. The second and third of these supernatural abilities – the emanation of a ‘mind-made’ body and the attainment of supernatural powers (*iddhi*) – include what, in the words of the Second Sermon, could be called the ability to ‘let my form be thus’ (*evaṃ me rūpaṃ hotu*):

When his mind is focused in this way, and is pure, cleansed, unblemished, devoid of defilements, supple, workable, still and imperturbable, he turns and diverts it towards creating a mind-made body. He extracts another body from this one – it possesses form, consists of mind, is endowed with all its limbs and is not lacking in any of its faculties.⁹

When his mind is focused in this way, and is pure, cleansed, unblemished, devoid of defilements, supple, workable, still and imperturbable, he turns and diverts it towards the various sorts of supernatural power (*iddhi*). Thus he experiences numerous supernatural powers: having been one he becomes many, having been many he becomes one; he becomes visible or invisible; he goes through a wall, rampart or mountain feeling no obstruction, as if he were in space; he plunges into the earth and emerges from it again as if it were water; he walks on water without splitting it, as if it were the earth; he flies cross-legged in space, just like a bird with wings; and he touches and strokes the sun and moon, of great power and majesty, even going as far as the Brahma world in his body.¹⁰

While some of these miraculous powers do not involve a magical transformation of the five aggregates, e.g. walking on water or flying, which are better described as nature miracles, others involve the ability to change one’s form through mere thought, e.g. creating a mind-made body, manufacturing simultaneous

⁸ D I, 76.13ff.

⁹ D I, 77.6: *so evaṃ samāhite citte parisuddhe pariyodāte anaṅgane viḅatūpakkilese mudubhūte kammaniye ṭhite ānejjappatte manomayaṃ kāyaṃ abhinimmināya cittaṃ abhinīharati abhininnāmeti. so imamahā kāyā aññaṃ kāyaṃ abhinimmināti rūpaṃ manomayaṃ sabbaṅgapaccāṅgaṃ ahīnidriyaṃ.*

¹⁰ D I, 77.30: *so evaṃ samāhite citte parisuddhe pariyodāte anaṅgane viḅatūpakkilese mudubhūte kammaniye ṭhite ānejjappatte iddhividhāya cittaṃ abhinīharati abhininnāmeti. so anekavihitaṃ iddhividhaṃ paccanubhoti: eko pi hutvā bahudhā hoti, bahudhā pi hutvā eko hoti; āvibhāvaṃ tirobhāvaṃ tirokuḍḍaṃ tiropākāraṃ tiropabbataṃ asajjamāno gacchati seyyathā pi ākāse; pathaviyā pi ummuḅjanimuḅjaṃ karoti seyyathā pi udake; udake pi abhiḅjamāne gacchati seyyathā pi pathaviyā; ākāse pi pallaṅkena kamati seyyathā pi pakkhī sakuṇo. ime pi candimasūriye evaṃmahiddhike evaṃmahānubhāve pāṇina parāmasati parimajjati. yāva brahmalokā pi kāyena vasaṃ vatteti.*

manifestations of one's self, becoming invisible etc. The final supernatural power (*iddhi*) also seems to involve the five aggregates functioning beyond the believed laws of nature, and so presupposes that they are magically transformed: as pointed out earlier, the belief that it is impossible to travel to the heavens in one's physical body is found in early Brahminic texts.¹¹ This miraculous power is in fact attested throughout the Pāli discourses, it being occasionally said that the Buddha and other eminent *bhikkhus* disappear in an instant and reappear immediately in the Brahma world.¹² Such a power suggests a belief in the possibility of attaining a magical power over the five aggregates, to let them be as one wishes in contradiction of what was believed to be a law of nature. But the first *anātman* teaching of the Second Sermon denies that all of this is possible, stating, for example, that 'with regard to form one does not succeed with the thought 'let my form be thus'.' The early texts would therefore appear to be contradictory. The first *anātman* teaching further states that any person who has the supernatural power over the five aggregates must therefore have an *ātman/attā* made up of the five aggregates and beyond suffering. The implication of this is that the ability to travel to the Brahma world in one's body, for example, can only mean that a person has an immortal *ātman*. And yet this ability is attributed to the Buddha and other eminent *bhikkhus* throughout the early Buddhist literature.

Other examples of similar magical powers are found in the Pāli Vinaya *Mahāvagga* soon after the Second Sermon. The first of these occurs when the householder Yasa is made invisible while the Buddha teaches his father.¹³ This conversion story is shortly followed by another more elaborate one, in which numerous miracles are performed by the Buddha in his attempt to convert the fire-worshipping Kassapas.¹⁴ All of these miracles are performed for the sake of Uruvela Kassapa. Thus the Buddha reads his mind and then disappears to lake Anotatta in the Himalayas (to avoid embarrassing him on a great sacrifice day),¹⁵ he visits the Tāvatiṃsa heaven to pluck fruit,¹⁶ splits five hundred pieces of unsplittable fire-wood in an instant, creates five hundred vessels of burning fire, walks on water,¹⁷ flies in the air¹⁸ and so on. Perhaps the most unusual miracle – given the content of the first *anātman* teaching of the Second Sermon – is the Buddha's fire miracle that tames the serpent king (*nāgarāja*) which inhabits the fire-hut of Uruvela Kassapa. The Pāli Vinaya contains two adjacent

¹¹ See n.6 for an example.

¹² M I, 326.11, S I, 142, S I, 144, S I, 145, A III, 332, A IV, 75.

¹³ Vin I, 16.16.

¹⁴ The Kassapas and their followers are called *jaṭilas*. According to the *Gautama*, *Baudhāyana* and *Vasiṣṭha Dharmasūtras* (III.34, II.1.15 and IX.1 respectively; Olivelle 2000: 128, 280 and 384), Brahminic anchorites (*vaikhānasa*) who dwell in the forest (*vānaprastha*) have matted hair (*jaṭila*). Since the fire worshipping Kassapas are also described as having matted hair in the Vinaya (Vin I.24.12: *jaṭilā*), it would seem that they were forest hermits of the Vedic kind. Rhys Davids and Oldenberg concluded this much based on other early Pāli sources (1885: 118 n. 1): 'The Gatilas (i.e. ascetics wearing matted hair) are Brahmanical vānaprasthas.'

¹⁵ Vin I, 27.27ff.

¹⁶ Vin I, 30.28.

¹⁷ Vin I, 32.9.

¹⁸ Vin I, 32.19.

accounts of this legend that are virtually identical.¹⁹ The important part of the second account reads as follows:²⁰

Once it saw that the sage had entered, the snake became unhappy and emitted smoke. For his part, the benevolent, untroubled ‘snake among humans’ (*manussanāgo*) also emitted smoke. Unable to endure his wrath, the snake began to blaze, just like a fire. But because he was skilled in the fire element, the ‘snake among human beings’ began to blaze right there. While both of them were aflame the dreadlocked ascetics watched the fire-hut and said: ‘Even though the form of the great ascetic is marvellous, he will not harm the serpent’. But at the end of that night the flames of the snake were conquered and the colourful flames of the wonder-worker remained. The colourful flames coming out of the golden-bodied Aṅgiras were dark blue, red, crimson and yellow. He then dropped the snake in his bowl and showed it to the Brahmin, saying: ‘Here is your snake, Kassapa – his fiery splendour has been consumed by mine.’

The story in the preceding account (Vin I.24.32ff: *Mahāvagga* 15.3-5) is essentially the same, although it gives more detail on the Buddha’s emission of flames: it states that he ‘absorbed himself in the fire element and burnt’ (Vin I.25.5: *bhagavā tejodhātum samāpajjivā pajjali*). In other words the Buddha has magically altered his form through thought – a skill the first *anātman* teaching claims is impossible since it implies the existence of an *ātman/attā* beyond suffering.

A similar Pāli text that suggests an early Buddhist belief in the magical power to let one’s form be thus is the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta*. The episode in question occurs when Ānanda fails to notice that the Buddha has suggested he is able to live on until the end of the aeon:²¹

If he wishes, the person who has developed, mastered, made a vehicle of, become grounded in, practised, contemplated and undertaken the four bases of magical power (*iddhipādā*) can endure for a whole

¹⁹ According to Rhys Davids and Oldenberg (1885: 120 n. 4), the first version is probably a reworking of the more ancient second: ‘In 6, 7 (excepting the last clause of 7) the story related in 1-5 is repeated in a more popular style. This appears to be a more archaic redaction than the preceding. We do not know any other instance in the Pāli Piṭakas of a similar repetition, excepting a short passage at the end of chapter 24; and one other in the *Mahāpadāna Sutta*’.

²⁰ Vin I, 25.24 (*Mahāvagga* 15.6-7): *disvā isiṃ pavittḥaṃ ahināgo dummano padhūpasi. sumānaso avimano manussanāgo pi tattha padhūpasi. makkhañ ca asahamāno ahināgo pāvako va pajjali. tejodhātukusalo manussanāgo pi tattha pajjali. ubhinnaṃ sajotibhūtānaṃ ayyāgāraṃ udiccere jaṭilā: abhirūpo vata bho mahāsamaṇo nāge na viheṭṭhissatī ti bhaṇanti. atha kho tassā ratiyā accayena hatā nāgassa acciyo honti, iddhimato pana ṭhitā anekavaṇṇā acciyo honti: nīlā atha lohitikā mañjeṭṭhā pītakā phalikavaṇṇāyo Aṅgirassa kāye anekavaṇṇā acciyo honti. pattamhi odahitvā ahināgaṃ brāhamaṇassa dassesi: ayaṃ te Kassapa nāgo, pariyaḍinno assa tejasā tejo ti.*

²¹ D II, 103.1: *yassa kassaci Ānanda cattāro iddhipādā bhāvītā bahulīkatā yānikatā vatthukatā anuṭṭhitā paricīṭā susamāradhā, so ākaṅkhamāno kappamā vā tiṭṭheyya kappāvasesam vā. Tathāgatassa kho Ānanda cattāro iddhipādā bahulīkatā yānikatā vatthukatā anuṭṭhitā paricīṭā susamāradhā. so ākaṅkhamāno Ānanda kappamā vā tiṭṭheyya kappāvasesam vā ti.* Reading *ākaṅkhamāno* with CSCD instead of *akaṅkhamāno* in the PTS edition.

aeon or for the remainder of an aeon. The Tathāgata, O Ānanda, has developed, mastered, made a vehicle of, become grounded in, practised, contemplated and undertaken the four bases of magical power, and if he wishes can endure for a whole aeon or for the remainder of an aeon.

The text goes on to narrate that although the Buddha repeats this statement two more times, Ānanda did not realise its import. And in a rather cruel twist, when Ānanda finally realises what the Buddha has stated, and asks him to remain for the remainder of the aeon, the Buddha declares that the time has passed.²² The authors of this passage clearly believed that the Buddha was adept in magical self-transformation – just as did the authors of the Vinaya account of the Buddha's conversion of the Kassapas, and the authors of some of the miraculous powers said to be attained after the fourth *jhāna*. The composers of the Second Sermon, however, seem to have believed the opposite.

3. Apart from the fact that the first *anātman* teaching of the Second Sermon contradicts various canonical texts on magical self-transformation, far more serious is the fact that it contradicts the fundamental Buddhist belief that consciousness can be transformed through meditation. This would seem to be the implication of the teaching that a person cannot alter consciousness (*viññāna*) by thinking 'let my consciousness be thus' or 'let not my consciousness be thus'. As an example of the opposing meditative belief, we can consider the passage on the four 'formlessnesses' in the *Saṅgīti Suttanta* (D.III.224.10: *cattāro arūpā/ārūppā*). It indicates that these meditative attainments are realised by 'thinking' them into reality:

The four formless states: here, venerable sir, with the complete transcendence of perceptions of visible forms, when perceptions of sensory 'impacts' fade away through not paying attention to perceptions of diversity, the *bhikkhu* thinks 'infinite space' (*ananto ākāso ti*) and then enters and abides in the sphere of the infinity of space; completely transcending the sphere of the infinity of space by thinking 'infinite consciousness' he enters and abides in the sphere of the infinity of consciousness; completely transcending the sphere of the infinity of consciousness by thinking 'nothing at all' he enters and abides in the sphere of nothingness; completely transcending the sphere of nothingness, he enters upon and abides in the sphere of neither-consciousness-nor-unconsciousness.²³

²² D II, 115.1: *evaṃ vutte āyasmā Ānando Bhagavantaṃ etad avoca: tiṭṭhatu bhante Bhagavā kappañ, tiṭṭhatu Sugato kappañ, bahujaṇahitāya bahujaṇasukhāya lokānukampāya atthāya hitāya sukhāya devamanussānaṃ ti. alaṃ dāni Ānanda, mā Tathāgataṃ yāci, akālo dāni Ānanda Tathāgataṃ yācanāyā ti.*

²³ D III, 224.10: *cattāro ārūppā: idhāvuso bhikkhu sabbaso rūpasāññānaṃ samatikammā, paṭiḥhasāññānaṃ atthagamā nānattasāññānaṃ amanasikārā, ananto ākāso ti ākāsaññācāyatanāṃ upasampajja viharati; sabbaso ākāsaññācāyatanāṃ samatikamma anantaṃ viññānaṃ ti viññānaññācāyatanāṃ upasampajja viharati; sabbaso viññānaññācāyatanāṃ samatikamma n' atthi kiñcī ti ākiñcaññācāyatanāṃ upasampajja viharati; sabbaso ākiñcaññācāyatanāṃ samatikamma nevasāññānaññācāyatanāṃ upasampajja viharati.*

This account describes how a *bhikkhu* attains meditative states through mere thought: the *bhikkhu* effectively wishes his consciousness ‘to be thus’ and then makes it so. Taken literally, the first *anātman* teaching of the Second Sermon denies that this is possible. In short, this teaching seems to deny both the possibility of a meditative transformation of consciousness and the magical power over one’s being that this was believed to effect. How is this contradiction to be explained? The only possible explanation for these different opinions, for and against meditation and the miraculous powers it confers, is that they were authored by early Buddhists with very different ideas about spiritual means and ends. A number of other early texts support this hypothesis. They suggest not only that different factions in the early Buddhist *saṅgha* held different opinions on spiritual practise and its goals, but also that these groups were sometimes engaged in quite hostile dispute.

4. Evidence suggesting that there was an early Buddhist school little interested in meditation is contained in the *Khemaka Sutta*. This text records a dialogue between the elders of Kosambi and the ill *bhikkhu* Khemaka. After inquiring about his illness, they send the *bhikkhu* Dāsaka to ask Khemaka the following question:

The Blessed one has spoken of five aggregates of attachment,²⁴ namely: the aggregate of attachment that is form... feeling... apperception... volitions... [and] consciousness. Does the venerable Khemaka see any sort of self (*attā*) or its property (*attaniyaṃ*) in these five aggregates of attachment?²⁵

After replying that he does not see any ‘self’ or its property in the five aggregates,²⁶ the Kosambi elders then ask Khemaka if he is an arahant; although the text does not say so it seems that the elders of Kosambi wanted to ascertain Khemaka’s spiritual status in case he were to die from his illness:

If the venerable Khemaka does not see any self or its property in the five aggregates of attachment, he must be an arahant whose corruptions have disappeared (*arahaṃ khīṇāsavo*).²⁷

The elders of Kosambi seem to have believed that liberating insight is effected through understanding the second *anātman* teaching. Whether or not they

²⁴ I give the standard translation of the compound *upādānakkhandha*, but for a more detailed historical explanation see Gombrich (1996: 67) and Wynne (2007: 84).

²⁵ S III, 27.24: *pañc’ ime āvuso upādānakkhandhā vuttā Bhagavatā, seyyathīdaṃ: rūpupādānakkhandho vedanupādānakkhandho saññupādānakkhandho saṅkhārūpādānakkhandho viññāṇupādānakkhandho. imesu āyasmā Khemako pañcasu upādānakkhandhesu kiñci attānaṃ vā attaniyaṃ vā samanupassatī ti?*

²⁶ S III, 128.1: *pañc’ ime āvuso upādānakkhandhā vuttā Bhagavatā, seyyathīdaṃ: rūpupādānakkhandho pe viññāṇupādānakkhandho. imesu khv āhaṃ āvuso pañcasu upādānakkhandhesu na kiñci attānaṃ vā attaniyaṃ vā samanupassāmi ti.*

²⁷ S III, 128.18: *no ce kirāyasmā Khemako imesu pañcasu upādānakkhandhesu kiñci attānaṃ vā attaniyaṃ vā samanupassatī, tenāyasmā Khemako arahaṃ khīṇāsavo ti.*

believed this to come about after intensive meditative practice, or through just a little meditation or through no meditation at all is not stated. But in the remainder of the text Khemaka explains his understanding of how liberation is effected, and this in turn sheds some light on the position of the Kosambi elders. Khemaka first of all points out that his understanding of this *anātman* teaching has not effected his liberation:

Venerable sirs, the Blessed one has spoken of five aggregates of attachment, namely: the aggregate of attachment that is form... feeling... apperception... volitions... [and] consciousness. I have no view that any sort of self (*attā*) or its property (*attanīyaṃ*) is found in these five aggregates of attachment, venerable sirs, and yet I am not an *arahant* devoid of corruptions. For I still have the notion 'I am' (*asmī ti*) with regard to these five aggregates of attachment, venerable sirs, despite the fact that I do not have the view 'I am this' (*ayam asmī ti na ca samanupassāmi*).²⁸

The logic of this statement is relatively simple. Khemaka knows that he should be detached from the five aggregates, this being inherently unsatisfactory since it does not contain an enduring essence or self. But he is unable to do so because of an automatic tendency to identify with the five aggregates in the form of the notion 'I am'. This indicates that for Khemaka, knowledge of this *anātman* teaching does not resolve the religious problem of self-consciousness, which appears to be a deeply-engrained state of ignorance that takes the form of an automatic identification with the five aggregates. As Khemaka puts it, just as a flower's scent arises from the flower as a whole, so too does self-consciousness (the notion 'I am') arise in connection with the five aggregates as a whole.²⁹ For Khemaka it seems that knowledge itself is not enough, and this would seem to indicate that this was the opinion of the Kosambi elders. This point is reinforced by Khemaka's statement that a prolonged contemplation of the five aggregates is required to effect a person's liberation:

Although a noble disciple might have abandoned the five lower fetters, it might occur to him that the conceit (*māno*), intention (*chando*) and

²⁸ S III, 28.29: *pañc' ime āvuso upādānakkhandhā vuttā Bhagavatā, seyyathīdam: rūpupādānakkhandho ...pe... viññāṇupādānakkhandho. imesu khv āhaṃ āvuso pañcasu upādānakkhandhesu na kiñci attānaṃ vā attanīyaṃ vā samanupassāmi, na c' amhi arahāṃ khīṇāsavo. api ca me āvuso pañcasu upādānakkhandhesu asmī ti adhigataṃ, ayam aham asmī ti na ca samanupassāmi ti.*

²⁹ S III, 130.13: *seyyathā pi āvuso uppalassa vā padumassa vā puṇḍarīkassa vā gandho. yo nu kho evaṃ vadeyya: pattassa gandho ti vā, vaṇṇassa gandho ti vā, kiñjakkhassa gandho ti vā, sammā nu kho so vadamāno vadeyyā ti? no h' etaṃ āvuso. yathākathaṃ pañāvuso sammāvyākaramāno vyākareyyā ti? pupphassa gandho ti kho āvuso sammāvyākaramāno vyākareyyā ti. evam eva khv āhaṃ āvuso na rūpaṃ asmī ti vadāmi, na pi aññatra rūpā asmī ti vadāmi, na vedanam ... na saññam ... na sañkhāre ... na viññāṇam asmī ti vadāmi, na pi aññatra viññāṇā asmī ti vadāmi. api ca me āvuso pañcasu upādānakkhandhesu asmī ti adhigataṃ, ayam aham asmī ti na ca samanupassāmi.*

In the second sentence reading *pattassa gandho ti vā, vaṇṇassa gandho ti vā, kiñjakkhassa gandho ti vā* with CSCD instead of the PTS *pattassa gandho ti, vaṇṇassa gandho pi, kiñjakkhassa gandho ti vā*.

underlying tendency (*anusayo*) ‘I am’ (*asmī ti*) with regard to the five aggregates of attachment has not been destroyed. Later on he immerses himself in observing the rise and fall of the five aggregates of attachment: ‘form ... feeling ... apperception ... volitions ... consciousness is thus, its arising is thus, its fading away is thus’. In doing this the conceit, intention and underlying tendency ‘I am’ with regard to the five aggregates of attachment that had not been destroyed is destroyed.³⁰

Khemaka likens this practice to that of placing a newly washed cloth in a sweet-scented box in order that its ‘residual smell of cleaning salt, lye or cowdung’ is eradicated.³¹ Thus the notion ‘I am’ can be eradicated when a person immerses himself in the contemplation of the five aggregates. The analogy makes the point that knowledge is not enough since the problem is not simply a matter of wrong-knowledge: self-consciousness is instead an automatic mode of ‘knowing’ rather than an incorrect knowledge of something, and thus requires a sustained effort to transform the deep-rooted assumption of identity with conditioned experience. The contemplation of the rise and fall of the five aggregates would therefore appear to be a contemplation of the phenomenal human being as a process rather than as a stable, enduring entity, and so disabuse a person of the basic misconception of identification with the five aggregates.

The *Khemaka Sutta* is evidence for two closely related early Buddhist tendencies: first, there is a tendency to believe in the spiritual efficacy of knowledge (in this case of the second *anātman* teaching), and second there is a tendency to believe that this knowledge is effected through a profound contemplation of personal experience in the light of Buddhist doctrine. The difference between the two is subtle. Khemaka’s response to the Kosambi elders does not state that they are wholly wrong in their understanding that knowledge liberates, but only that this knowledge is of a special kind that must be worked at through contemplation. Whether or not this was believed to require meditation is not made clear. And yet Khemaka’s analogy of the scented box would not make sense if the elders of Kosambi were serious meditators pursuing altered states of consciousness. If so, the text would seem to indicate a tendency towards doctrinal knowledge at the expense of serious meditation. More explicit evidence for this tendency is found elsewhere.

³⁰ S III, 130.28: *kiñcāpi āvuso ariyasāvakaṃ pañcorambhāgiyāni saññojanāni pahīnāni bhavanti atha khv assa hoti: y’ eva pañcasu upādānakkhandhesu anusahagato asmī ti māno asmī ti chando asmī ti anusayo asamūhato. so aparena samayena pañcasu upādānakkhandhesu udayabbayānupassī viharati: iti rūpaṃ, iti rūpassa samudayo, iti rūpassa atthagamo; iti vedanā... iti saññā... iti saṅkhārā... iti viññāṇaṃ, iti viññāṇassa samudayo, iti viññāṇassa atthagamo ti. tass’ imesu pañcasu upādānakkhandhesu udayabbayānupassīno viharato, yo pi ’ssa hoti pañcasu upādānakkhandhesu anusahagato asmī ti māno asmī ti chando asmī ti anusayo asamūhato, so ’pi samugghātaṃ gacchati.*

³¹ S III, 131.8: *seyyathā pi āvuso vatthaṃ saṅkilīṭṭhaṃ malaggahitaṃ tam enaṃ sāmikā rajakassa anupadajjuṃ. tam enaṃ rajako ūse vā khāre vā gomaye vā sammadditvā acche udake vikkhāleti. kiñcāpi taṃ hoti vatthaṃ paṇisuddhaṃ pariyoḍātaṃ atha khv assa hoti y’ eva anusahagato ūsagandho vā khāragandho vā gomayagandho vā asamūhato. tam enaṃ rajako sāmikānaṃ deti. tam enaṃ sāmikā gandhaparibhāvite karaṇḍake nikkhipanti. yo pi ’ssa hoti anusahagato ūsagandho vā khāragandho vā gomayagandho vā asamūhato, so pi samugghātaṃ gacchati.*

5. The existence of an early Buddhist school little interested in meditation and supernatural powers, but more concerned with the contemplation of *anātman* teachings, is suggested in the *Susīma Sutta*.³² This unusual discourse narrates the story of a wandering mendicant (*paribbājaka*) called *Susīma* who, while living in *Rājagaha*, is asked by his fellow wanderers to enter the Buddhist *saṅgha* in order to discover the reason for its success. The story begins as follows:

And then *Susīma*'s assembly of wanderers spoke this to him: 'Go, venerable *Susīma*, and live the holy life under the ascetic *Gotama*. Master his teaching (*dhammaṃ*) and tell it to us so that we can master it and teach it to the householders. In this way we will be appreciated, esteemed, respected, honoured and worshipped, and thus gain such requisites as robes, alms, lodgings and medicines for diseases'.³³

After being ordained by *Ānanda*, *Susīma*'s attention is drawn towards the many *bhikkhus* who claim the attainment of liberating insight (*aññamaṃ*) by stating 'birth is destroyed, the holy life has been lived, done is what had to be done, there is no more of this state'.³⁴ *Susīma* therefore questions them in an attempt to understand what they mean. He first asks them if they have attained the various sorts of supernatural power (*iddhi*);³⁵ the *bhikkhus* state they have not (S II.121.24: *no h' etaṃ āvuso*). *Susīma* then asks a number of questions about attainments that, if the standard account of the path described in the *Sīlakkhandhavagga* of the *Dīgha Nikāya* is to be believed, a *bhikkhu* attains just before awakening: the ability to read minds, to remember one's past lives, and to see the reincarnation of other beings by means of the 'divine eye'. To all these questions the *bhikkhus* who claim to have attained insight reply in the negative (*no h' etaṃ āvuso*); they also respond in the negative when asked if they have attained the 'formless releases' (*ārūppā vimokkha*).³⁶ This exchange leaves *Susīma* perplexed – how can these *bhikkhus* claim to have attained liberating insight without attaining these accomplishments (*dhammānaṃ asamāpatti*)?³⁷ To this the *bhikkhus* simply reply that they are 'released through insight' (*paññāvimuttā*).³⁸ *Susīma* is even more confused by this reply – the story gives the impression he had never heard of this notion – and asks for clarification, but is dismissed by the *bhikkhus* with

³² *Samyutta Nikāya*, *Nidānasamyutta* XII.70 (S II, 119.16ff).

³³ S II, 120.1: *ehi tvaṃ āvuso Susīma samaṇe Gotame brahmacariyaṃ cara. tvaṃ dhammaṃ pariyaṇuṇṭivā amhe vāceyyāsi, taṃ mayaṃ dhammaṃ pariyaṇuṇṭivā gihīnaṃ bhāsissāma. evaṃ mayaṃ pi sakkatā bhavissāma garukatā mānitā pūjitā apacitā lābhino cīvarapaṇḍa-pātasenāsanagilānappaccayabhesajja-parikkhārānaṃ ti.*

³⁴ S II, 120.28: *tena kho pana samayena sambahulehi bhikkhūhi Bhagavato santike aññā vyākatā hoti: khīṇā jāti vusitaṃ brahmacariyaṃ kataṃ karaṇīyaṃ nāparaṃ itthattāyā ti pajānāmā ti.*

³⁵ S II, 121.13: *api tumhe āyasmanto evaṃ jānantā evaṃ passantā anekavihitaṃ iddhividhaṃ paccanubotha? eko pi hutvā bahudhā hotha...*

The text that follows is exactly that cited above (n. 10) from the *Dīgha Nikāya* D I.77.30.

³⁶ S II, 123.14: *api pana tumhe āyasmanto evaṃ jānantā evaṃ passantā ye te santā vimokkhā atikamma rūpe ārūppā, te kāyena phusitvā viharathā ti? no hetvaṃ āvuso.*

³⁷ S II, 123.18: *ettha dāni āyasmanto idaṃ ca veyyākaraṇaṃ imesaṃ ca dhammānaṃ asamāpatti.*

³⁸ S II, 123.26: *paññāvimuttā kho mayaṃ āvuso Susīmā ti.*

the following words: ‘Whether you understand it or not, venerable Susīma, we are released through insight.’³⁹

This dialogue suggests that an early Buddhist group was not interested in the attainment of magical powers and, moreover, that their interest in meditation was marginal: they deny the attainment of the ‘formless releases’, and it seems that they were little interested in the *jhānas*, since it is these meditative states that pave the way for the supernatural powers (*iddhi*) which they have not attained. The *Susīma Sutta* would therefore seem to confirm the suspicion, raised by the above analysis of the first *anātman* teaching of the Second Sermon, that there was an early Buddhist school little interested in mediation and supernatural powers. Further evidence for this identification is contained in the remainder of the text, when the Buddha undertakes to explain to Susīma what it means to be ‘released through insight’. To do this he leads Susīma through the second *anātman* teaching of the Second Sermon, according to which the five aggregates are found to be impermanent (*anicca*), unsatisfactory (*dukkha*), subject to change (*vipariṇāmadhamma*), and so not fit to be considered as one’s *ātman/attā*.⁴⁰ This teaching concludes by stating that the person who sees its truth becomes disillusioned (*nibbindati*) with the five aggregates, which leads to dispassion (*virāga*), liberation (*vimuccati*) and the knowledge that ‘birth is destroyed, the holy life has been lived...’.⁴¹ This teaching, it would seem, was important for those *bhikkhus* who claimed to have been released through insight.

A contemplation of Dependent Origination seems to have been just as important: after the *anātman* teaching the Buddha asks Susīma if decrepitude and death (*jarāmaraṇaṃ*) are caused by birth (*jātipaccayā*),⁴² and this leads into a similar series of questions about each link in the twelvefold chain of Dependent Origination – first in reverse order and the origination mode, and then in reverse order and the cessationist mode.⁴³ The Buddha then asks Susīma whether, even though he understands these teachings, he has attained the miraculous powers,⁴⁴ to which Susīma replies that he has not (S II.126.29: *no h’ etaṃ bhante*). The Buddha finally concludes his interview of Susīma by pointing out that his knowledge is identical to that of the *bhikkhus* who claimed to be released ‘through insight’, and yet he has without attained any supernatural powers:

³⁹ S II, 124.1: *ājāneyyāsi vā tvamaṃ āvuso Susīma na vā tvamaṃ ājāneyyāsi, atha kho paññāvimuttā mayan ti.*

⁴⁰ E.g. S II, 125.19 (= Vin I, 14.21): *yaṃ kiñci viññāṇaṃ atītānāgatapaccuppannaṃ ajjhataṃ vā bahiddhā vā oḷārikaṃ vā sukhumaṃ vā hīnaṃ vā paṇītaṃ vā yaṃ dūre santike vā, sabbaṃ viññāṇaṃ: n’ etaṃ mama, n’ eso ‘ham asmī, na me so attā ti evaṃ etaṃ yathābhūtaṃ sammapaññāya daṭṭhabbaṃ.*

⁴¹ S II, 125.24 (Vin I, 14.27): *evaṃ passaṃ Susīma sutavā ariyasāvako rūpasmiṃ pi nibbindati... vedanāya pi... saññāya pi... saṅkhāresu pi... viññāṇasmiṃ pi nibbindati. nibbindaṃ virajjati, virāgā vimuccati. vimuttasmiṃ vimuttam iti ñāṇaṃ hoti: khīṇā jāti, vusitaṃ brahmacariyaṃ, kataṃ karaṇīyaṃ, nāparaṃ ithattāyā ti pajānāti.*

⁴² E.g. S II, 125.19: *jātipaccayā jarāmarānaṃ ti Susīma passasī ti?*

⁴³ E.g. S II, 126.8: *jātinirodhā jarāmarāṇanirodho ti Susīma passasī ti?*

⁴⁴ S II, 126.19: *api pana tvamaṃ Susīma evaṃ jānanto evaṃ passanto anekavihitam iddhividhaṃ paccanubhosī?*

In this matter, Susīma, there is this answer and yet no attainment of these states – how can this be, Susīma?⁴⁵

This passage strengthens the connection between the authors of the Second Sermon and the *paññāvimutta bhikkhus* of Rājagaha. For the understanding of important Buddhist doctrine – particularly the second *anātman* teaching of the Second Sermon – is related to both groups. If the texts are related to a single group or school, we could call this a contemplative rather than meditative school: its followers were inclined towards a contemplation of Buddhist doctrine rather than meditative practice. This group seem to have taken the second *anātman* teaching literally, i.e. that the correct comprehension of this teaching leads to disillusionment, dispassion, release and the knowledge ‘birth is destroyed, the holy life has been lived...’. For this teaching precedes the five *bhikkhus*’ instantaneous liberation in the Second Sermon, and not only forms a part of the understanding of the Rājagaha *bhikkhus* ‘released through insight’, but is also most probably the source of their claim that ‘birth is destroyed...’. Does this mean that the same group of *bhikkhus* composed the *Susīma Sutta* and the Second Sermon? And is this group to be situated in Rājagaha?

Although a close connection between the two texts seems clear, we do not know where and by whom they were composed. The location of a contemplative group in Rājagaha, on the basis of the *Susīma Sutta*’s location, is also suspect, for the peculiar conclusion of the text suggests the possibility that its extant form was due to a later redaction. If so, it is possible that an original discourse set in Rājagaha was altered to make a point about the notion of ‘released through insight’; such an alteration would mean that the text does not contain primary evidence for Buddhist activity in ancient Rājagaha. The possibility of a later redaction is raised by the teaching’s peculiarly indecisive finale. The Buddha concludes his instruction to Susīma with the statement that ‘there is this answer and yet no attainment of these states - how can this be, Susīma?’. This implies that Susīma has himself been put in the very position he could not originally understand, i.e. an understanding of Buddhist doctrine equivalent to liberating insight without the attainment of formless meditation and supernatural powers. And yet following this Susīma confesses his impure motive for entering the *saṅgha*, to which the Buddha replies that he has made progress (*vuddhi*) by admitting his error and making amends for it.⁴⁶ Thus it appears that Susīma was not released by insight after all. According to Gombrich,⁴⁷ however, the extant Chinese version of the text makes more sense. In this version the Rājagaha *bhikkhus* interrogated by Susīma are shown to have not attained release from greed, hatred and delusion, and in this narrative where neither the Rājagaha *bhikkhus* nor Susīma have attained liberation, Susīma’s confession and pardon by the Buddha are easy to understand. Gombrich has suggested that an original text similar to this Chinese version was changed by the redactor of the Pāli text,

⁴⁵ S II, 127.22: *ettha dāni Susīma idaṃ ca veyyākaraṇam imesaṃ ca dhammānaṃ asamāpatti, idaṃ no Susīma kathan ti?*

Reading CSCD *kathan* for PTS *katan*. According to Bodhi (2000: 784 n. 209), this reading is also found in the Sinhalese edition of the text.

⁴⁶ S II, 128.24: *vuddhi hi esā Susīma ariyassa vinaye yo accayaṃ accayato disvā yathādhammaṃ paṭikarotī āyatim ca samvaram āpajati ti.*

⁴⁷ Gombrich (1996: 126).

so that the Rājagaha *bhikkhus* were not shown up by a non-Buddhist upstart. If so, the Pāli text would seem to have been changed to make the Rājagaha *bhikkhus*' claim to liberating insight genuine, and the religious rewards they had not attained altered to non-essential aspects of the Buddhist path, i.e. the supernatural powers (*iddhi*) and the formless releases (*āruppā vimokkhā*).⁴⁸

Gombrich's case that an original close to the Chinese version of the *Susīma Sutta* was changed is strong: this text seems to be simpler and more coherent. However, the notion that this original text was changed purely to defend the honour of a group of Buddhist *bhikkhus* is harder to maintain. The Pāli text contains long sections that are superfluous to this aim – the sections in which the Buddha instructs Susīma in the second *anātman* teaching and leads him through the teaching of Dependent Origination. The point of these sections is to elevate Susīma to the same understanding as the *paññāvimutta bhikkhus*. If the text was changed in order to defend Buddhist *bhikkhus* against a curious outsider, why elaborate the latter to the same level of understanding as the former? It would make better sense, for example, if the Buddha were to that the insight of the *paññāvimutta bhikkhus* is hard to understand because because of its profundity. Since the text devotes so much space to Susīma's instruction, and since this cannot be made sense of on the assumption that the text was redacted to defend the Rājagaha *bhikkhus* against Susīma, we should instead suspect a doctrinal motive for the extant form of the text.⁴⁹

This analysis suggests that the early Buddhists who redacted the *Susīma Sutta* into its current form wanted to say something about the notion of 'release by liberation'. And since the text concludes with Susīma's non-liberation, the point would seem to be that knowing Buddhist teachings does not effect liberation by itself. The implied answer of the final question of the Buddha ('there is this answer and yet no attainment of these states – how can this be, Susīma') is that it can only be so because knowledge by itself is not liberating. If so, the *Susīma Sutta* would seem to be a polemic against the intellectual or contemplative tendency in early Buddhism: it is a subtle criticism of a group who focused on the contemplation of the second *anātman* teaching and Dependent Origination at the expense of meditation and the supernatural rewards it was thought to bring about. The *Susīma Sutta* is a subtle indication that there was a debate between early Buddhist schools with different ideas about how liberation is effected.

6. The *Susīma* and *Khemaka Suttas* indicate a tendency towards the notion that liberating insight is attained through contemplating important Buddhist teachings. No doubt there were numerous degrees to which individual *bhikkhus*

⁴⁸ Gombrich (1996: 126): 'The redactor of our Pāli text wanted to change the story so that the monks already with the Buddha became clearly superior to the newcomer from a non-Buddhist sect. So their Enlightenment had to be genuine, and his questions simply questions, not a clever cross-examination. At the same time, the things the Enlightened monks had not achieved could hardly be as basic as the elimination of greed and hatred. For these the redactor substituted the supernormal powers listed in the *Sāmañña-phala Sutta*. This was an intelligent choice, in that the Buddha had suggested that the exercise of supernormal powers was unnecessary, even distasteful.'

⁴⁹ Interestingly, Gombrich (1996: 127) also suggests the possibility that 'the author of the Pāli *Susīma Sutta* that has come down to us had views on the matter to put forward'.

and *bhikkhunīs* were influenced by this tendency and adopted it as an approach to their religious practice. Since the *Khemaka Sutta* does not rule out meditation, and the *Susīma Sutta* does not rule out the practice of the four *jhānas*, it is likely that some of these early Buddhist contemplatives continued to practice meditation. But it is also possible that some individuals took this tendency to the extreme of avoiding meditation by focusing on understanding the second *anātman* teaching, and contemplating the rise and fall of the five aggregates, i.e. conditioned experience as a process. It is possible, moreover, that such Buddhists not only avoided the serious pursuit of meditative development, but were also critical of it.

‘A debate between meditators and contemplatives is suggested by the conclusion of the *Susīma Sutta*, which can be read as a subtle critique of the tendency towards contemplation at the expense of meditation. No indication of such a debate is found in the *Khemaka Sutta*, although this contemplative text can be related to the school of thought critical of meditation. This would seem to be shown by its close connection to the Second Sermon. Both of these texts conclude with the words ‘Khemaka/The Blessed One said this’ followed by a short account of how the recipients of the teachings – the Kosambi *bhikkhus* and the five *bhikkhus* respectively – delighted in them, their minds being subsequently released from the corruptions.⁵⁰ This conclusion is problematic in the *Khemaka Sutta*, however, for it does not come immediately after Khemaka’s discourse, as it should, but is preceded by the apology of the Kosambi *bhikkhus*, who explain to Khemaka that their inquiries were motivated out of respect for his teaching ability.⁵¹ In other words, when the text begins its conclusion by stating that ‘Khemaka said this’ (*idaṃ Khemako avocaṃ*), the closest direct speech to the deictic pronoun ‘this’ is that given by the Kosambi *bhikkhus*, and not Khemaka’s teaching. The only possible explanation for this anomaly is that the this conclusion was added, at a later point, to an original conclusion consisting of the Kosambi elders’ apology to Khemaka. The text therefore seems to have been redacted to bring it in line with the perspective of the Second Sermon, i.e. a reductionistic, *anātmavādin* approach (the second teaching) critical of meditation and the supernatural powers of self-transformation (the first teaching). It would seem, then, that the *Khemaka Sutta* was an important text for those early Buddhists critical of meditation.’

Other texts related to the *Susīma* and *Khemaka Suttas* are openly critical of meditation. Such texts support the present reading of the Second Sermon, for they show that there was an early Buddhist group who were not only critical of meditation, but who also believed in liberation through knowledge alone. An important text of this kind is the *Mahācunda Sutta*, where *bhikkhus* ‘devoted to the doctrine’ (*dhammayogā bhikkhū*: ‘intellectuals’ or ‘contemplatives’)⁵² are said to be in dispute with a group of ‘meditating’ *bhikkhus* (*jhāyī bhikkhū*).

⁵⁰ S III,132.8: *idaṃ avoca āyasmā Khemako. attamanā therā bhikkhū āyasmato Khemakassa bhāsitaṃ abhinanduṃ. imasmiṃ ca pana veyyākaraṇasmim̐ bhaññamāne satṭhimattānaṃ therānaṃ bhikkhūnaṃ anupādāya āsavehi cittaṇi mucchiṃsu āyasmato Khemakassa cā ti; Vin I, 14.32: idaṃ avoca Bhagavā. attamanā pañcavaggiyā bhikkhū Bhagavato bhāsitaṃ abhinandati. imasmiṃ ca pana veyyākaraṇasmim̐ bhaññamāne pañcavaggiyānaṃ bhikkhūnaṃ anupādāya āsavehi cittaṇi vimucchiṃsu.*

⁵¹ S III, 131.32-132.7.

⁵² PED *yoga* s.v.: ‘one who is devoted to the *dhamma*’.

We find a brief statement of their views towards the end of the Sutta. The intellectuals/contemplatives, it is said, should praise the meditators as follows: ‘Marvellous are those venerable persons, [and] hard to find in the world, those who touch the deathless realm with the body’ (*amataṃ dhātuṃ kāyena phusitvā*).⁵³ Conversely, the meditators should praise those ‘devoted to the doctrine’ as follows: ‘Marvellous are those venerable persons, [and] hard to find in the world, those who have vision by penetrating the profound words of the doctrine with understanding.’⁵⁴ This description of those ‘devoted to the doctrine’ implies that they valued an intellectual appreciation of the *dhamma*, for all other references to the expression ‘penetrating with understanding’ (*paññāya ativijjha*) show that it denotes an understanding that avoids meditation.⁵⁵ The *Mahācunda Sutta* does not say what particular doctrine the intellectuals/contemplatives were intent on ‘penetrating with understanding’. Another text, however, speaks of a similar if less quarrelsome split between the adherents of meditation and contemplation, and in this text the latter are clearly defined.

The text in question is the *Kosambi Sutta* (S II 115 = *Nidāna Saṃyutta* 68, *mahāvagga*). It states that Musīla knows and sees (*etaṃ jānāmi etaṃ passāmi*) by himself (*paccattaṃ*) all the links in the chain of dependent origination in its reverse (*paṭiloma*) order, in both the origination (*samudaya*) and cessation (*nirodha*) modes.⁵⁶ This is an understanding apart from faith (*saddhā*), apart from intellectual inclination or belief (*ruciyā*) and apart from traditional

⁵³ A III, 356.14: *acchariyā h’ ete āvuso puggalā dullabhā lokasmiṃ, ye amataṃ dhātuṃ kāyena phusitvā viharanti*.

⁵⁴ A III, 356.20: *acchariyā h’ ete āvuso puggalā dullabhā lokasmiṃ, ye gambhīraṃ atthapadaṃ paññāya ativijjha passantī ti*.

⁵⁵ The phrase *paññāya ativijjha* is usually coupled with the phrase *kāyena phusitvā* or *kāyena paramaṃ saccaṃ sacchikaroti* (M I, 480.10, II, 173.24; S V, 227.1, V, 230.10; A II, 115.12). The complete phrase therefore combines the different points of view of the *Mahā-Cunda Sutta*, with *paññāya ativijjha* referring to an intellectual insight different from meditation. Indeed, when it occurs alone it refers to a sort of understanding not necessarily connected to any state of meditation: at M II, 112.1 the expression *paññāya ativijjha* refers to the understanding of the Buddha; at A I, 265.12 *paññāya ativijjha* refers to a non-liberated, intellectual understanding; at A IV, 362.2 *gambhīraṃ atthapadaṃ paññāya ativijjha passati* refers to the understanding of a dhamma-preacher; and at A II, 178.28 *paññāya c’ assa atthaṃ ativijjha passati* describes the understanding – of the Four Noble Truths – of a disciple (*sutavā*) rather than the liberated person (*pañḍito mahāpañño*). Moreover, the compound *atthapada* seems to refer to doctrinal formulations in general (CPD: ‘1. a right or profitable word’; PED s.v. states: ‘a profitable saying, a word of good sense, text, motto’).

⁵⁶ Insight into the twelvefold chain of dependent origination, in its *paṭiloma* order and its *samudaya* and *nirodha* modes, is said to be the original discovery of the Buddha and the six previous Buddhas at S II, 5.7 (*Nidānavagga: Nidānasamyutta* IV-X). However, in the biographical account in the *Mahāvagga* (Vin I. ff), insight into the twelve-fold dependent origination occurs after awakening; it does not occur before the awakening, nor does it constitute the content of the Bodhisatta’s liberating insight. Therefore, we have two different theories of liberating insight: for Musīla at S II, 115 and the Buddha at S II, 5.7 ff, the twelve-fold list of dependent origination forms the content of liberating insight. But for the authors of the biography in the *Mahāvagga*, the content of liberating insight consists of the Four Noble Truths (Vin I, 11.1 ff), with insight into dependent origination being a later discovery of the Buddha. If insight into dependent origination was thought to be discovered by the Buddha after the awakening, as described in the Vinaya, it is easy to see how the idea arose that this must be what any *bhikkhu* must realize in order to attain liberation. If this is correct, it means that Musīla’s theory of liberating insight was just that

teachings (*anussavā*). Musīla is asked by Savitṭha if he knows and sees that ‘Nirvana is the cessation of becoming (*bhavanirodho*)’, to which he answers that he does know and see this. So when Savitṭha asks Musīla if he is an *arahant* with corruptions destroyed, he is silent, and the conclusion is that he is indeed an *arahant*.⁵⁷ In response to this, Nārada claims to know and see exactly what Musīla does, but he denies that he is liberated.⁵⁸ He likens his condition to the state of a thirsty person who can see water in a well, but cannot touch it with his body (*na kāyena phusitvā vihareyya*). Nārada claims to have the correct intellectual understanding (he knows what Nirvana is or should be) but he does not consider this to be liberating. The simile of seeing water in a well but not touching it with the body indicates a state of having knowledge without being liberated. However, the expression ‘he does not touch it with his body’, coupled with its opposition to insight (*paññā*), likens Nārada’s view to the view of the meditators in the *Mahā-Cunda Sutta*, where liberation is said to involve ‘touching’ the deathless realm with the body. This implies that liberation, for Nārada, similarly required ‘touching’ a ‘deathless realm’ while in a meditative state (*amatam dhātuṃ kāyena phusitvā*). Musīla, on the other hand, can be connected to the *paññāvimutta bhikkhus* of the *Susīma Sutta*, since both groups are associated with the contemplation of Dependent Origination.

I have argued elsewhere that the sort of meditation implied by the *Mahācunda* and *Kosambi Suttas* are the formless ‘releases’;⁵⁹ in other early texts these ‘formless meditations’ are associated with the former teachers of the Bodhisatta (Āḷāra Kālāma and Uddaka Rāmaputta).⁶⁰ Does this mean that these two texts only refer to a group who were not interested in a particular type of meditation also practised by non-Buddhists, or does it imply that they were not meditators at all? While the emphasis is certainly on the fact that the contemplatives of the *Mahācunda Sutta* (*dhammayogā bhikkhū*) and Musīla of the *Kosambi Sutta* do not practice formless meditation, the *Mahācunda Sutta* seems to emphasise insight (*paññā*) at the expense of meditation altogether. And while the *Kosambi Sutta* points to the formless meditations through the person of Nārada, it also seems to refer to knowledge of Buddhist doctrine alone as a way to liberation: Nārada’s claim to know and see exactly what Musīla does indicates that the authors of this text connected the contemplation and knowledge of Buddhist doctrine to the insight into it. These two texts show that at least two factions had emerged in the early Buddhist saṅgha: ‘intellectuals’ or ‘contemplatives’ (*dhammayogā bhikkhū*) focused on the understanding of Buddhist doctrine at the expense of meditation, and meditators (*jhāyī bhikkhū*) interested in the practice of formless meditation and the goal of ‘touching’ the ‘deathless realm’ (probably the meditative state known as *saññāvedayitanirodha*: ‘the cessation of perception and feeling’).⁶¹

– a theory – and a theory preceded by the theory in the *Mahāvagga* that insight into the Four Noble Truths effected the Bodhisatta’s liberation.

⁵⁷ S II, 117.15: *tenāyasmā Musīlo araham khīṇāsavo ti. evaṃ vutte āyasmā Musīlo tunhī ahoṣī ti.*

⁵⁸ S II, 118.1: *bhavanirodho nibbānan ti kho me āvuso yathābhūtaṃ sammapaññāya suditṭhaṃ, na c’ amhi araham khīṇāsavo.*

⁵⁹ Wynne (2007: 117ff).

⁶⁰ Wynne (2007: 2-3).

⁶¹ Wynne (2007: 119).

On the basis of this evidence, it is easy to imagine that early Buddhist contemplatives would have formulated a polemic against meditation, perhaps in response to the implied criticism of the *Susīma* and *Kosambi Suttas*. This hypothesis explains why the first *anātman* teaching of the Second Sermon claims that magical powers of self-transformation are impossible and imply a the existence of the *ātman/attā*: such beliefs were held by meditators, as the texts show, and so the Second Sermon would seem to be a very subtle critique that such beliefs contradict the true meaning of the Buddha's important *anātman* teachings. The early evidence for the contemplative/anti-meditative tendency studied above also explains the doctrinal content of this teaching, for we have seen that the *Susīma* and *Khemaka Suttas* are particularly associated with the second *anātman* teaching of the Second Sermon. The first *anātman* teaching would appear to be an accusation of the most important doctrinal heresy in Buddhism: the belief in an *ātman/attā* identical with the five aggregates and beyond suffering. The Second Sermon therefore seems to read as a crucial early *anātmavādin* text. Its authors believed in the non-existence of anything enduring in a person (*ātman/attā*), and argued – quite subtly – that the presuppositions of the meditative school imply the opposite.

7. The evidence discussed above allows us to establish a motive for the formulation of an early contemplative polemic against meditation and the attainment of supernatural powers. But we must also explain the form of the polemic – why state that if the five aggregates could be controlled, they must therefore constitute an *ātman*? A strong case can be made that the idea was based on the *anātman* teaching of the *Cūlasaccaka Sutta*, which is similarly concerned with the notion of control, but is shorter and simpler. If so, it would seem to be another example of the authors of the Second Sermon adapting a pre-existing discourse towards a new end, for we have already seen that the general narrative in which the Second Sermon was situated was lifted from the *Ariyapariyesana Sutta* but adapted to a new conclusion.

The *Cūlasaccaka Sutta* is set in Vesālī and records a complex dialogue between the Buddha and the Jain layman Saccaka. The latter believes himself to be a formidable debating opponent, claiming to be able to make an insentient pot tremble with fear when tackled in debate.⁶² Upon seeing the *bhikkhu* Assaji coming into Vesālī for alms, Saccaka questions him what the Buddha's teaching is 'mostly concerned with at present',⁶³ and is told that the Buddha teaches that the five aggregates are impermanent and therefore not-self (*anattā*); this is

⁶² M I, 227.23: *thūnañ ce p' ahaṃ acetanaṃ vādena vādaṃ samārabheyyaṃ, sā pi mayā vādena vādaṃ samāradhā saṅkameyya sampakameyya sampavedheyya, ko pana vādo manussabhūtaṃsā ti.*

⁶³ Saccaka asks (M I, 228.6): *kathaṃ pana bho Assaji samaṇo Gotamo sāvake vineti, kathaṃbhāgā ca pana samaṇassa Gotamassa sāvakesu anusāsani bahulā pavattati ti?* 'How does the ascetic Gotama discipline his disciples, venerable Assaji? What is the instruction of the ascetic Gotama to his disciples mostly (*bahulā*) concerned with (*kathaṃbhāgā*) at present?'

The verb *pavattati* (PED: 'to move on, go forward, proceed') here seems to indicate that Saccaka is asking about the nature of the Buddha's teaching at present.

simply a truncated version of the second *anātman* teaching.⁶⁴ Upon hearing this Saccaka voices his disapproval, states that he wishes to disprove this ‘pernicious view (*pāpaka dīṭṭhi*),⁶⁵ and then invites five hundred visiting Licchavis to witness the impending debate.⁶⁶ When Saccaka and the Licchavi approach the ‘hall with the peaked roof where the Buddha is residing,⁶⁷ they are directed by the *bhikkhus* who are practising walking meditation outside (M I.229.17: *abbhokāse caṅkamati*) to the great forest where the Buddha is sitting at the foot of a tree to pass the day (M I.229.23). Upon asking the Buddha the same question previously put to Assaji, and receiving the same response, Saccaka replies as follows:⁶⁸

Venerable Gotama, it is just like the manner in which the different species of seeds and living beings achieve maturation, growth and profusion: they all do so only in dependence on earth, by being rooted in the earth. Alternatively, it is just like the manner in which difficult works are done: they are only done in dependence on earth, by being rooted in the earth. It is in exactly this way, venerable Gotama, that the ‘self’ of a phenomenal person (*purisapuggalo*) is form (*rūpattā*), for when he is rooted in form, he generates (*pasavati*) merit (*puññaṃ*) or demerit (*apuññaṃ*). A phenomenal person’s ‘self’ is feeling (*vedanattā*), for it is through being rooted in feeling that he generates merit or demerit; a phenomenal person’s ‘self’ is apperception (*saññattā*), for it is through being rooted in apperception that he generates merit or demerit; a phenomenal person’s ‘self’ is volitions (*saṅkhārattā*), for it is through being rooted in volitions that he generates merit or demerit; a phenomenal person’s

⁶⁴ M I, 228.8: *evaṃ kho Aggivessana Bhagavā sāveke vineti, evaṃbhāgā ca pana Bhagavato sāvakesu anusāsani bahulā pavattati: rūpaṃ bhikkhave aniccaṃ, vedanā aniccā, saññā aniccā, saṅkhārā aniccā, viññāṇaṃ aniccaṃ; rūpaṃ bhikkhave anattā, vedanā anattā, saññā anattā, saṅkhārā anattā, viññāṇaṃ anattā; sabbe saṅkhārā aniccā, sabbe dhamme anattā ti.*

The conclusion of this teaching is curious, for the word *saṅkhārā* in the final formula ‘all constructed things are impermanent’ surely has a more general and all-encompassing sense than the word *saṅkhārā* as used in the five aggregates.

⁶⁵ M I, 228.16: *dussutaṃ vata bho Assaji assumha, ye mayaṃ evaṃvādiṃ samaṇaṃ Gotamaṃ assumha. app’ eva ca nāma mayaṃ kadā ci karaha ci tena bhotā Gotamena saddhiṃ samāgaccheyyāma, app’ eva nāma siyā ko cid eva kathāsallāpo, app’ eva nāma tasmā pāpakā dīṭṭhigatā viveceyyāma ti.*

⁶⁶ M I, 228.22: *atha kho Saccako Nigaṇṭhaputto yena te Licchavī tenupasaṅkami, upasaṅkamitvā te Licchavī etad avoca: abhikkamantu bhonto Licchavī abhikkamantu bhonto Licchavī, aṭṭha me samaṇena Gotamena saddhiṃ kathāsallāpo bhavissati.*

⁶⁷ M I, 229.14: *atha kho Saccako Nigaṇṭhaputto pañcamattehi Licchavisatehi parivuto yena mahāvanaṃ kūtāgārasālā ten’ upasaṅkami.*

⁶⁸ M I, 230.12: *seyyathā pi bho Gotama ye kec’ ime bījaṃabhūtagāmaṃ vuddhiṃ virūhiṃ vepullaṃ āpajanti, sabbe te pathaviṃ nissāya pathaviyaṃ patiṭṭhāya, evaṃ ete bījaṃabhūtagāmaṃ vuddhiṃ virūhiṃ vepullaṃ āpajanti. seyyathā pi vā pana bho Gotama ye kec’ ime balakaraṇīyā kammantā kariyanti, sabbe te pathaviṃ nissāya pathaviyaṃ patiṭṭhāya, evaṃ ete balakaraṇīyā kammantā kariyanti. evaṃ eva kho bho Gotama rūpattā ’yaṃ purisapuggalo, rūpe patiṭṭhāya puññaṃ vā apuññaṃ vā pasavati; vedanattā ’yaṃ purisapuggalo, vedanāya patiṭṭhāya puññaṃ vā apuññaṃ vā pasavati; saññattā ’yaṃ purisapuggalo, saññāya patiṭṭhāya puññaṃ vā apuññaṃ vā pasavati; saṅkhārattā ’yaṃ purisapuggalo, saṅkhāresu patiṭṭhāya puññaṃ vā apuññaṃ vā pasavati; viññāṇattā ’yaṃ purisapuggalo, viññāṇe patiṭṭhāya puññaṃ vā apuññaṃ vā pasavati.*

‘self’ is consciousness (*viññāṇattā*), for it is through being rooted in consciousness that he generates merit or demerit.

The Buddha then requests that Saccaka state his position explicitly as follows:⁶⁹

‘So do you speak thus, Aggivessana: ‘form is my self, feeling is my self, apperception is my self, volitions are my self, [and] consciousness is my self?’

‘Indeed I speak thus, venerable Gotama – ‘form is my self, feeling is my self, apperception is my self, volitions are my self, [and] consciousness is my self’ – and so too does this great congregation.’

‘How will this great congregation help you, Aggivessana? Come on, Aggivessana, please clarify that this is your very own statement.’

‘Indeed I speak thus, venerable Gotama: ‘form is my self, feeling is my self, apperception is my self, volitions are my self, [and] consciousness is my self.’

In this interchange Saccaka makes an entirely reasonable point: that the workings of karmic retribution (*puñña/apuñña*) depend upon an individual’s identification with the five aggregates. For it can hardly be denied that in Buddhist ethical theory, moral or immoral action – of body, speech or mind – depend upon the functioning of the five aggregates and a person’s identification with them. If so, it would seem that Saccaka is probing a potential weakpoint in the Buddha’s teaching, i.e. the conflict between the doctrine of karmic retribution, which depends upon a person’s identification with the five aggregates, and the *anātman* teaching that the five aggregates are not a person’s *ātman/attā*. For how can the Buddha teach a doctrine of karma in which a person’s individual identity with the five aggregates is assumed, when exactly this is denied at a deeper level of Buddhist psychology and soteriology? Surely Saccaka is justified to point out that the although the Buddha teaches that the five aggregates are not a person’s *ātman/attā*, the Buddha’s ethical teachings depend on a person believing the opposite.

In response to Saccaka the Buddha introduces the idea that a person is not in control of the five aggregates. Since the Buddha introduces the notion of control by comparing it to the control wielded by a *rāja* in his kingdom (*viḷita*), this argument appears to have been formulated to fit the occasion – the audience of Licchavis rounded up by Saccaka:⁷⁰

⁶⁹ M I, 230.26: *nanu tvaṃ Aggivessana evaṃ vadesi: rūpaṃ me attā, vedanā me attā, saññā me attā, saṅkhārā me attā, viññāṇam me attā ti? ahaṃ hi bho Gotama evaṃ vadesi: rūpaṃ me attā, vedanā me attā, saññā me attā, saṅkhārā me attā, viññāṇam me attā ti, ayaṃ ca mahatī janatā ti. kiṃ hi te Aggivessana mahatī janatā karissati? iṅgha tvaṃ Aggivessana sakaṃ yeva vadaṃ nibbeḷhehi ti. ahaṃ hi bho Gotama evaṃ vadesi: rūpaṃ me attā, vedanā me attā, saññā me attā, saṅkhārā me attā, viññāṇam me attā ti.*

⁷⁰ M I, 230.36: *tena hi Aggivessana taṃ yeva ettha paṭipucchissāmi, yathā te khameyya tathā naṃ byākareyyāsi. taṃ kim maññasi Aggivessana: vatteyya rañño khattiyassa muddhāvasittassa sakasmim viḷite vaso ghātetāyaṃ vā ghātetuṃ, jāpetāyaṃ vā jāpetuṃ, pabbājetāyaṃ vā pabbājetuṃ, seyyathā pi rañño Pasenadissa Kosalassa, seyyathā pi vā pana rañño Māgadhassa Ajātasattussa Vedehiputtassā ti? vatteyya bho Gotama rañño*

‘Well now, Aggivessana, I will question you on this matter; please answer as it seems fit to you. What do you think, Aggivessana: might a *kṣatriya* king who has been anointed on the head – such as king Pasenadi of Kosala or king Ajātasattu of Magadha (the son of the princess of Videha) – have the power to kill [a person] who ought to be killed, to conquer a [country] that ought to be conquered, or to banish a [person] who ought to be banished?’

‘Venerable Gotama, a *kṣatriya* king who has been anointed on the head – such as king Pasenadi of Kosala or king Ajātasattu of Magadha (the son of the princess of Videha) – would have the power to kill a [person] who ought to be killed, to conquer a [kingdom] that ought to be conquered, or to banish a [person] who ought to be banished. This is also the case, venerable Gotama, for tribal confederacies such as the Vajjis or Mallas – they also have the power to kill a [person] who ought to be killed, to conquer a [kingdom] that ought to be conquered, or to banish a [person] who ought to be banished. They would have that power, venerable Gotama, and they should have it.’

‘So what do you think, Aggivessana, about what you said earlier: ‘form is my self’: with regard to that form, do you have the power to say ‘let my form be thus, let it not be thus’?’

When it was spoken thus, Saccaka the follower of the Nigaṇṭhas remained silent.

In response to Saccaka’s claim that he possesses a ‘self’ made up of the five aggregates (‘form is my self’ etc.), the Buddha responds by pointing out that a person ordinarily controls that which he possesses. This simple point is made with the rather extravagant example of a king’s ability to exert control in his own kingdom. No doubt the example was designed to appeal to the Licchavis witnessing the debate, but the point is simply about controlling what one possesses. This simple truth, which Saccaka readily agrees to, then allows the Buddha to point out that the five aggregates are not in a person’s control. In this way Saccaka falls into the Buddha’s trap, for the point that a king controls what he possesses implies that, a person cannot possess what he does not control. Thus the Buddha has shown that a person does not possess the five aggregates, the implication being that he cannot ultimately be identified with them. Saccaka is forced to agree that he has no control over the five aggregates:⁷¹

khattiyassa muddhāvasittassa sakasmim vijite vaso ghātetāyaṃ vā ghātetuṃ, jāpetāyaṃ vā jāpetuṃ, pabbājetāyaṃ vā pabbājetuṃ, seyyathā pi: rañño Pasenadissa Kosalassa, seyyathā pi vā pana rañño Māgadhassa Ajātasattussa Vedehiputtassa. imesaṃ pi hi bho Gotama saṅghānaṃ gaṇānaṃ seyyathidaṃ Vajjīnaṃ Mallānaṃ, vattati sakasmim vijite vaso ghātetāyaṃ vā ghātetuṃ, jāpetāyaṃ vā jāpetuṃ, pabbājetāyaṃ vā pabbājetuṃ, kiṃ pana rañño khattiyassa muddhāvasittassa, seyyathā pi rañño Pasenadissa Kosalassa, seyyathā pi vā pana rañño Māgadhassa Ajātasattussa Vedehiputtassa. vatteyya bho Gotama, vattituṃ ca –m- arahatī ti. taṃ kiṃ maññasi Aggivessana: yaṃ tvaṃ evaṃ vadesi: rūpaṃ me attā ti, vattati te tasmim rūpe vaso: evaṃ me rūpaṃ hotu, evaṃ me rūpaṃ mā ahoṣī ti? evaṃ vutte Saccako Nigaṇṭhaputto tunhī ahoṣi.

⁷¹ M I, 232.4: *taṃ kiṃ maññasi Aggivessana, yaṃ tvaṃ evaṃ vadesi: rūpaṃ me attā ti, vattati te tasmim rūpe vaso: evaṃ me rūpaṃ hotu, evaṃ me rūpaṃ mā ahoṣī ti? no k’ idaṃ*

‘What do you think, Aggivessana, about what you said earlier: ‘form is my self’: with regard to that form, do you have the power to say ‘let my form be thus, let it not be thus’?’

‘It is not so, venerable Gotama.’

‘Pay attention Aggivessana, and once you have done so explain yourself, for what you have just said does not agree with what you said earlier, and what you said earlier does not agree with what you have just said!’

The Buddha thus point out the inconsistency between Saccaka’s claim to possess a self made up of the five aggregates and his admission that he has no control over them. Two facts indicate that this teaching originally belonged to the *Cūlasaccaka Sutta* and was drawn on by the authors of the Second Sermon, rather than vice versa. First, the teaching of the *Cūlasaccaka Sutta* is much simpler and shorter than that contained in the Second Sermon. And second, the notion that a person lacks control over his phenomenal being is well matched to the context described in the *Cūlasaccaka Sutta*. The example of a king being able to exert control over his kingdom seems designed to win over the audience of Licchavis. When the Buddha asks Saccaka if he can ‘let his form be thus’, the context suggests only a loose ability to be in charge of one’s phenomenal being consisting of the five aggregates. This is little more than a simple expansion of the paradigmatic *anātman* teaching that the five aggregates are impermanent, subject to change, unsatisfactory and so cannot constitute one’s true identity. The point that the five aggregates are subject to change (*vipariṇāmadhamma*) is roughly equivalent to saying that that a person lacks control over them. Indeed, it is no coincidence that the Buddha’s teaching to Saccaka concludes with the paradigmatic *anātman* teaching. The Buddha has simply adapted his fundamental *anātman* teaching to the audience of his debate with Saccaka. In order to win over the Licchavi leaders, rather than state that the five aggregates are changeable and so not ‘self’, the Buddha instead states that a person lacks control over the five aggregates and so implies the futility of regarding them as one’s ‘self’.

It is also important to note that the notion of control in the *Cūlasaccaka Sutta* has a quite different sense from that of the Second Sermon. The example of a king’s command over his territory does not suggest that the Buddha’s question about ‘control’ over the five aggregates is in any way ‘magical’. The point is not that a king can let his kingdom be ‘thus’ in any way conceivable, but that he exercises a general sovereignty over it. This analogy implies that the Buddha did not intend his question about a person’s control of the five aggregates to be understood in any absolute or magical sense: the question simply points out that the five aggregates are generally beyond a person’s control. But the authors of the Second Sermon abandoned the context in which the Buddha made the ‘no control’ point and drew what to them seemed a logical conclusion: the ability to ‘let form etc. be thus’ was taken literally in the sense of being able to let form be anything a person might want, even to the extent of being immune to suffering

bho Gotama. manasikarohi Aggivessana, manasikarivā kho Aggivessana byākarohi, na kho te sandhiyati purimena vā pacchima, pacchimena vā purima.

and affliction – which is not stated in the *Cūlasaccaka Sutta*. The authors of the Second Sermon took the teaching on no control in an abstract and literal sense, and thus saw a contradiction between a teaching of the Buddha and the magical goal of some meditators. To make this clear they had to expand the no control teaching as follows:

‘Form, *bhikkhus*, is not *attā*. For if form were *attā* it would not incline towards pain, and with regard to it one would succeed with the thoughts ‘let my form be thus’ or ‘let not my form be thus’. Since form is not *attā*, *bhikkhus*, it inclines towards illness and with regard to it one does not succeed with the thought ‘let my form be thus’ or ‘let not my form be thus’.

Presented in this way, the teaching points out the folly in the notion that the five aggregates might make up an *ātman* beyond suffering. And yet this is not what Saccaka had originally claimed, nor was it a notion of personal identity that the Buddha had attempted to refute in the *Cūlasaccaka Sutta*. Saccaka’s point was that personal identity is assumed by the doctrine of karmic retribution, not that this identity implies anything beyond the ordinary. Likewise, the Buddha was not arguing against a notion of personal identity in which it was claimed that the five aggregates constitute a ‘self’ beyond suffering. He simply pointed out that personal identity with the five aggregates does not ultimately hold, even despite the conventional identity necessary for karmic retribution to function.

8. The reading of the first *anātman* teaching of the Second Sermon proposed here suggests that it is not an argument against the early Upaniṣadic notion of the *ātman* as an inner controller, but against the *ātman* conceived as an enduring and satisfactory version of a person’s phenomenal being (the five aggregates). The teaching states that since there is no control over the five aggregates, they are subject to affliction and suffering and do not constitute such an *ātman*. This implies, of course, that if the five aggregates could be controlled, they would be beyond affliction and suffering and would constitute an *ātman/attā*. If so, the teaching would seem to be a warning against the belief in magical self-control and the notion that one’s individual being is potentially god-like and immortal’. But this is peculiar, since the textual record of the period do not mention such a conception of personal identity. In the ascetic milieu from which the early Buddhist movement emerged there was not, it seems, a belief in the possibility of human immortality.

If this teaching does not read easily as an abstract analysis of the human condition (as the second *anātman* teaching of the Second Sermon does), it can be better explained as the product of a debate within the early Buddhist community about spiritual means and ends. Other early Buddhist texts note that miraculous self-transformation can be attained at a high level of meditative accomplishment, and even that this was an ability of the Buddha and certain prominent *bhikkhus*. Such texts disagree with the first *anātman* teaching of the Second Sermon in suggesting that a magical or supernatural control over the five aggregates is possible. Surely, then, this teaching is a subtle argument against those members of the early Buddhist community who believed in the attainment miraculous powers through meditative accomplishment. If so, the

Second Sermon would seem to have been the work of a school devoted to the contemplation of the Buddha's paradigmatic *anātman* teaching that there is no self in the five aggregates. Although this teaching originally noted the lack of an enduring substance in conditioned experience, the conclusion of the Second Sermon shows that it was taken to indicate the non-existence of any enduring substance in the human being *per se*. The composers of the Second Sermon were therefore *anātmavādins* for whom the belief in the attainment of supernatural powers through meditative accomplishment subverted the Buddha's *anātman* teaching.

Other early Buddhist texts support this reading of the Second Sermon. The *Khemaka Sutta* suggests that there was an early Buddhist school of thought, located in Kosambi, devoted to the contemplation of the *anātman* teaching that the five aggregates are impermanent, unsatisfactory and so lacking *ātman/attā*. This school believed that understanding this teaching effects a person's liberation, or that liberating insight is attained by a profound contemplation of it. The *Susīma Sutta* suggests a similar movement – one interested in contemplating the teaching of Dependent Origination as well as the *anātman* teaching at the expense of meditation: formless mediation was completely avoided, and the four *jhānas* seem to have been little valued. This text suggests two fundamentally different approaches to spiritual practice. The *Kosambi Sutta* supports this hypothesis: in the persons of Musīla and Nārada, it suggests the existence of a contemplative school (devoted to the contemplation of Dependent Origination) and a meditative school (associated with the formless meditations), these two groups being in disagreement about the means to attain liberation. The *Mahācunda Sutta* mentions two similar groups – one devoted to the contemplation of Buddhist doctrine, the other devoted to meditation – and also contains evidence that these groups were at some point engaged in a fierce debate over spiritual method.

Given this textual evidence, the reading of the Second Sermon as an *anātman* polemic against meditators whose aim was (at least partly) the attainment of supernatural powers is plausible. This interpretation is supported by the probability that the Second Sermon is an expansion of a similar teaching contained in the *Cūlasaccaka Sutta*. In this text, in response to Saccaka's argument that a person must possess the five aggregates as his 'self' (e.g. *rūpattā*) in order for the laws of karmic retribution to function, the Buddha points out that a person does not control the five aggregates. And just as a king can only control that which he possesses, it follows that a person does not possess the five aggregates as 'his own'. This teaching is little more than an *ad hoc* adaptation of the Buddha's most important *anātman* teaching that the five aggregates are impermanent, unsatisfactory and therefore not to be regarded as one's self: just as a person should not regard the five aggregates as 'his own' since they are impermanent (*anicca*) and subject to change (*vipariṇāmadhamma*), the fact that they are beyond his control also indicates that they are not 'his own'. Both teachings therefore point to the fact that a person does not possess the five aggregates, and thus that personal identity with them is ultimately misconceived.

This adaptation of the paradigmatic *anātman* teaching in the *Cūlasaccaka Sutta* is a prime example of the Buddha's ability to vary his message to the situation, i.e. what is generally termed his skill in means' (*upāya-kauśalya*). However, *ad hominem* teachings of this sort cannot be properly understood

apart from the context in which they were originally delivered. It follows that by taking this teaching out of context, the authors of the Second Sermon were bound to alter the meaning of this teaching considerably. When abstracted from the context, the teaching seems to refer to a 'magical' ability to exert control over the five aggregates, to 'let them be thus', i.e. to exert absolute control even to the extent of being beyond affliction and suffering. It was therefore possible for the contemplative school to draw upon the *Cūlasaccaka Sutta* and so fashion a subtle critique of the goal of meditators, those who believed in the ability to transform one's being supernaturally. Just as the authors of the Second Sermon adapted the narrative of the *Ariyapariyesana Sutta* to a new doctrinal end, so too did they adapt the teaching of the *Cūlasaccaka Sutta* to make a new, polemical point. It is worth noting that this is not the only place where the authors/redactors of the Vinaya biography drew upon already existing collection of sacred compositions.⁷²

All this evidence inclines towards the conclusion that the Second Sermon was a polemical text of the contemplative, *anātmavādin* branch of the early Buddhist community. These Buddhists were probably part of a general movement spread throughout the early *saṅgha*, although the evidence suggests that Kosambi was an important centre of the movement, the names of Khemaka and Musīla being associated with it. By the time of the composition of what Frauwallner has termed the 'old Skandhaka', i.e. the presectarian source of all the extant Vinaya biographies cited above (and many more),⁷³ this school was important enough to dominate the account of the Buddha's Second Sermon, and fashion it in an *anātmavādin* direction critical of the tendency towards the belief in miraculous powers and meditation. According to Frauwallner this old Vinaya biography was composed around about the time of the Second Council of Vesālī, which has been variously dated between 50 and 100 AB.⁷⁴ If so, we could perhaps say that by the time of the Second Council, the early Buddhist movement had already reached a stage of considerable doctrinal and textual complexity. If we agree with Finot and Frauwallner that the Pāli *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta* (and its versions preserved in other sectarian literature) was originally a part of the

⁷² According to Erich Frauwallner (1956: 148), '[t]he author had a rich and varied material available for his work. Firstly, collections of the monastic rules were already extant. This is no wonder, because a gigantic work like this is not created suddenly out of nothing. This material was already shaped into form and was, at least partly, enclosed into the frame of an instruction by the Buddha to his earlier disciples. He had also available narratives elucidating the Prātimokṣa, like those in the extant Vibhaṅga. Moreover, he could also draw from a rich Sūtra tradition; he utilized Sūtra which can be found in the extant canonical collections.'

⁷³ Frauwallner's thesis on the development of the old Skandhaka is developed in detail in chapter three of *The Earliest Vinaya* (1956: 43ff, 'The Origin of the Skandhaka').

⁷⁴ Gombrich (1992: 258): 'We may thus date the Second Council round 60 A.B. or round 345 B.C.; the dates are very approximate and the precise margin of error incalculable'. Gombrich had earlier estimated it to be between 50 and 75 years after the Buddha's death (1988: 17), which elsewhere he dates to 404 B.C. (1992: 246): 'The Buddha died 136 years before Aśoka's inauguration, which means in 404 B.C.' According to Cousins (1991: 59) the Second Council is to be dated to seventy or eighty years after the Buddha's death in 413 B.C. Prebish has recently argued that the date of 100 AB, which is contained in 'all the texts' on the subject, should be accepted (2008: 15).

‘old Skandhaka’,⁷⁵ it would seem that the latter originally contained numerous passages of a miraculous nature, e.g. the long account of the conversion of the Kassapas, the Buddha’s claim that he could live until the end of the aeon and so on. According to Frauwallner, the old Skandhaka was structured around a full biography of the Buddha,⁷⁶ and if so we can hardly doubt that this text was of a miraculous nature from beginning to end. How, then, is the contemplative/polemical text of the Second Sermon to be understood within such a miraculous narrative? Why was a text critical of the miraculous tendency in early Buddhism included in a long and miraculous biography of the Buddha?

The basic text of the original *Skandhaka* would seem to have been composed by *bhikkhus* influenced by the meditative/miraculous tendency. If so, the Second Sermon perhaps reflects a redaction by those under the influence of the contemplative/*anātmavādin* school. It is unlikely that any major changes could have been worked into such a long and important work, but it would have been possible to present the contemplative perspective in a few important places such as the Second Sermon. Indeed the Second Sermon was eminently suitable to be expanded and adapted towards contemplative ends, for its source – the presectarian version of the *Ariyapariyesana Sutta* – does not comment on the content of the teaching imparted by the newly awakened Buddha to his disciples.⁷⁷ An expansion of this narrative would have been easy enough.

Whether or not it is correct to assume a basic ‘magical’ text with minor ‘contemplative/*anātmavāda*’ emendations, the extant Vinaya texts avoid any overwhelming bias towards either the meditative or contemplative tendency. This must surely indicate that some sort of settlement or agreement between the two tendencies or schools (meditative and contemplative) had been reached in the pre-schismatic Buddhist era. In other words, perhaps the advice of the *Mahācunda Sutta* that each school recognise the merits of the other was heeded, the overriding issue being the need to avoid a schism through doctrinal disagreement, as the *Pāsādika Sutta* had advised in order to avoid the example of the early Jain community.⁷⁸ Further investigation into the evidence for the Second Council, and of the extant texts derived from the ‘old Skandhaka’ – such as the various Vinaya texts cited at the beginning of this essay – will hopefully shed further light on the reading of the Second Sermon proposed here.

⁷⁵ Frauwallner (1956: 45): ‘The original continuity of the Mahāparinirvāṇasūtra and of the account of the councils, upheld by Finot, is thus not a conjecture, but a fact, established by tradition.’

Frauwallner (1956: 46): ‘The story of the death of the Buddha and the account of the two earliest councils formed originally one single narrative. This narrative, according to the evidence of the great majority of the sources, was a fixed component of the Vinaya. It belonged to the Vinaya already in its earliest form recognisable to us, and had its place at the end of the Skandhaka.’

⁷⁶ Frauwallner (1956: 52): ‘Originally the core of the Buddhist monastic rules in the Skandhaka were enclosed by a biography of the Buddha. But even the monastic rules are narrated in the form of a historical account. Legends are woven into this general biographical framework of early life, awakening, initial teaching, rules and community establishment, death, councils.’

⁷⁷ See M I, 173.2ff.

⁷⁸ On which see Wynne (2004: 115).

Abbreviations

All Pali citations are from Pali Text Society editions; citations from the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* are taken from Olivelle 1998.

A	Aṅguttara Nikāya
BU	Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad
CSCD	<i>Chaṭṭha Saṅgāyana</i> : CD-ROM version of the Burmese Tipiṭka, Rangoon 1954. Dhammagiri: Vipassana Research Institute, version 3.
CPD	Critical Pali Dictionary
D	Dīgha Nikāya
M	Majjhima Nikāya
Mbh	Mahābhārata
Mv	Mahāvastu (see Senart)
PED	Pali English Dictionary (see Rhys Davids and Stede)
S	Samyutta Nikāya
SbhV	Saṅghabhedavastu (see Gnoli)
Vin	Vinaya

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