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Why Did Brahmā Ask the Buddha to Teach?

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The episode of Brahmā's request to the Buddha to teach has been regarded as problematic from early times, since it suggests that the Buddha was initially lacking in compassion. Comparison of versions of the story shows it to be possibly pre-Aśokan in origin. A close reading of themes in the episode in relation to other incidents in the Buddha's life described in the Pali canon show that it need not be taken as portraying an actual experience of the Buddha. The original purpose of the episode was not to describe the Buddha's inner conflict but to show that Brahmā, representative of Brahmanical religion, was a follower of the Buddha. The episode was originally religious propaganda.

After the Buddha had gained enlightenment, so the story goes (see below for references), he considered whether to teach others the truth that he had discovered. Thinking that it would be troublesome for him, since the *Dhamma* is deep and difficult, and people, ensconced in worldly enjoyment, are not interested, he initially decided on not teaching but instead on 'living at ease'. Brahmā, the creator god of Indian mythology, having perceived the Buddha's decision, appeared before him, bowed down, and requested that he teach because some beings had but little dust on their eyes, and would also find enlightenment if they heard the *Dhamma*. The Buddha reconsidered. He surveyed the world with Buddha-vision and saw beings like lotuses at various stages of growth, some indeed likely to understand the truth; he then changed his mind and decided to teach.

This famous episode, in various forms, is found in all versions of the Buddha's traditional life-story, testament to its enduring appeal. But from an early stage it has also been regarded as problematic, since it portrays the hesitant Buddha as less than perfectly compassionate. In this article I propose to demonstrate through a close reading of the Pali version that the episode of Brahmā's request was originally designed to tell us about Brahmā, not the Buddha. It was a piece of religious propaganda against Brahmanism which was so successful as a narrative about the Buddha that it took on a life of its own within the Buddhist tradition.

The implication of this approach is that it is unlikely that a god really appeared to ask the Buddha to teach, because it is unlikely that a god *needed* to appear. Instead, I propose that the story arose, told either by the Buddha or by early

Buddhist story-tellers, as a means by which the Buddhist tradition asserted its superiority over Brahmanical religion. But whatever the genesis of the episode, I am not so much interested to judge the *truth* of the episode (whether or not a god really asked the Buddha to teach), which we are in no position to ascertain, but to inquire into the *value* of the story for the early tradition.

THE PROBLEM OF THE BUDDHA'S HESITATION

The theme of divine intervention makes this episode part of the Buddha's 'sacred biography', leading modern Western Buddhists to interpret it in psychological terms. Sangharakshita, for instance, has said:

> We shouldn't of course take this incident literally, in the historical sense – the Buddha was enlightened, he didn't need to be asked to preach. Brahmā's request represents the manifestation within the Buddha's own mind of the forces of Compassion. (Sangharakshita 1996, 41)

Similarly, Stephen Batchelor, in an interpretation of Māra, the Buddha's constant adversary, writes:

> Unless we are prepared to regard Brahma as a celestial apparition who descends from the sky in order to plead with Buddha on behalf of humanity, we need to consider him as another metaphor of Buddha's inner life. If Mara represents Buddha's shadow, then Brahma represents his charisma. (Batchelor 2004, 146)

Brahmā, internalized in accordance with a psychological interpretation of myth, becomes a higher or divine aspect of the Buddha's mind, and the episode of Brahmā's request illustrates the play of forces inside his whole mind.

These commentators take the episode as a metaphor for a psychological process. Taking it at face value, David Webster suggests that the episode of Brahmā's request represents an early 'human' portrayal of the Buddha, though he is unable to discover its significance (Webster 2005). Less literally, André Bareau assumes that the composers of the episode wished to portray the Buddha's inner conflict prior to deciding to teach, although the resulting hesitant Buddha is thereby represented most unfortunately:

> It does not appear to his advantage, accumulating arrogance in the appreciation of his discovery and laziness and egoism in his decision, betraying the ideal of the Bodhisattva always ready to sacrifice himself for the good of other beings and contravening the moral precepts of the Buddhist teaching itself, which recommends modesty, energy and altruism with so much insistence.
>
> (Bareau 1963, 141, my translation)

Bareau explains this representation as 'clumsiness' on the part of story-tellers who were 'very badly inspired'. Not yet having invented the character of Māra, the personification of evil, the narrators have been obliged 'to entrust to the Blessed One the surprising role of devil's advocate'. Brahmā thus represents 'divine inspiration' — although Bareau also notes that the Buddha's vision of beings as like lotuses comes to him independently of Brahmā, and that divine inspiration is therefore not wholly necessary to the Buddha's decision to teach, a point to which I will return.

However, it is not just in modern times that Buddhists and scholars have considered it necessary to explain the Buddha's apparent hesistation. From early

times the episode, taken at face value, has appeared to require explanation. In the *Milindapañha*, dating from the second century CE or later, King Milinda puts to Nāgasena two incompatible propositions concerning the Buddha:

> Revered Nāgasena, you say: 'During four incalculables of eons and for a hundred thousand eons omniscient knowledge was matured by the Tathāgata for pulling out great masses of people (from saṃsāra)'. And again (you say): 'After he had attained to omniscience his mind inclined to little effort and not to teaching Dhamma [*appossukkatāya cittaṃ nami, no dhammadesanāyāti*]'.
>
> (Miln 232–234; Horner 1964, II: 34)

The first proposition corresponds to the tradition that the whole vast career of the *bodhisatta* had been undertaken out of compassion for suffering beings. As the *Buddhavaṃsa* (chapter 2) records, the early Buddhists came to believe that it was under the former Buddha Dīpaṅkara, a very long time ago, that 'our' Buddha resolved upon Buddhahood as the ascetic Sumedha. Such stories elaborate on a theme that appears to go back to the Buddha:

> Monks, there is one person who was born and comes into the world for the welfare and happiness of the people, out of compassion for the world, for the benefit, welfare and happiness of gods and human beings. Who is that person? The *Tathāgata*, the Worthy One, the fully and completely enlightened one. (AN I 22)

And yet, as King Milinda's second proposition states, the Buddha is said to have hesitated before teaching. How can this hesitation be reconciled with the *Tathāgata*'s compassion? The King compares the Buddha to an archer who hesitates on the day of battle, or a wrestler on the day of the fight. 'Was it because of fear, revered Nāgasena', the King asks, 'that the Tathāgata hesitated [*osakkitaṃ*], or was it because of the unmanifest [*apākaṭatāya*] (nature of *Dhamma*), or was it because of weakness [*dubbalatāya*], or did he hesitate because he was not omniscient (after all)?'. Nāgasena replies firstly that the Buddha only *appeared* to hesitate before teaching, and that the Buddha's hesitation was in fact merely an appropriate preparatory relaxation: 'precisely this was his (purposeful) thought and intention [*cintanamānasaṃ*]: that it [the *Dhamma*] should be pierced by beings' (Miln. 233; Horner 1964, II: 35). He compares the Buddha to a doctor who hesitates before treating a patient, or a King who hesitates before attempting to protect his charges. The hesitation is a mark, one might say, of professional expertise, appropriate for someone who had trained as thoroughly as had the *bodhisatta*.

Nāgasena then offers a second explanation for the Buddha's hesitation, in terms of the cultural importance of Brahmā's requesting the Buddha to teach:

> Moreover, sire, this is an essential rightness [*dhammatā*] in all Tathāgatas, that they should teach *Dhamma* at the request of Brahmā. But what is the reason for this? At that time all these people — ascetics and wanderers, recluses and brahmans — were worshippers of Brahmā, reverencing Brahmā and they took Brahmā as their mainstay. Therefore at the thought that the world with its devas will bow down (to Dhamma), feel confidence and faith in it because that one who is so powerful, famed, well known, renowned, high and lofty bows down to it — it is for this reason, sire, that Tathāgatas teach Dhamma at the request of Brahmā.
>
> (Miln. 234; Horner 1964, II: 36–37)

In the *Mahāpadāna Sutta* (DN II 12–15) it is said that it is natural (*dhammatā*) that Buddhas descend into their mothers' wombs from the Tusita heaven, accompanied by earthquakes, that they take seven steps, that their mothers soon die, and so on. Later in the same *sutta,* former Buddha Vipassin is asked to teach by Brahmā, and so when Nāgasena says that it is natural (*dhammatā*) that Buddhas teach *Dhamma* after Brahmā has requested it, this is no doubt alluding to these paradigmatic life-stories of Buddhas. That is, the Buddha hesitated before teaching because it is the done thing for Buddhas to wait for the highest deity to request the *Dhamma*, hence to increase its prestige in the eyes of the populace. Scholars have ascertained that Brahmā was indeed widely worshipped in the north-east of India in the early Buddhist period (Bailey 1983, 35, Brockington 2003, 119).

Nāgasena therefore explains the Buddha's hesitation as a professional tactic customary to compassionate Buddhas. But the idea that the Buddha hesitated in thoughtful preparation would appear not to be compatible with the idea that the Buddha hesitated in order to allow Brahmā to intercede. Nevertheless, these awkwardly juxtaposed reasons seem to have been widely accepted, as evident in the commentary (SN-a I 197–198) on the episode as it occurs in the *Saṃyutta Nikāya* (SN I 137):

> *Living at ease* (*appossukkatā*, lit. 'little zeal') means lack of desire to teach. But why did his mind so incline after he had made the aspiration to Buddhahood, fulfilled the perfections, and attained omniscience? Because as he reflected, the density of the defilements of beings and the profundity of the Dhamma became manifest to him. Also, he knew that if he inclined to living at ease, Brahmā would request him to teach, and since beings esteem Brahmā, this would instil in them a desire to hear the Dhamma. (Bodhi 2000: 431–32)

The traditional Buddhist biographers, however, preferred less complex explanations of the Buddha's hesitation. The Theravādin *Nidānakathā* simply relied upon the idea that it is natural (*dhammatā*) for Buddhas to hesitate:

> as he was reflecting on the profundity of the Dhamma he had realised, there arose in him the thought customary with all Buddhas, that he had realised the Dhamma but that he was not inclined to proclaim the Dhamma to others. Thereupon Brahmā Sahampati... (Jat I, 81; Jayawickrama 1990, 108)

The Buddha's hesitation before teaching is explained as something that all Buddhas do; later the Buddha automatically agrees to the Brahmā's request. The *Lalitavistara* account of the episode prefaces it with the following reflection in the mind of the Buddha:

> I have infinite compassion towards all the world, and I do not expect prayers from others. The multitude pleased Brahmā, who requested me to turn the wheel. Thus, I will instruct this Dharma if Brahmā fell at my feet and begged: 'Instruct the beings who are of good disposition and desirous to know' (Lv 287; Goswami 2001, 358).

In this version of his life-story, the Buddha appears as perfectly compassionate but waits to be asked to teach in order to convince those who have faith in Brahmā. The episode thus becomes the rehearsal of an interchange known in fact to be unnecessary, though of missionary value. In the *Buddhacarita*, the episode of Brahmā's request is reduced to a formality. Brahmā, along with Indra, visits the

Buddha after his enlightenment in order to encourage a decision to teach that the Buddha has already made:

> when the two chiefs of the heavenly dwellings knew that the Sugata's mind had taken the decision to preach tranquillity, they were filled with a desire for the world's benefit and, shining brightly, approached him.
>
> (Bc XIV 98; Johnston 1936, 215)

The Buddha's resolution to teach had been in some conflict with his decision to remain immobile, but Brahmā's (and Indra's) task is merely to encourage the Buddha actually to begin teaching. The episode of Brahmā's request is thus reduced to the episode of Brahmā's encouragement. The Buddha is not portrayed as needing to be asked to teach, which certainly solves the problem of the Buddha's hesitation.

THE ANTIQUITY OF THE EPISODE OF BRAHMĀ'S REQUEST

In the oldest, possibly pre-Aśokan, versions of the episode of Brahmā's request, the source material for commentators and biographers, there is no hint that the Buddha did not really need to be asked to teach, nor that the Buddha's hesitation was customary for Buddhas. This suggests that the problems later found in the story were not envisaged by its composers. (I take it that we cannot know who these composers were, whether the episode was told by the Buddha or was invented later). Richard Gombrich has drawn attention to early Buddhist teachings whose original significance appears to have been forgotten quite quickly by the tradition (Gombrich 1992, 160; 1996, 69). By identifying what appears to be the earliest version of our episode, I hope to show that it had a quite precise original significance.

In the Pali canon, the episode occurs five times. In the *Ariyapariyesana Sutta* it is recounted in the first person by the Buddha, between the accounts of his enlightenment and his first attempts to teach (MN I 167–169). This first-person narrative recurs identically in the *Bodhirājakumāra Sutta* (MN II 93), amid autobiographical material drawn from both the *Mahāsaccaka Sutta* (MN I 237) and the *Ariyapariyesana Sutta*.[1] The episode occurs as a third-person narrative but otherwise identically in the *Mahāvagga* of the *Vinaya*, within the detailed story of the first few weeks after the Buddha's enlightenment (Vin I 4–7). The same third-person narrative recurs as an independent *sutta* in the *Saṃyutta Nikāya* (SN I 136–138). Finally, the third-person narrative occurs in the *Mahāpadāna Sutta* as an episode in the life of the former Buddha Vipassin, with an appropriate change of nomenclature, and some other slight changes (DN II 35–40). The development of stories of former Buddhas was evidently early, and the inclusion of a slightly modified version of the episode of Brahmā's request in the story of Vipassin suggests that the episode was already in existence by the time those stories were first composed, possibly before the reign of Aśoka (Bareau 1980, 5).

André Bareau has compared the version of the episode narrated in the Pali *Vinaya* with those in two other recensions of the *Vinaya* preserved in Chinese translation. The episode always occurs, as one would expect, just prior to the

1. These materials also occur, without the episode of Brahmā's request at MN II 209.

Buddha's leaving the vicinity of Uruvilvā (Uruvelā) in order to begin teaching (Bareau 1963, 135–143). The episode is shown to be more or less identical in the *Vinaya*s of the Mahīśāsaka, Dharmaguptaka and Theravāda schools compared by Bareau. The episode of (the) Brahmā's request does not appear in the Chinese version of the *Ariyapariyesana Sutta* (Minh Chau 1991, 155). This might suggest that the episode was originally part of the *Mahāvagga*, but since other episodes in that narrative recur elsewhere in the Pali canon, the *Mahāvagga* narrative itself might be a compilation.[2] The manner of recurrence of the episode in the Pali sources suggests that, prior to the compilation of the canon into the form in which it has come down to us, the episode of Brahmā's request existed as a discrete story, the composition of which preceded the compilation of the *sutta*s. More direct evidence for this view comes from the *Mahāvastu*, a Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit (BHS) text which includes a life-story of the Buddha, in which the episode of 'Great Brahmā's' request occurs in much the same way as, including many direct verbal parallels with, the Pali versions (Mvu III 313–319; Jones 1956, III: 302–309). However, there are variations in the prose narrative that suggest that the *Mahāvastu* version does not depend upon the Pali versions but that they have a common source. In the BHS *Lalitavistara*, there is considerable elaboration of the episode, with variations suggesting it is not simply derived from the *Mahāvastu*, and yet there are unmistakeable parallels to both the *Mahāvastu* and the Pali versions (Lv 286–294; Goswami 2001, 357–366).

These parallels are most explicit in a series of verses which recur almost word-for-word in the Pali and BHS despite differences in their prose narratives, suggesting that in them we find the oldest version of the episode of Brahmā's request. Firstly, there are four verses in which the Buddha states his reluctance to teach:

> Why should I teach what I attained with such difficulty?
> This *Dhamma* won't make sense to those greed-bound and consumed by hate.
> Blinded by passions, impaled within darkness, they won't see
> that which goes against the current, so subtle, profound, difficult and delicate.
> (SN I 136 = Mvu III 314, Lv 290)[3]

In the *Mahāvastu* version, the lines are in a different order, and instead of 'impaled within darkness' (*tamokkhandena āvuṭā*), the BHS repeats 'why should I teach?' (*alaṃ dāni prakāśituṃ*). The BHS also has 'people consumed by sense-pleasures are carried with the current'[4] instead of the second line in the Pali. This suggests that the BHS version is not simply derived from the Pali: final evidence for the antiquity of the episode, as it suggests that the Pali and BHS versions are derived from a common and older source. The *Lalitavistara* version also changes the order of the verses but retains the same sense.

These opening verses are followed in the Pali by some verses in which Brahmā requests the Buddha to teach:

2. Vin 1.1–2 = Ud 1.1–4; Vin 1.3 = Ud 2.1; Vin 1.6 = SN 56.11; etc.
3. My trans. of: *kicchena me adhigataṃ halaṃ dāni pakāsituṃ | rāgadosaparetehi nāyaṃ dhammo susambuddho | paṭisotagāmin nipunaṃ gambhīraṃ duddasaṃ aṇuṃ | ragarattā na dakkhanti tamokkhandena āvuṭā ti ||*
4. My trans. of *anuśrotaṃ hi vahyanti kāmeṣu grasitā narāḥ*

Formerly there appeared among the Magadhans
an impure *Dhamma* thought out by those with stains.
Throw open the door of the deathless
that they may hear the *Dhamma* realised by the stainless one!
(SN I 137= Mvu III 317; Lv 291)[5]

Arise victorious hero and wander in the world,
debt-free leader of the human caravan.
Blessed One, teach the *Dhamma* –
there will be some who will understand.
(SN I 137 = Mvu III 316; Lv 290)[6]

The BHS verses are identical except that the Pali 'caravan leader' (*satthavāha*) is replaced by 'fully laden' (*pūrṇabharo*), a variation on the theme of wealth in a pre-monetary economy; and the Pali 'Blessed One' (*bhagavā*) is replaced in the *Mahāvastu* by *sugata* and in the *Lalitavistara* by 'you sage', *tvaṃ mune*. Finally, there are some verses in which the Buddha replies to Brahmā that he will teach. From the Pali:

The doors of the deathless are open for them –
let those with ears *pamuñcantu saddhaṃ.*
Forseeing bother, Brahmā, I did not speak
the rarefied, subtle *Dhamma* among human beings.
(SN I 138 = Mvu III 319, Lv 25.34)[7]

In all versions of these final verses, the Buddha affirms Brahmā's request that he open the 'doors of the deathless', and says that the *Dhamma* is now available for those who *pamuñcantu saddhaṃ/ pramuṃcantu śraddhāṃ*, a phrase which may mean 'give up the [Vedic] funerary rights' or 'release faith' (i.e. in the Buddha's teaching). However, while the Pali version adds that the Buddha had foreseen bother (*vihiṃsa-saññī*) in teaching the *Dhamma*, this expression in BHS is transferred from the Buddha to the *Dhamma* (*viheṭhasamjño praguṇo abhūṣidharmo*) such that it does not appear to make as much sense, perhaps representing a corruption of the verses.[8]

THREE REASONS FOR LIVING AT EASE

The Pali narrative tells us that, having been asked to teach, 'the Blessed One, aware of Brahmā's entreaty and out of compassion for beings, surveyed the world with Buddha-vision', the 'and' (*ca*) making it clear that it is ambiguous whether Brahmā's intercession was really necessary, since his compassion is a sufficient

5. My trans. of: *pāturahosi magadhesu pubbe | dhammo asuddho samalehi cintito | apāpuretaṃ amatassa dvāraṃ | suṇantu dhammaṃ vimalenānubuddhaṃ* || These verses are missing in DN 14. There are some additional verses following in all Pali versions but not in BHS which I have omitted.
6. My trans. of: *uṭṭhehi vīra vijitasaṅgāma | satthavāha anaṇa vicara loke | desassu bhagavā dhammaṃ | aññātāro bhavissantī ti||*
7. My trans of: *apārutā tesaṃ amatassa dvārā / ye sotavanto pamuñcantu saddhaṃ | vihiṃsasaññī pagunaṃ na bhāsiṃ | dhammaṃ paṇītaṃ manujesu brahme ti ||*
8. According to Jones (1956, 308), 'the Pali version has the greater claim to represent the original tradition in that it makes more explicit the Buddha's consent to teach the dharma, *na bhāsiṃ*, "I did not preach" implying that he is now ready to do so'.

condition for his deciding to teach. I suggest that this ambiguity deliberately preserves the Buddha's autonomy, while also allowing, for the purposes of an interesting narrative, that he is influenced by Brahmā. Once this ambiguity is noticed, we can surmise that the purpose of the episode is not to record an event in the life of the Buddha, but to illuminate the nature of the teaching in relation to Brahmā and what Brahmā stands for, which is the religion of the Brahmins. This will become more obvious through a detailed analysis of three reasons given in the episode for the Buddha's reluctance to teach.

The first reason is that the *Dhamma* is difficult. In the Pali verses (SN I 136) it is said to be *nipunaṃ* (subtle) *gambhīraṃ* (profound) *duddasaṃ* (difficult to see) *aṇuṃ* (delicate) as well as *paṇītaṃ* (subtle) at SN I 138; the BHS verses (Mvu III 314; Lv, 290) also call it *gambhīraṃ dudṛśaṃ*. The Pali prose narrative uses the formula: 'the *Dhamma* that I have discovered is profound, difficult to see, abstruse, serene, subtle, non-conceptual, rarefied, only to be known by the wise (*gambhīro duddaso duranubodho santo paṇīto atakkāvacaro nipuṇo paṇḍitavedanīyo*)' (SN I 136 etc). This same formula recurs in the *Majjhima Nikāya*, in the context of the Buddha explaining to the wanderer Vacchagotta that the *Dhamma* is profound and difficult for someone like him who is committed to wrong views (MN I 487). The formulaic epithets also occur in the *Brahmajāla Sutta* in relation to those things (*dhammā*) the Buddha knows for which he is rightly praised (DN I 12). Similarly, in the *Mahānidāna Sutta*, the Buddha tells Ānanda that *paṭiccasammupāda* is 'profound' (*gambhīraṃ*), and that it is through not understanding it that beings revolve in *saṃsāra* (DN II 55). We therefore observe that the Buddha did not change his mind concerning the difficulty of the *Dhamma*.

The second reason not to teach is that beings, blinded by their passions, won't understand the *Dhamma*. But the observation that passion (*rāga*) and desire for sense-pleasure (*kāma*) keep people suffering in *saṃsāra* is ubiquitous in early Buddhism; elsewhere we read that 'one who goes against the current' (*paṭisotagāmin*) is someone who does not indulge in sense-desires (AN II 6).[9] That human beings are more or less ensconced in worldly enjoyment was also something that the Buddha did not change his mind about.

The third reason for the Buddha's reluctance to teach is that to try to do so will be a 'bother' (*vihiṃsa*); in the prose we read that trying to teach will be a 'wearisome' (*kilamatho*) 'bother' (*vihesā*) (SN I 136 etc). In this connection there is the story in the *Udāna* of Suppabuddha the leper, 'a pauper and a miserable wretch', who approached the Buddha, engaged in teaching the *Dhamma* to a crowd, because he thought he might get some food. The Buddha, wondering who might understand the *Dhamma*, saw that Suppabuddha would understand (Ud 48). The Buddha teaches *Dhamma* aimed at the leper, and Suppabuddha becomes a stream-entrant. Later he is killed by a cow, but the Buddha praises Suppabuddha because he 'did not bother me' (*na maṃ vihasesi*), but became enlightened quickly. The implication is that teaching *Dhamma* was mostly a bother, so this was not something the Buddha changed his mind about either.

9. 'Who, *bhikkhus*, is the person who goes against the current? There is someone who does not indulge in sense-desires and does not perform evil deeds; he lives the completely purified and perfect holy life, despite pain and misery, though crying, his face in tears — this one is called a person who goes against the current'.

These reasons for not teaching culminate in the Buddha's mind inclining to 'living at ease' (*appossukkatā*) (SN I 137 etc). But this decision was by no means unique. For instance, in the *Upakkilesa Sutta*, the Buddha attempts to intercede in a quarrel which has engulfed the monks of Kosambi, but they tell him to go away and be 'living at ease, *bhante* (*appossukko bhante*)' (MN III 152–162).[10] Unable to persuade them from their dispute, the Buddha does go away, and, according to a related narrative in the *Mahāvagga*, takes himself to a forest, where he lives happily and in comfort, attended by a bull elephant who has got away from the hurly-burly of elephant life (Vin I 353).[11]

Although the Buddha's initial inclination to live at ease in the episode of Brahmā's request was interpreted as an apparently uncompassionate lifestyle choice, 'living at ease' is not in fact represented negatively elsewhere in the Pali canon. In the stock phrase 'living at ease, keeping silent and still (*appossuko tuṇhībhūto saṅkasāyati*)', it has a positive meaning. A monk who stops reciting and turns to 'living at ease, keeping silent and still' turns out to be an *arahant* (SN I 202). A tortoise withdraws into its shell to protect itself, 'living at ease, keeping silent and still', and so should a *bhikkhu* withdraw from Māra, by guarding the senses (SN IV 178). 'Living at ease' most positively means simply dwelling in the *jhāna*s (SN II 277). The phrase therefore signifies a strategic and positive withdrawal from the world, but is given a rhetorical twist in the episode of Brahmā's request that does not really accord with the Buddha's own evaluation of such withdrawal evident in his reported taste for solitude, silence and meditation.

The themes of 'bother' and 'living at ease' also occur in the *Cātumā Sutta*, in which the Buddha turns away a party of monks who are bothering him by making noise like 'fishermen hawking fish' (MN I 456–62). The people of Cātumā, the nearby town, come to the Buddha to remonstrate with him. Brahmā Sahampati also comes to remonstrate. The Cātumāns and Sahampati argue that the newer *bhikkhu*s, like seedlings starved of water, or calves separated from their mothers, may suffer through not seeing the Buddha. The Buddha changes his mind and decides to teach the monks, in a reprisal of the episode of Brahmā's request that supposedly began his teaching career.[12]

The three reasons — the difficulty of the *Dhamma*, the worldliness of beings, and the bother of teaching — given for the Buddha's decision not to teach were all constant features of his teaching career. Living at ease instead of teaching is similarly described in the Pali canon as a recurrent feature of the Buddha's lifestyle. The issues represented as facing the Buddha at the outset of his teaching career were therefore the ongoing conditions of his teaching activity. This suggests that the composers of the episode did not intend it to be understood literally, as portraying an event in the life of the Buddha, but instead as symbolizing

10. The background story is at *Mahāvagga* 10.1–2 (Vin I 336–48). Ñāṇamoli (1972, 109–119) presents a connected narrative concerning this episode, from various canonical and commentarial passages.
11. The story is also at Ud 41, where it is prefaced by a slightly different story, in which the Buddha had felt hemmed in by everyone at the monastery at Kosambi, and had left having reflected that he lived in discomfort (*dukkha*), not at ease (*phāsu*).
12. A similar story is told at SN III 91–94, except the Buddha is dwelling at Kapilavatthu, only Brahmā Sahampati remonstrates with him, and his subsequent teaching to the monks is different.

a continuous decision-making process innate in the Buddha's teaching role. Later Buddhists, having elevated the Buddha to a superhuman status in which such a decision-making process was no longer conceivable, were unable to understand the episode of Brahmā's request symbolically. But when taken at face value, it became problematic.

This means that the episode of Brahmā's request is unlikely to correspond to an actual event, since the Buddha is represented as continuing to hesitate and to want to live at ease throughout his teaching career. In this episode, his hesitation is compressed into one symbolic decision such that it becomes possible to represent Brahmā as appearing and then successfully persuading the Buddha to teach the *Dhamma* to living beings. If this argument is correct, there was never any need for a deity to ask the Buddha to teach. Yet in the episode of Brahmā's request we find a story carefully crafted to make it appear plausible that the Buddha needed divine intercession to persuade him off the bank of the Nerañjarā.

I am not arguing that the episode of Brahmā's request originated in a symbolic portrayal of a continuous decision-making process in the Buddha's teaching career and was only *later* taken up as propaganda. Instead I envisage the Buddha, or early Buddhist story-tellers, as inventing an episode which both compresses into a single symbolic event the Buddha's continuous process of deciding to teach, and employs this image as an opportunity to show the superiority of Buddhism to Brahmanism by having Brahmā appear to make his request.

THE IRONY OF BRAHMĀ'S ROLE

Why was it Brahmā in particular who asked the Buddha to teach? In the oldest verses (SN I 136 etc.), Brahmā asks the Buddha to teach in the specific context of Magadha, where an inferior *Dhamma* is already taught. It is not clear why Magadha is specifically referred to, when the Buddha taught in many north Indian countries of the time, nor which inferior *Dhamma* is being referred to. However, Brahmā's contrast between an 'impure' (*asuddha*) *Dhamma* taught by those 'with stains' (*samala*), and that taught by the 'stainless one' (*vimala*) points to a polemic against Brahmanical religion with its concern for ritual purity. This is another ubiquitous theme in the Pali canon: the Buddha is more 'pure' (*suddha*) and 'stainless' (*vimala*) than the Brahmins. Brahmā's verse also implies an intellectual failing: the impure *Dhamma* is 'thought out' (*cintito*), whereas the Buddha's *Dhamma* (in the preceding prose) is described as 'non-conceptual' (*atakkāvacāra*); elsewhere in the canon the 'range' (*visaya*) of a Buddha is described as 'unthinkable' (*acinteyya*) (AN II 80).

Brahmā, then, appears to be familiar with the superior purity and intellectual depth of the Buddha's *Dhamma*. And yet Brahmā, for Brahmins of the time, would have been regarded as a mythic figure personifying the priest who specifically oversaw the correct performance of the Vedic rituals out of concern for ritual purity (Bailey 1983, 3). There would appear to be a deliberate irony, then, in Brahmā's asking the Buddha to teach, out of concern for the people of Magadha with their impure *Dhamma*.

I believe there is specific evidence for the irony of Brahmā's request in the theme of 'the deathless' (*amata*). This word is used in Pali as a synonym for *Nibbāna*, and the 'doors to the deathless' as those teachings and practices that

lead to enlightenment.[13] The Buddha, having listened to Brahmā's request that he 'open the doors to the deathless', declares that they are open, and that 'those with ears (*sotavanto*)' should 'give up the funerary rites (*pamuñcantu saddhaṃ*)'. This translation of *saddhaṃ* as 'funerary rites' does not, however, do justice to what looks like a piece of rhetorical word-play. *Saddhaṃ* also means 'faith', so that Bhikkhu Bodhi translates *pamuñcantu saddhaṃ* as 'let them release faith', that is, let those keen on attaining *Nibbāna* have faith in the Buddha's *Dhamma* (Bodhi 2000, 233). Maurice Walshe notes that previous translators have given 'renounce your empty faith' and 'abandon blind belief', but that the commentarial tradition clearly favours 'let them declare their faith' (Walshe 1987, 563). This may be so, but *saddhaṃ* also means Vedic funerary rites, which the Buddha is elsewhere represented as knowing about (AN I 166).

In the *Pārāyana* the Buddha tells Piṅgiya that:

> As Vakkali has declared his faith, and Bhadrāvudha and Āḷavi-Gotama, in just the same way you too declare your faith (*pamuñcassu saddhaṃ*). You, Piṅgiya, will go to the far shore of the realm of death. (Sn 1146, trans. Norman 2001, 145)

Prof. Norman notes that that there is the same ambiguity here as in the phrase *pamuñcantu saddhaṃ* in the Brahmā's request passages, which might mean 'proclaim their faith' or 'give up their (old) faith, i.e. wrong beliefs' or even 'give up their desire' (Norman 2001, 390). It seems to me, however, that there might be a punning connection between the Brahmin Piṅgala's giving up funerary rites and his going to the other side of death. The joke might be that if one is going beyond death, or through the doors of the deathless, one is not going to be worrying about funerals.

The *Pārāyana* is among the oldest of Buddhist compositions,[14] so perhaps the word-play was taken from there and used in the episode of Brahmā's request. The joke is intensified, however, if we consider that Brahmā is described in the *Mahābhārata* as the originator of the Vedic funerary rites (Mhbh 13.91).[15] The Buddha is therefore informing Brahmā, in these old verses concerning his request, that those interested in attaining that which goes beyond death should have faith/give up the very rites concerned with the dead traditionally ascribed to Brahmā. The several ironies involved in Brahmā's role in our episode, then, appear to be designed to show that Buddhism is superior to Brahmanical religion. Indeed, it would appear in this episode that Brahmā, the supreme deity of the Brahmins, has become a follower of the Buddha.

BRAHMĀ THE BUDDHIST

The pantheon contained in the Pali canon appears to represent a period when Brahmā enjoyed considerable popularity in Indian religious life. Brahmā is named in Vedic literature, but his mythology is elaborated only in the (later) epics and

13. e.g. at SN II 43. At MN I 353, eleven doors to the deathless are listed: the four *jhāna*s, the four *brāhma-vihāra*s and the first three formless bases (infinite space, infinite consciousness and nothingness), when seen as impermanent.
14. It is mentioned, and some verses from it quoted, at SN II 47, implying it was recited during the Buddha's lifetime.
15. This is probably later than the Pali canon but presumably reflects an old tradition.

*Purāṇa*s (Bailey 1983, 3). But it must have already existed in some form, since the early Buddhists borrowed the mythology of Brahmā and modified it to suit their own ends.

In this mythology, Brahmā enjoys a crucial role in the process of creation, but the Buddha is represented as denigrating the claims of such a supposed creator-god. In the *Brahmajāla Sutta*, he tells the story that, during the periodic expansion of a world-system, a being appears in an empty Brahmā-palace. Being lonely, he wishes for companions. More beings arrive in the Brahmā-palace through exhaustion of their life-span or their merit, and Brahmā concludes that he has created those beings. Likewise, those beings believe Brahmā has created them, because he arose first and they afterwards (DN I 18–19, also at DN III 29–30).[16] In so appearing to create other beings, Brahmā describes himself according to a stock formula as: 'I am (*aham asmi*) great Brahmā, conqueror, unconquered, all-seeing, all-powerful, lord, maker, creator, chief, appointer, orderer, father of all that are and will be' (DN I 18; DN III 29; MN I 326–327, etc.). These epithets are mostly also found in non-Buddhist texts, indicating that they represent beliefs about Brahmā current at the time of the Buddha (Bailey 1983, 7). However, in the Buddhist story, such beliefs are shown to be the pompous conceits of a deluded being, a *primum non-mobile* one might say. The Buddha therefore does not deny the existence of a 'great Brahmā', but will not allow that he is the creator: the impersonal processes of the ripening of karma govern the arising and passing away of beings, not the will of Brahmā. And while Brahmā does not realize this, the Buddha does.

The Buddha makes a joke out of the deluded self-importance of the non-creative 'creator' in the *Kevaddha Sutta* (DN I 211–223), another ironic reference to non-Buddhist Indian mythology. But '*brahmā*' also appears in early Buddhist mythology not as a specific deity but as a class of gods who enjoy magnificent and powerful lives through their good actions in past existences. The *brahmā*s and *mahābrahmā*s of the *brahmā*-worlds are regarded as beings of the *rūpa-loka*, or world of subtle form, and the Buddha teaches that human beings can be reborn in these worlds through the practice of *jhāna* (e.g MN III 100–103) or through cultivation of the *brahmā-vihāra*s (e.g. DN II 196). Beyond the *rūpa-loka* are the even more exalted realms of the *arūpa-loka*, where even more sublime and subtle beings live, though they too belong in the cyclical world of *saṃsāra*.

Hence Buddhist mythology transformed the one Brahmā, creator god of Indian mythology into many gods, none of which are creative or supreme. We meet stories concerning individual Brahmās: Brahmā Baka, who is possessed by Māra and believes himself to be permanent until corrected by the Buddha (MN I 326–331); Brahmā Tudu, formerly a Buddhist monk and non-returner (SN I 149); and Brahmā Sahampati, the particular Brahmā who, in the Pali canon, requested the newly-enlightened Buddha to teach.

In the Dharmaguptaka and Mahīśāsaka *Vinaya*s, as well as in the *Mahāvastu* (Mvu III 317) and the *Lalitavistara*, in passages very similar to the episode in the Pali canon, the Brahmā who requests the Buddha to teach is simply called Brahmā or Mahā-Brahmā, and is not specifically named. In the Pali tradition, however,

16. Gombrich (1990, 13) points out that this is satirical retelling of the creation myth in *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 1.4.1–3.

this Brahmā is given the name Sahampati. In a short discourse in the *Saṃyutta Nikāya*, we discover that Brahmā Sahampati was a *bhikkhu* named Sahaka under the previous Buddha Kassapa, reborn in this *kalpa* according to his merit (SN V 233). This leads the commentary (11) on the *Buddhavaṃsa* to say that his name should be Sahakapati (Haldar 1977, 97). This, however, would appear to be an over-literal reading by the commentator; it seems more likely that the name Sahaka is derived from the name Sahampati. The name Sahampati itself is mysterious, which is perhaps why the commentator offered his derivation.

Rhys Davids and Oldenberg suggested that 'Sahampati' could be understood as equivalent to the Sanskrit 'Svayampati' (Rhys Davids 1881, 86). This name does not appear to be found in the epics and *Purāṇas*, but it combines two names commonly used in them for Brahmā. 'Svayambhū', meaning 'Self-existent', is an epithet for a deity believed to be eternal and supreme; 'Svayambhuva Manu' was born of Brahmā and Sarasvatī and represents the *Veda*s (Khan 1981, 30, 38). 'Pati' means 'Lord'; 'Prajāpati', 'Lord of Creation' is another epithet for Brahmā, and becomes a name for sons of Brahmā (Khan 1981, 39). 'Sahampati', understood as the Pali version of 'Svayampati', thus combines recognisable elements from well-known epithets for the Brahmā of Indian mythology. The early Buddhist story-tellers clearly wished the Sahampati who requested the Buddha to teach to be regarded as the same Brahmā worshipped by their non-Buddhist religious contemporaries.

Brahmā Sahampati appears in a number of stories in the Pali canon as a character who supports the Buddha. In the *Garava Sutta*, after the Buddha has considered who or what to show reverence for, and concluded that he will revere the *Dhamma*, Brahmā Sahampati arrives to give his approval to what the Buddha has said (SN I 138–140).[17] Sahampati similarly appears in order to approve of the Buddha's formulation of the *satipaṭṭhāna*s, the establishments of mindfulness (SN V 167–168 = SN V 185–186).[18] Finally there is the *Cātumā Sutta* (MN I 456–462), already referred to, in which Brahmā Sahampati reprises his role as the god who asks the Buddha to teach. I suggest, therefore, that the early Buddhist story-tellers in the Pali tradition, having told stories of how Brahmā regarded as a creator god is deluded, could not very convincingly have this same Brahmā request the Buddha to teach *Dhamma*. Instead, they invented the character of Brahmā Sahampati, whose role in several stories is sympathetic to the Buddha. However, as his name suggests, he is also representative of the Brahmā of Indian mythology who is creator and overseer of *saṃsāra*. This character has taken on a life of his own; he is no longer pompous Brahmā the pseudo-creator, but has become a Buddhist.

I suggest, however, that a trace of old Brahmā's big 'I am' remains in the words that close the Pali prose narrative on the Buddha's verse expressing his decision to teach: 'Then Brahmā Sahampati, thinking "The Blessed One has given his consent [to my request] regarding the teaching of the Dhamma", respectfully took leave of the Blessed One and vanished'. I have used Bodhi's translation (2000, 233)

17. This discourse is set under the Goatherd's Banyan tree just after the enlightenment.
18. These discourses are also located under the Goatherd's Banyan tree just after the enlightenment. One suspects a mechanical association between Sahampati and Buddha-under-the-Goatherd's-Banyan.

of the awkward Pali construction *katāvakāso kho'mhi bhagavatā dhammadesanāya*, literally, 'I am (*amhi*) one who has made the opportunity for the teaching of *Dhamma* by the Blessed One'. I have already noted that the prose makes it ambiguous whether Brahmā's request was ever necessary for the Buddha to teach; but this Brahmā's vanity won't have that.

The reason Brahmā asks the Buddha to teach, therefore, is that his merely asking suggests the superiority of the *Dhamma* to Brahmanism, since it shows this Brahmā to be a convert to Buddhism. The Buddha may not really have needed to be asked, but, just as Nāgasena told King Milinda, even Buddhas need celebrity endorsement.

BRAHMĀ'S MYTHIC ROLE AS REQUESTING TEACHING

If it seems peculiar that the early Buddhists invented a story about how Brahmā asked the Buddha to teach, there are hints in the epics that requesting teaching was one of the Brahmā's roles. If this is so, then the early Buddhists may have been borrowing this role for their own ends, while altering the myth to show Brahmā's subservience to the Buddha.

Greg Bailey has shown that the myth of Brahmā's request is also found in both the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa*. Brahmā inspires the traditional authors of the epics to teach them to their pupils after the authors have encountered problems in trying to do so orally (Bailey 1983, 175). The story appears in the *Mahābhārata* as an explanation of how, once Vyāsa had composed it, the epic first came to be recited:

> After he had completed that best of poems, Lord Dvaipāyana [Vyāsa] thought, 'In what way should I instruct my pupils in this poem, they who are present here?' And even as the sage was thinking, Lokaguru ['World-teacher'], the illustrious Brahmā, desiring the welfare of beings and as a favour to the great sage, remembered Dvaipāyana and came there. On seeing him, he [the sage] was surprised and he bowed and supplicated him with his hands. Then he arranged a seat for that one who was accompanied by all the groups of gods. When he had walked around Hiraṇyagarbha sitting in that best of seats, Vāsaveya stayed near the seat, bowing... He who has great splendour then said to Brahmā Parameṣṭhin, 'Lord, this highly honoured poem was composed by me, and, O Brahmā, it contains the secrets of the Vedas and was also named by me' ... [then he lists the contents of the poem he has just composed] ... [and Brahmā replies] 'The world will be covered with darkness, disordered in intellect, stupid, deaf and blind, if it is not illuminated by you, whose knowledge is like a fire ... With the full mooned ancient tales and the *śruti* which shines like a moon-lit night, you have dispelled mankind's darkness, O Sun of the Bhāratas. This awakening knowledge was composed with the lamp of history (*itihāsa*), striking at the obstructing defilements for the benefit of men who are like lotuses moist and cool ...' (Bailey 1983, 176)[19]

A similar myth is found in the *Rāmāyaṇa* as an explanation of the origin of the metrical form in which the epic is composed: Brahmā appears to Vālmīki and urges him to recite the epic in the *śloka* metre. Bailey analyses the three incidences of this myth and discovers a common succession of episodes, most notably

19. The myth is not found in all versions of Mhbh but is included in the critical edition as an appendix (Bailey 1983, 177).

the arrival of Brahmā after the expression of doubt about whether anyone will understand what the poet/Buddha has written/realised, and Brahmā's urging of the poet/Buddha to recite/teach for the benefit of beings (Bailey 1983, 181).

The earliest parts of the epics are usually dated to the second century BCE; therefore the story in the Pali canon is probably older. It is thus possible that the story in the epics is a deliberate re-telling of the very successful Buddhist story, re-casting Brahmā in his properly superior light. However, as Greg Bailey surmises, the story of Brahmā requesting teaching may pre-date its appearance in the epics and the Pali canon. Bailey suggests that the best way to understand the story is in terms of the motif of the *avatāra*, the incarnation of god who descends to re-establish *Dharma* when it has disappeared from the world. Brahmā represents *saṃsāra* as its creator and appears in order to present the dark and disordered fate of beings should the *avatāra* not teach. Of course, the Buddha is not an *avatāra* of Viṣṇu, and in the Buddhist telling of the story, Brahmā bows down to the Buddha, whereas in the epics the poets bow down to Brahmā; but, as Bailey notes, this change is an exact reversal, which emphasises the basic mythic motifs (Bailey 1983, 182).

There is no way of proving whether the Buddhists invented the story of Brahmā's request, or whether they borrowed the theme from a pre-existing myth in the way Greg Bailey has suggested. The latter possibility, however, would explain at a stroke the origin of this peculiar story: it is a Buddhist re-telling of a myth about Brahmā that achieves an endorsement of the *Dhamma* in the manner already described.

BEINGS AS LIKE LOTUSES

If my argument about the original meaning of the episode of Brahmā's request is correct, it follows that the episode does not correspond to any historical event, nor does it signify an inner conflict in the mind of the Buddha (though it does in part symbolize a continuous decision making process). Instead, it is a story which gives Brahmā the opportunity to endorse the Buddha's *Dhamma* over against the religion with which he was associated. There are hints of all this even in the lotuses.

The blue, red and white lotuses at different stages of growth are presented as metaphors for beings at different stages of readiness to benefit from the *Dhamma*. Realising that there were beings — like Suppabuddha the leper — ready to hear the *Dhamma*, the Buddha decided that it was worthwhile teaching. Yet the description of 'lotus flowers that have sprouted and grown under water thrive submerged without breaking the surface' is the same form of words as used elsewhere as a stock image for third *jhāna* (DN I 75 etc.; MN I 277; AN III 25). This entirely positive usage does not at all correspond to its apparent meaning here, which is that underwater lotuses resemble beings too deluded to hear the *Dhamma*. An existing image appears to have been borrowed for a new purpose — to contrast it with lotuses that have bloomed, representing those capable of hearing.

However, the 'lotus flowers that have sprouted and grown under water [and] stand right out of the water, unsoiled by it' is a stock image for the Buddha himself: 'so too the Tathāgata was born and grew up in the world, but having overcome it, lives unsoiled by the world' (SN III 140; cf. AN II 38; AN V 152; AN III

345). The image of the sage undefiled by passion like the lotus leaf undefiled by water is found in possibly early passages in the *Sutta-nipāta* (Sn 71, 213, 547, 845), and the same image is found in the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*: 'when someone knows it [*Brahman*] bad actions do not stick to him, just as water does not stick to a lotus leaf' (CU 4.14.3 trans. Olivelle 1998, 225). The lotus flowers above the water, then, originally symbolized sages, liberated beings, not just beings capable of hearing the *Dhamma*. The image of lotus flowers at different stages of growth, although it works perfectly well when taken naturally, appears to have been stitched together from previous sources.[20]

I wish to draw attention, however, to the religious background of this image. Let us assume that the early Buddhists were aware of the Upaniṣadic image of the one who 'knows *Brahman*' (the underlying truth of the universe) as being like a lotus leaf, undefiled by the world. Therefore those beings that the Buddha is said to perceive as being likely to understand the *Dhamma* – those whom Brahmā has said will understand it — are comparable to those who, in the Upaniṣadic language, know *Brahman*. Brahmā, generally speaking, is the personification of the neuter abstract principle called *Brahman* (Gombrich 1996, 21). Therefore, we find that Brahmā is recommending that the Buddha teach *Dhamma* for the sake of those beings who are knowers of him, are his own followers.

Not only has Brahmā become a Buddhist, but he is represented, through a suggestive rather than overt deployment of mythical motifs, as offering his own followers ('some who will understand') as those who will most appreciate the Buddha's teaching. What greater advocate of the Buddhist religion could the Buddhists desire than the god of their rivals? The very personification of reality as taught in the *Upaniṣads*, knowledge of whom constitutes salvation, encourages the Buddha to teach his stainless *Dhamma* to those who wish to know *Brahman*. The evidence is mounting that the episode of Brahmā's request is religious propaganda. What is most extraordinary is that the early Buddhists told this story with such skill that it became popular for its own sake, quite apart from its origin in contemporary religious rivalry.

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ABBREVIATIONS

References are to the Pali Text Society editions of Pali texts
Translations are the author's own when not otherwise attributed.

AN	*Aṅguttara-nikāya*
Bc	*Buddhacarita*
CU	*Chāndogya Upaniṣad*

20. At both Mvu III 318 and Lv 25.34 these intra-canonical references have disappeared beneath the natural meaning of the image, heightening the sense that the Pali version of the episode preserves it most originally.

DN	*Dīgha-nikāya*
Jat	*Jātaka*
Lv	*Lalitavistara*, ed. P.L. Vaidya, 1958. *Lalitavistara*. Darbhanga: Mithila Institute.
MN	*Majjhima-nikāya*
Mhbh	*Mahābhārata*
Miln	*Milindapañha*
Mvu	*Mahāvastu*, ed. Émile Senart, 1882–97. *Mahāvastu*. Paris: Imprimerie Nationale.
SN	*Saṃyutta-nikāya*
SN-a	*Saṃyutta-nikāya* commentary
Sn	*Sutta-nipāta*
Ud	*Udāna*
Vin	*Vinaya piṭaka*

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