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Beyond Class, Only Commentary: Rereading the Licchavis' Origin Story in Buddhist Contexts

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The origin story of the Licchavis, retold in two commentaries on *Nikāya* texts, has received some scant attention in the modern scholastic record, yet has usually been either cast aside as so much myth or has been recast in thematic or structural studies that align it with other tales of incest, foundling narratives, or origin stories of *gaṇa-saṅgha*s. This article argues against those interpretations and offers a thorough reread of the story as not only encoding a class hierarchy but also, in so doing, critiquing the Brahmanical class structure and the concept of *svabhāva* by birth. In this new interpretation of the story, and by reading it alongside other narratives, it becomes apparent that the origin story of the Licchavis makes sense within the context of the Buddhist commentaries where it is found. The account of their origins is not merely retelling an old story but furthering a Buddhist message.

Introduction

The Licchavis, the residents of Vesālī (Skt Vaiśālī) appear frequently as significant characters in Pāli Buddhist commentaries, as well as in later Buddhist texts. On some occasions when the Licchavis are mentioned, their interactions with the Buddha are accompanied by a story of their origin. The story appears in two commentaries attributed to the fifth-century commentator Buddhaghosa:[1] the discussion of the *Ratana Sutta* in the *Paramatthajotikā* commentary on the *Khuddaka Pāṭha* (Pj I 177–201), and the commentary on the *Mahāsīhanāda Sutta* (MN 12) in the *Papañcasūdanī* commentary on the *Majjhima Nikāya* (Ps II 19–54). It also appears in the *Shan Chien P'i P'o Sha*, the Chinese translation of the *Samantapāsādikā* (also attributed to Buddhaghosa), although the Pāli version of the same text only mentions the name of the city (Deeg 2004, 131). The story is also recounted later in the thirteenth-century Sinhalese *Pūjavaliya* (Obeyesekere 1969, 212–13). This article, however, focuses on the Pāli sources.

1. A significant number of works are attributed to the fifth-century commentator Buddhaghosa, but it would be problematic to base a study of them on the author's biography. Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli, in a letter to Ñāṇavīra, referred to 'the committee called Buddhaghosa Thera' (Ñāṇamoli 1971, 235).

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The story, in brief, proceeds as follows: The chief queen of the king of Benares gives birth to a lump of flesh and discards it in a jug which she throws in the Ganges. Downstream, an ascetic finds the lump and brings it home where it then splits in two and becomes a boy and a girl. The ascetic feeds the twins with milk that comes from his thumb. The cowherds of the area find problematic this arrangement of children raised by an ascetic, so they take the children from the ascetic and raise them. The twins begin to behave in a belligerent way towards the cowherds' children, so the cowherds procure some land from the local king, marry the twins to each other, and anoint these sibling Licchavi progenitors as rulers and founders of their own kingdom, Vesālī, which is later the head of the Vajjian confederacy. Along the way, the story provides etymological explanations for the name of the clan, the city, and their confederacy.

Scholars have given this story some consideration, however it is usually cast aside, like the lump of flesh, as so much 'myth'. In the few instances where it is taken somewhat seriously, it is analyzed in reductionist terms that see it only as an explanation of the Licchavis' royalty and lineage purity or as an extension of etymologies. A few scholars have read this story in positivist terms that try to identify historical truths about the Licchavis, while most dismiss it for that purpose since Hindu sources, such as the *Purāṇa*s and the *Rāmāyaṇa*, provide alternate stories of the founding of Vesālī, specifically that it was founded by Viśāla, a son of Ikṣvāku and a nymph, Alambuṣā.[2] These approaches to the story, however, bracket off entirely the narrative structure of the story and ignore the commentarial context, regarding it primarily as an unnecessary fanciful interpolation. Dismissing the story as 'myth' or 'fable' echoes an Orientalist concern for historical fact or philosophical thought over narrative.[3] Such approaches presume the story's appearance in Buddhist texts to be an accident and avoid trying to make sense of it in Buddhist contexts. The story could be an interpolation without meaning, this must be admitted, but the burden of the argument in this article is to show that the story offers nuanced Buddhist ideas about class and functions as an explanatory narrative in the Pāli commentaries in which it appears.

Reading the etymological phrases or the theme of purity of kinship as the primary points of the story, when in fact they are small parts, would erase the entire narrative structure that precedes the final sibling marriage. As Charles Hallisey and Anne Hansen argue convincingly, taking Buddhist narratives seriously can reveal important meanings and significant aspects of Buddhist thought elided by a focus on philosophy and historicity over story.[4] The second part of this article attempts to rectify this oversight, delineated in the first part, by giving this story a thorough rereading. The central contention is that the narrative does not merely identify the Licchavis as royalty or of pure lineage, but rather assigns them a class position through a plot line that reifies the system as a natural and inevitable function of *svabhāva*. Thus, the narrative subtly parodies the *vaṇṇa* system, tacitly offering a trenchant Buddhist

2. E.g., *Rāmāyaṇa, Bālakānda*, *Sarga* 47, vs. 11–12.

3. For a concise and clear discussion of this matter, see King 1999, 143–160.

4. See Hallisey and Hansen 1996, 309–13.

critique of the dominant Brahmanical class structure. Thematically, the story also rests on repeated motifs of protection, and the failure of protection, that extend beyond the story itself into the commentaries' discussions of the Buddha.

A close rereading of this story by itself would still not mine it adequately for the potential meanings it might convey if read as intentionally told within a Buddhist context. One issue with extant scholarship on this story, and other origin stories of the related *gaṇa-saṅgha* communities in early South Asia, including a rather similar story for the founding of the Buddha's native Kapilavatttu, is the tendency to bracket these stories off from the commentaries in which they are found. This tendency reflects a bias toward reading origin stories either as false or as original proto-nationalist myths, both approaches that consider them to be interpolations rather than aspects of commentaries, narrative chaff to be winnowed out in favour of grains of truth. Instead of taking the position that these stories detract from true historical analysis or from the philosophical meanings imparted in the commentaries, perhaps it would be fruitful to presuppose that the stories, true or not, were put there by intelligent Buddhist writers to explain or illustrate important ideas in the commentaries in which they appear. In contrast to Rabbi Hillel's famous assertion that the golden rule is the most important part of the Torah and the rest is 'only commentary', in South Asian religious traditions *everything* is commentary, and the commentaries are not to be dismissed nor assumed to be fragmented by the interruption of frivolous stories. The overarching themes of the Licchavi origin story, I argue, carry over into and colour the ensuing encounters between the Buddha and the Licchavis in the Pāli commentaries. Instead of the story being a vestigial feature, it forms an integral part of the commentarial apparatus intended to convey messages about the Buddha and the Buddhist path.

Misreading the origin story of the Licchavis

An overview of previous scholarship is necessary to suggest some of the pitfalls into which studies of this story, and others like it, have fallen, and thus to suggest the need for a corrective reading.[5] Certainly some of the scholars who have studied the Licchavi story did hit on important points worth noting at the outset. Yet most frequently, scholars who have mentioned it are quick to dismiss it as not 'history', and have little more to say about it. Bimala Churn Law has written the most in the scholastic record about this story and other origin narratives of the *gaṇa-saṅgha*s, yet he refers to them in highly negative terms: 'These stories, of course, are entirely mythical and must have grown up in very recent times, there being no evidence in the sacred canon itself to corroborate any part of the narrative. It shows at least that the Licchavis were regarded as Kṣatriyas' (Law 1924, 19). His main use for citing the story is for the folk etymology, which he suggests was the impetus behind the story, implying but not stating that the myth is Müllerian disease of language leading to 'the

5. One will have noticed that I refer to this as a 'story' or a 'narrative'. I find these to be the least value-laden terms in contrast with 'myth', 'legend', or other such dismissive options that prejudge its truth-value. On this matter of 'myths' as fundamentally 'stories', I take my cue from O'Flaherty 1988, 27–28.

fanciful explanation' that holds no historical value (Law 1924, 19). Law is frequently complimentary towards Buddhaghosa, but with reference to his many stories, he repeatedly calls them 'fanciful' and also accuses the commentator of 'mix[ing] up fact and fable without exercising any discrimination' (Law 1924, 64, 106, 118).

Many early Orientalist authors similarly apply dismissive nomenclature to these origin narratives, and marginalize the Licchavis as well. Arthur Berriedale Keith calls the stories 'legendary' in his forward to Law's book (Keith, in Law 1924, vi). Robert Spence Hardy refers to the Licchavi story as a legend, and he speaks extensively of the lack of credibility attributable to legends from India (Hardy 1880, 242; Hardy 1866, 59–70). Sylvain Lévi, in his history of Nepal, translates the story and refers to it as '*legende*' and '*conte*' (generally translatable as 'fairy-tale') (Lévi 1905, 88–9). Meanwhile, Vincent Smith argues that the Licchavis were not even Indian, but rather Tibetan (Smith 1958, xi–xxi and 47), and his writings thus appear to prevent *gaṇa-saṅgha* republicanism from being any part of the Indian heritage so as to reaffirm an Orientalist, colonial conceit about South Asian propensity towards despotism and caste structures, a topic I will return to in the conclusion.

T.W. Rhys Davids, in his book that introduced to the scholarly world the presence of ancient South Asian *gaṇa-saṅgha*s, speaks of only a few stories which he describes in terms of the 'untrained adolescence of the Indian mind' (Rhys Davids, 1903, 186). Though he cites the Licchavis, he does not retell the story. An intriguing indication of this Orientalist condescending attitude toward such stories can be found in the back of Rhys Davids's book in an advertisement leaf for the 'The Story of the Nations', the series in which the book appears. The editors write: 'In the story form the current of each National life is distinctly indicated. ... the myths, with which the history of all lands begins, will not be overlooked, though these will be carefully distinguished from the actual history' (Rhys Davids 1903). Nevertheless, the present story of the origin of the Licchavis was overlooked in this text. Furthermore, differentiating such stories from the 'actual history', the 'story' they want to tell betrays the overall positivism of these authors and their disdain for narrative. The stories are mere curios in such an analysis.

Some post-Independence Indian scholars who have addressed the Licchavi narrative also cast it off as fluff, but then try to offer new etymologies. Yogendra Mishra twice calls this story 'legendary' and twice calls it 'entirely mythical', yet offers an awkward etymology for Vesālī based on the presence of an expanse of *sāl* trees (Mishra 1962, 93–4, 110, 127–128). J.P Sharma is unduly harsh in his critique of the story in calling it a 'legend' that might have been sufficient explanation for the commentator's audience, but that it is 'fanciful, unscientific, and unscholarly', 'fantastic', and 'evidently mythological, legendary, and divorced from historical fact' (Sharma 1968, 85–93). Sharma's litany of derogatory terms is in the interest of 'real history', yet in the process forecloses any possible recovery of meaning that might be hidden in the mythical. Yet he offers his own primitivising etymology that associates the people with a clan 'totem', reading the name 'Licchavi' as derived from '*ṛkṣavi*', or 'bear' (Sharma 1968, 87–88, 92, 245). These descriptions of the story are not scholarly classification, but rather attempts to throw at the narrative every

possible denigrating term in the positivist playbook with the intent of undermining any shred of putative historical credibility.

Although the etymologies are prominent elements of the story, and may be the basis around which the story was initially constructed, an etymological origin should not be mistaken for the account as a whole. The etymologies may only be legitimators serving to make the story sound plausible. Etymological, or *nirukta*-based, interpretations are frequently found in South Asian literature, and could be later attempts at dealing with an older story or extant nomenclature. They need not be read as essential to the story itself, but nevertheless they have been the focus of much scholarship. Even in the Pāli Text Society's Pāli version of the *Ratana Sutta* commentary (though not in the *Mahāsīhanāda Sutta* commentary), the words from which the names were putatively derived are printed with greater spacing between characters, indicating a slight emphasis (Pj I 159–160). However, to conflate etymology with the essential meaning is to assume myth to be a 'disease of language', to provide a synecdochal understanding, and to commit the genetic fallacy at once. It is also to think from 'the great Anglo-Saxon tradition' that overly privileges etymologies, often incorrectly (Kellens 2009, 261–269). The etymologies in the text are undeniable, and given an emphasis on *nirukta* reasoning in South Asia they are not to be ignored, but they are only a small part of the plot.

A few scholars have tried to analyze the narrative in a more positive light as a meaningful story of origins. Romila Thapar provided one of the closest approximations to an interpretation, if only in reference to the entire group of *gaṇa-saṅgha* stories and if only in a general survey text:

> Legends relating to their [the *gaṇa-saṅgha*s'] origin[s][6] generally refer to two curious features: one was that the ruling families were frequently founded by persons of high status who, for a variety of reasons, had left or been exiled from their homeland; the other was that a claim to high status was encapsulated in a myth tracing the founding family to an incestuous union between brother and sister. Tracing origins back to such parentage was thought to prove purity of descent, and was therefore highly complimentary. (Thapar 2004, 148)

Thapar appears to think these really were origin stories told by the people they describe, but provides no evidence for such a conclusion. At least she suggests that 'purity of descent' is an important issue, thus indicating that something in the story might be valuable. The 'purity of descent' theme has been emphasized by other authors, particularly Jonathan Silk, who mentioned the Licchavi story in the context of a comparative piece that draws upon various myths, both Buddhist and Hebrew, that involve 'incestuous ancestries' (Silk 2008, n. 4).[7] Taking purity of descent as a main theme, however, gives attention only to the incestual dimension,

6. This pluralization is my correction. The original singular could imply that they all have one origin. Perhaps this is a typo, or perhaps a slip indicative of the way in which Thapar is lumping these legends together as if they comprised one metastory with various instantiations.

7. Silk also mentions the story in the context of 'child abandonment' stories. See Silk 2007, 306–07. That is another theme that I would argue is possibly present but decidedly not the central focus of the Licchavi story. It is unnecessary and potentially distorting to reduce tales to universal types in order to understand them.

one of the final elements of the story, and ignores the rest of the narrative. While certainly 'purity of descent' is part of what is important in the story, it cannot be the whole story. It does, as I will suggest, make sense within the context of the commentary of the *Ratana Sutta*, but not without the rest of the narrative.

In her explanation, Thapar singled out the 'curious features' of rejected *khattiya* (Skt *kṣatriya*) children and sibling marriage as the most pertinent aspects to discuss. These issues that strike the reader as odd when viewed outside the realm of stories (where they are quite common) have been the cause of much consternation among scholars, both European and Indian. That Thapar calls these 'curious features' reveals at once a distancing and exoticization of the story and a confusion of the shocking with the significant. Furthermore, contra Thapar, if the story is not unique in involving incest, it is does not necessarily follow that incest is the most salient point of the stories. Perhaps a detail as normally taboo as incest compels some scholars to consider it as a primary feature. The trend of exoticizing Indian myth has been well noted (Inden 1990),[8] and it appears that this story of the Licchavis has fallen prey to a similar fate. As Malinowski is reported to have said, 'I still believe that the fundamental is more important than the freakish' (in Kuper 2008, 733). Incest in royal lineages is quite common, and in Ceylon no less, where it is likely these commentaries were written (Trautmann 1973). It does not seem reasonable or profitable, therefore, to subsume the story within the categories of incest or child abandonment narratives or any other universal mythemes suggested by individual points along the plot line. Rather, it might be more salutary to consider the full narrative arc.

The focus on the purity of the Licchavi lineage, while not unimportant, also seems beset by another bias in Euro-American scholarship. The study of kinship systems was an obsession of Victorian anthropologists, and many anthropologists since, for whom it was assumed that there were both primitive and civilized forms of kinship systems and that kinship structures define entirely the workings of primitive society. Pierre Bourdieu usefully critiques this bias, and by implication the concern for incest, in the work of Claude Lévi-Strauss: 'Marriage with a patrilateral parallel cousin ... appears as a sort of scandal in Claude Lévi-Strauss's terms, only to those who have internalized the categories of thought which it disturbs' (Bourdieu 1977, 30). With respect to the Licchavi story, overly focusing on a general idea of 'lineage' and the structures of kinship, or highlighting only class identity, elides how the narrative structure of the story nuances these themes of lineage and class for commentarial purposes.

In what follows, I offer a close reading of the story of the origins of the Licchavis, and interpret it as hewing closely to Bruce Lincoln's interpretation of 'myth' as 'ideology in narrative form', that 'encodes a taxonomy', specifically a taxonomy of a class structure (Lincoln 1999, 147–149). In short, the story is far more about class structure and identity than any of the other possible subthemes. My point is not meant to suggest that South Asian thought is overly preoccupied with social hierarchy, in the way that focusing on caste and class can often seem overly determi-

8. See, particularly, Inden 1990, 8, 7–22, 49–84, and 196.

native. In contrast, I suggest that the emphasis on class serves ultimate Buddhist messages.

Narrative and identity in the Licchavi origin story

When the story's narration commences, the outer frame has already made clear that the account will tell of the founding of the city of Vesālī and the Licchavi people who dwell there.[9] As the story is told, the reader can assume this eventual outcome. It is the manner of the origin of the Licchavis that the story explicates, and that process is what I want to focus on rather than just the result: the plot and major themes may be the important matters and the city and people merely instruments for driving the plot — a MacGuffin of sorts.

The story commences with the pregnancy of the chief queen of Benares. Her offspring, a reader might immediately and correctly assume, will eventually found the Licchavi clan. That their mother was a chief queen indicates that her offspring, the Licchavis, would have a high royal status, and a son might succeed the king of Benares. This fact also connects the Licchavi dynasty with the religious and political superpower of Benares/Vārāṇasī, one of the main political superpowers of the region at the time of the Buddha. Certainly, the story establishes for the Licchavis a royal bloodline. Yet if that class identification was all there were to it, the rest of the story would seem quite unnecessary.

In the Pāli Buddhist versions of the story, one important factor of ancestry is noticeably missing: the story does not say how the queen became pregnant. Although one might assume the father was the king of Benares, the story leaves the matter ambiguous. In a later Sinhalese variant, the king is not at all the father, and instead the Licchavis are the offspring of an adulterous encounter between the queen and the sun that eventually gives rise to the *Sanni* demons.[10] Even without a preceding account of adultery, the silence here speaks volumes: by leaving blank this significant side of the Licchavi lineage, the offspring of the queen and the entire Licchavi lineage that ensues from it are imbued with a sense of ambiguity and rendered potentially problematic. They might be founded by a brother and sister, and thus there is no intermixture, but we lack complete assurance that they are full-blooded royalty.

Leading up to the delivery of the fetus, however, all indications are positive. The king performs a 'child-protection' ceremony (*gabbhaparihāram*) which could indicate that the child is, after all, his own. The queen then enters a special place for giving birth and gives birth in the morning, which timing the story specifies is the result of her having merit. According to the story, the ceremony and birth house both act to surround and demarcate a special status and place for the purpose of the protection and welfare of the mother and child. Protection, I want to argue, is a major theme in this story and in the commentary.

9. The following analysis is based on the transliterated Pāli text of Pj I in Helmer Smith's PTS edition 1978, 158–160. For a quite accurate English translation, see Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli 1960, 173–175.

10. This text is mentioned in Obeyesekere 1969, 183–186.

The story introduces the first point of conflict when, despite the protection afforded the queen, she bears a lump of flesh rather than a child resembling a golden statue as had been explicitly expected earlier in the narrative. The juxtaposition of the mother's and offspring's purity and security during pregnancy with the resultant undesirable lump of flesh impels the story's spiraling narrative trajectory of contradictions and its attempts at solutions. The lump and the children that later will grow from it were at the same time meritorious and protected, but at last they were not as expected and out of place. The lump does not immediately meet the criteria of the perfect child that a chief queen ought to have borne, and therefore poses a potential danger to her status as chief queen.[11]

To protect her rank, the queen puts the lump in a vase and casts it into the Ganges. Yet this need not be read as a complete and utter rejection. The Ganges is of no little significance as a holy river and as an important carrier of goods. Furthermore, by putting the fetus in a protective jar with a royal seal, perchance she is not giving up on it entirely. Though imperfect, dangerous to her well-being and social status, and rejected like so much refuse, the lifeless lump is nevertheless marked by her as royal property. She possibly intends it to be salvaged by someone downstream. Her act of marking is itself an act not only of identification but also of providing protection.

The narrator reports that deities also protected the vase and attached a label to it that identified its contents as the 'offspring of the king of Benares' chief queen'. Thus no one who might find the vessel would have any doubt about its contents. It has been further protected and identified, in contrast to its 'lumpen' ambiguity as dispossessed and uprooted royalty.[12] In this instance, while the king might not become aware of the incident, someone downstream could potentially discover the lump, rescue it, and protect it. Of course, there is also a logical problem with her attempt at concealment: the king performed a child-protection ceremony, so he knew of the pregnancy. Even if she argued that the child had not made it to term, it is not clear why that alone would not have been a stain on her status as chief queen. Yet nothing more is said of the queen. The story casts her aside at this point to focus on the development of the Licchavis from uncertainty to royalty. Significant here is the tension between protection and ambiguity. On the one hand, the fetus is cast aside as a lump of flesh, lacks a definite paternity, and is not at all the expected golden son. On the other hand, all treatment of the fetus by humans and deities before and after birth, with the key exception of the queen's rejection of it, are attempts to shield it from harm. It is being protected as best as possible, but remains vulnerable and ambiguous.

11. We might usefully compare this to the account of the birth of the incarnated demon Kauravas in the *Mahābhārata* as a similar lump of flesh: there, the lump of flesh is not seen as a good omen, and despite advice to the contrary, Gāndhārī insists on saving it, and the rest, as they say, is *itihāsa* since her decision precipitates war.

12. It is a happy coincidence that the word 'lumpen', defined in Marxist contexts as, according to Merriam-Webster: 'of or relating to dispossessed and uprooted individuals cut off from the economic and social class with which they might normally be identified', seems to work here for this Licchavi fetus as well. The reader will hopefully forgive the pun.

The next character to enter the story and offer protection to the fetus is an ascetic, who is himself said to be dependent upon a group of cowherds.[13] The ascetic initially thinks that the vessel containing the lump is just refuse, but he nevertheless picks it up. Having noted the royal seal and the deities' more specific label about its contents, he decides that the vase's contents might have potential for life. While what he saw was just a lump of flesh, he confirms its purity and viability by his sense of smell, specifically by what he does not smell: decay. He intuits the fetus's potential for life by *modus tollens* reasoning. The ascetic then takes the lump to his hermitage, effectively offering it protection in his home, and sets it in a clean place. After it splits in two, he moves it to an even better place. These moves up the hierarchical ladder of clean places marks its purity and need for protection from pollution, in contradistinction to its otherwise being perceived initially as pollution, and parallels the fundamental trajectory from rejection and impurity to acceptance and purity that plays itself out in this narrative. As it takes shape, it loses its uncertainty and gains distinction. Indeed, it appears here that ambiguity and impurity are conceptually interrelated and in opposition to the conjunction of identity and purity.

The lifeless but pure lump gradually yields two children: a daughter, about whom little is said, and a son like a golden statue, as had been anticipated. Once the lump becomes recognizably human children, a problem emerges: they are children living with an ascetic male who presumably renounced the householder life and has no economic or biological means to provide for infants. Nevertheless, the ascetic develops 'affection for children' (*puttasineho*), which, while not the expected state of mind for an ascetic, does successfully encourage and enable him to care for the infants. In order to provide sustenance, milk flows from the ascetic's thumb, thus transforming a non-sexual, renounced male into an entity that has female characteristics.[14] In addition, the ascetic is thereby in a position to provide food for two *khattiya*s. Although the text nowhere uses the word '*khattiya*', it is reasonable to assume that these royal-born children would have been considered to be members of that class. The priest, after all, did see the seal and label on the vase.

In an intriguing twist, an ascetic feeding royalty is the reversal of the normal order of food distribution to renouncers or Brahmin priests: such people are to be supported *by* royalty. The word translated as 'ascetic' is *tāpaso*, which could imply an ascetic or a Brahmin or both, although for Buddhism an ascetic need not necessarily be a Brahmin, but it is likely that the character described is a *samaṇa-brāhmaṇa*. While the ascetic transgresses and reverses what defines a male and a renouncer, as a Brahmin he is reverting to his householder status in which he was the purest provider of food to the lower classes. Thus, while some lines of demarcation may be blurred, other structures are solidified for the purpose of protecting these cast-out but not outcast nor outcaste orphans.

13. In the *Sanni* demon account given by Obeyesekere, this ascetic is the Buddha himself as a *bodhisattva* (Obeyesekere 1969, 184).

14. There is a parallel here to the *Mahābhārata* story of king Māndhātṛ, named so because Indra fed him with milk from his forefinger.

At this point in the story, the narrator provides two variant folk etymologies for the name of the Licchavi clan. According to some, the infants were so skinless (*nicchavi*) that their stomachs were transparent like a crystal jug. That they were without skin is yet another anomalous feature.[15] The second etymology provided is that the children's skins (*chavi*) clung (*līnā*) together. Since the narration specified that the one lump of flesh divided in two, this seems an odd description, although it could refer to their initial state prior to the split. To try to ascertain any veracity of these etymologies is to fall down a positivist rabbit hole. Usually in the story of origin genre the narrator must account for names. Yet the narrator is ambivalent about the origin of the name as indicated by the fact that two possibilities are supplied. He is himself unsure. On my reading, the etymologies were given to preempt a possible *pūrvapakṣin* or inquisitive child's question; they are a sideshow of the plot and have little to do with the overall narrative trajectory of the story or its potential meaning in the commentary.

The narrative is further propelled by the mismatched, improper household composed of the ascetic and the two infants. Although there are many instances of ascetics raising orphaned children in the literary canon of South Asia and it is not necessarily an inappropriate state of affairs, this story problematizes this ad hoc family.[16] According to the cowherds, not only did this arrangement impair the ascetic's ability to go on his begging rounds in a timely manner, but it also prevented him from attending to the children throughout the day. The cowherds tell him to do his own work (*tumhe attano kammaṃ karothā*) and offer to take custody of the children, thus both maintaining the ascetic in his activities as a renouncer while performing their duty as working people of providing for the physical sustenance of these children.

With the addition of the cowherds, the narrative has now introduced the three Brahmanical twice-born classes and delineated their ideal social roles. The children are royalty, albeit without a kingdom or family and dependent upon people of other classes to raise them. The ascetic, while not explicitly a Brahmin, is certainly a person with religious authority whose role in the community is to attend to religious matters, not matters of food or childrearing. In the presupposed class hierarchy in which the narrative operates, the cowherds would then correspond to the laboring *vessa* (Skt *vaiśya*) class who support the rest of the society with food. Yet if the ascetic is indeed a Brahmin, then he would have been the more proper educator of the children. Instead, he instructs the cowherds to educate the children, to marry them to each other, and to obtain land on which to anoint the boy as king. Already, then, we have an indication of the outcome of the story: the children of the chief

15. Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss noted the concept in India of the translucent body of the sacrificer who was considered pure when his skin touched his bones from starvation (Hubert and Mauss 1981, 113, n. 66), but interpreting these children as potential sacrificers or ascetics makes little sense in the story, unless that could be their destiny if raised by the ascetic. The audience knows this not to be the case since it is already clear that the children are going to establish the Licchavi dynasty.

16. Some of the most famous examples would be Śakuntalā, who was raised by the sage Kanva, and Rāma's twin sons, Kuśa and Lava, who were raised by Vyāsa.

queen of the king of Benares will become royalty after all, but they are still children in need of care. We also see here a class system and its ideal roles revealed as subject to probing, ambiguity, and impermanence.

Prior to the ascetic's description of the children as having merit and as royalty-to-be, the cowherds came to retrieve the two children from the ascetic with fanfare worthy of a royal procession. Perhaps the cowherds intuit the social and meritorious status of the two infants, or perhaps this is authorial intervention, but nevertheless these children are given the royal treatment even as they are taken from the care of a Brahmin ascetic to the care of cowherds. They have been relocated from the highest class status to a lower class ranking and, in effect, skipped over the class identity bestowed on them by their birth by means of a procession nevertheless befitting their birth class.

This new arrangement proves equally problematic since the two children grow up to be overly aggressive toward the cowherds' children. Their inclination toward bellicosity implicates their inherent *khattiya* nature. They are, after all, warriors whose nature it is to fight, as well as to protect by martial means. They belong neither among Brahmin ascetics nor among *vessa* cowherds. Or, if it were important to abandon dependence on strict *vaṇṇa* terminology, it would suffice to argue that their place is neither among those who have renounced the household life and were instead ascetic beggars, nor among those who were poor cowherds. Their place in the hierarchy is distinct and superior, but as children they still need care and protection.

Another etymology is provided at this point: the elder cowherds decree that because of their pugnacity, the Licchavi children are to be 'kept away from' (*vajjitabba*), from which word was supposedly derived the name of the Vajjian confederacy of which the Licchavi clan was a member. Again, it is not clear whether the account preceded the etymology or the need for an etymology engendered the story. In either case, this folk etymology is not sufficient on its own to impel the creation of the story. The theme of 'keeping away' has wider implications, specifically with respect to the maintenance of class distinctions. While the etymology might explain the origin of the name, the idea of 'keeping away' echoes the general themes of abandonment and exile that create problems for the incipient Licchavi progenitors, but also the themes of protection (in this case of the cowherd children) and the establishment of a new separate group.

To protect their own children, the cowherds relinquish the two Licchavi progenitors to another place and status that this time best befits their nature: they are made the rulers of their own land. The cowherds build a city on land obtained from a king who remains anonymous, although his necessity suggests a specific role that royalty had in the real estate market. Perhaps fittingly, it is the cowherds rather than the royalty who do the physical work of establishing the city. These cowherds also anoint the boy as king in this new space through a ceremony that ought normally to be conducted by Brahmins. Then they marry him to his sister. This marriage arrangement could be read as an odd state of affairs but given the lack of any others of equal class status (excluding the anonymous king from

whom land was obtained) the marriage is necessary to maintain class endogamy, not merely purity. Furthermore, the new Licchavis and the cowherds agree upon the rule that the Licchavis would not marry their women outside of their group, nor marry women from outside of their group. Strict class and city-state endogamy are thus established.

Scholars have noted that sibling marriage can be regarded as a means of retaining the purity of lineage, and accounts of sibling marriage among royalty is a common feature of stories about the founding of *gaṇa-saṅghas* as well as in royal lineages in Ceylon, where the commentaries in which the story is found may have been written (Thapar 2004, 148; Trautmann 1973, 174). The unidentified paternity aside, and looking instead toward the future of the dynasty, the idea of purity of lineage is relevant to the narrative that follows in one of the commentaries. Interestingly, in the story, the rules of endogamy are not stated as an internal rule but rather an external rule levied upon the Licchavis by the cowherds. Although it was stated to be an 'agreement', it was the cowherds, not the Licchavis, who enforce the pact. Perhaps this agreement is the cowherds protecting their children from anomalous, bellicose people. But it might also be read as an act of inculcation: demonstrated here is the establishment of class purity and endogamy affected from the bottom up. The Licchavi twins are taught by the cowherds to be separate geographically and socially; they are taught who they are and how to be a social class. As the story ends, they return to their proper place in the class hierarchy and take up their proper occupation according to their ancestry. The ascetic had charged the cowherds with the infants' education, and the Licchavis are taught the Brahmanical rules of class Dharma.

The story's final salvo is to attempt an etymology of the name of the city. Vesālī is described as a large city that had been expanded (*vesāli-katatta*) thrice beyond its initial size by means of building larger enclosing walls.[17] Walls indicate protection, the job of the Licchavis as *khattiya*s is to protect. Yet walls also divide, and the Licchavis are supposed to be kept separate. Throughout the story, these two themes of division and protection interweave towards a telos of the foundation of the clan that nevertheless left that clan's status on uneasy footing. The infants were one minute cast out and kept separate, and the next minute protected by some other retaining wall of class that was an imperfect situation, until they eventually reached what should be their proper place and a stasis. In the narrative, these

17. The archaeological record gives some credence to the idea that the city was thrice expanded since there is evidence that the city's defences were rebuilt three times, the last two corresponding to the Kuṣāṇa and Gupta periods (Kumar 1986, 70). If that were the origin of that aspect of the story, the text must have come into its present form at least in the fifth century CE (the time when Buddhaghosa was active and many of the Pāli commentaries were written), if not later. Yet there is an alternative to this triple expansion concept: according to the Tibetan Dulva account of Vesālī, the city was trisected into three parts that corresponded to upper, middle, and lower classes (Law 1924, 37; Mishra 1962, 93). While that trisection would be in keeping with the tripartite class structure of the narrative arc, plenty of other accounts, including the story itself, insist that the Licchavi clan was purely comprised of *khattiya*s, as was consistently the case with the *gaṇa-saṅghas*. This equivocality is yet further evidence that the historical positivist route is bound to be problematic and why I am maintaining a more literary approach.

khattiya protectors were protect*ed* until they gained their own sovereignty and royal status from which vantage they might protect themselves. While the story affirms the lineage and nature of the Licchavis as endogamous *khattiya*s, it does so by assuming essential natures of the Brahmanical classes and through a narrative that propels the Licchavis through class situations into which they do not fit until they finally return to that class befitting their birth. In short, it is not only a story that affirms class identity or lineage purity, but rather a story that reaffirms the entire taxonomic structure of class divisions and specific class essences. It further insists on these classes not necessarily in terms of group identity, but more precisely in terms of group destiny: it naturalizes class as given at birth and functions as a robust illustration of class nature as *svabhāva*, as constituted in the endless cycle of rebirth. Yet the account also suggests that the royal class is not entirely proficient in their nature of providing protection. The Brahamanical structure, the notion of a class essence, begins to break down on this reading, opening space for a Buddhist interpretation.

Critiquing class, changing comparative contexts

In scholastic explorations of the Licchavis' origin story, it has most commonly been read along with various other *gaṇa-saṅgha* origin stories, and while that might be productive for thinking about the story as an actual origin myth, it is not the only avenue to pursue. If indeed the story both encodes and critiques a class taxonomy, then perhaps it might more profitably be read in conjunction with stories with a similar theme. One tale that mirrors the narrative arc of the Licchavi story is the story of Jaṭila that occurs in the *Dhammapada* commentary, a text which is also sometimes attributed to Buddhaghosa.[18] An obvious similarity is the motif of the unwanted baby in Benares thrown in a vessel that is tossed in the Ganges. The child is the illegitimate offspring of a daughter of a treasurer. Named Jaṭila, he is then raised by a Buddhist laywoman. The laywoman sends him to join the Saṅgha, but the monk in charge of him comes to realize that the boy did not belong in a religious order but rather in the realm of commerce. The monk apprentices him to a layfollower who rears the boy as his own son. Yet it soon becomes apparent that the boy is a far more capable and savvy businessman than his father. The father weds the adopted son to his daughter, which is almost similar to sibling marriage. Finally, Jaṭila becomes a treasurer, exactly like his grandfather (Dhp-a IV, 214–16).

After a sequence of not finding a place to fit in, Jaṭila comes to fill the role that defines the true essential nature of his family at birth, just as the Licchavi twins eventually revert to their true essential nature as *khattiya*s.[19] On the surface, the story of Jaṭila lacks the robust theory and narrative taxonomy of class structure featured in the Licchavi story. Further, while it does include a foundling episode and a semi-incestual episode, these are not the central points of the story. The marriage of Jaṭila to his foster-sister is unimportant in the narrative, and the foundling

18. For the English (translated somewhat oddly in places), see 'Jaṭila' in Burlingame 1921, 325–29.

19. The trajectory brings to mind P.D. Eastman's classic children's story *Are You My Mother?* in which a baby bird mistakes various objects for its mother, before finding its actual mother.

aspect serves only to highlight that identity is inborn and survives abandonment by one's family. Both the Jaṭila story and the Licchavi story insist that everyone has a true essential nature given at birth that is indelible and inevitable, and that even if lost it will be found. The Licchavi and Jaṭila stories thus trade upon a concept of class essence that conflicts with Buddhist thought but accords with orthodox Brahmanical thought. This apparent mismatch suggests that something significant might be at stake in these stories.

Once we consider the commentarial context of the story of Jaṭila, its meaning becomes clearer. Jaṭila's tale occurs in the *Dhammapada* Commentary (*Dhammapadatthakathā*) specifically under the commentary on verse 416 of the *Dhammapada*, in which it is declared that the one who abandons and has extinguished craving (*taṇhā*), 'him I call a Brahmin' (Carter and Palihawadana, 1987, 411). The sixteenth chapter of the *Dhammapada* rehashes this last line in each verse, making the argument that a 'Brahmin' is not defined by his birth but by his actions, that one who follows the *dhamma* is superior to one who follows a more Brahmanical sense of *varṇa-dharma*. Thus, the story of Jaṭila is not merely an entertaining tale about a treasurer, a legend told for no reason, but forms part of the explicatory apparatus for that particular verse. The commentary later clarifies that Jaṭila was thrown into the water for seven successive births due to an inadvertent curse in a past life as a goldsmith. In his last birth, after he becomes a treasurer, he finds other treasurers with far more wealth and therefore he renounces the world to become a monk and eventually an *arahant*. In the final salvo of the story, the monk Jaṭilathera announces that he has given up craving for wealth, and when his nonattachment to wealth is doubted by the members of the Saṅgha, not only does the Buddha proclaim Jaṭila truly free of craving, but it is at that moment he recites the aforementioned *Dhammapada* verse 416 (Dhp-a IV 221). The commentary implies that Jaṭila, by giving up his craving, is indeed a 'Brahmin', and thus inborn class or occupational essences are secondary to following the teaching. Identity nomenclature, too, is revealed as malleable. It might be possible, then, to consider the Licchavi origin story as similarly offering a tacit critique of the class system.

In so far as the Licchavi story deals with the problem of class, it would be informative to compare it with a Buddhist account that focuses quite exclusively on that topic, namely the *Aggañña Sutta* (DN 27; AS). And if that text's discussion of class is indeed a satirical parable, as Steven Collins reads it, then perhaps there is latitude to interpret the Licchavi story in a similar vein. Found in the *Dīgha Nikāya*, the *Aggañña Sutta* provides a story of the origin of the classes in the context of the Buddha's discourse with two Brahmin converts, Vāseṭṭha and Bhāradvāja.[20] In the story in the *Aggañña Sutta*, the Buddha asks the converted Brahmins how their kinsmen regard them and the erstwhile Brahmin monks report that their class-mates abuse them and insist that Brahmins are the best class. The Buddha responds that while

20. I should also note also that the *Aggañña Sutta* is repeated in the *Visuddhimagga* (XIII 44 and 52) of Buddhaghosa. Therefore, even if Buddhaghosa was not the actual writer of the commentaries in which the story of the Licchavis is found, despite the fact that those texts are attributed to him, we can at least conclude that the commentators who included the Licchavi story likely knew of the *Aggañña Sutta*.

Brahmins say they are born from Brahmā's mouth, they are in fact born from the vaginas of Brahmin women, thus undermining the logic of the Brahmanical Vedic creation myth. The Buddha proceeds to state that people of all classes can perform both moral and immoral actions, and that the monks of the Saṅgha come from different classes. Yet they can all say they are 'born from his [the Buddha's] mouth, born of the *dhamma*', the Buddha being he whose body is the *dhamma* (DN III 82–4; AS 5–9), and who stands in contrast to the Brahmanical concept of *dharma* and its focus on class (Collins 1993, 338–348).

As the *Aggañña Sutta* continues, it appears to establish a new hierarchy that posits the royal *khattiya*s at the top of the class structure, but followers of the Buddha atop even them. This overturns the usual hierarchy in which Brahmins are superior to *khattiya*s and not only validates the importance of royals but devalues Brahmins in order to leave a void of religious authority that Buddhist adepts can then fill. The Buddha illustrates the superiority of the *dhamma* by insisting that the king of Kosala respects the Buddha as superior to himself. Further, the Buddha concludes with the words of Brahmā Sanaṃkumāra, with whom the Buddha agrees: 'For those who rely on clan, the *kṣatriya* is the best in this world; (but) the person endowed with wisdom and (good conduct) is the best in the whole universe' (DN III 97; Collins 1993, 348). The Brahmins are not mentioned explicitly as defined by the latter description, thus the account suggests a subtle reordering by positioning the superiority of royalty within the class system while establishing the superiority of the Buddha, not Brahmins, atop the class system.

Also notable is that the origins of classes as recounted in the *Aggañña Sutta* begins not with birth from a primordial being (as in the Ṛg Vedic *Puruṣa Sūkta,* 10.90), but with language, i.e. discursivity, as appellations attributed to the classes by other people (DN III 93–5; AS 21–25; Collins 1993 345–347). This point is also made, as Collins mentions, at the outset of Buddha's response to the same two Brahmin converted monks in the *Vāseṭṭha Sutta,* which appears in the *Majjhima Nikāya* (MN 98) and the *Sutta-nipāta* (Sn 3.9). On that occasion, the Buddha argues that all living beings (*jāti*) have attributes inherent in their birth, but this is not the case for humans among whom the classes are a matter of designation based on occupations (Collins 1993, 318; Sn, 117–120). Classes, in other words, are social conventions, but for those who know of them as designations, they can be surpassed.

Looking back now at the stories of the Licchavis and Jaṭila, it is apparent that the stories suggest realities in tension with ideal Buddhist doctrine, and thus they establish the truth of Buddhism over and against the Brahmanical tradition. Collins reads the *Aggañña Sutta* as a parable, a send-up of Brahmanical norms that elevates Buddhism to a superior role:

> I take it to be a story whose *raison d'être* is to present a Buddhist-ascetic hierarchical model of society, offered with satirical and ironic wit in the manner of a moral commentary and with the discursive form of an aetiology. (For this reason I prefer to call its story of origins a parable rather than a myth). ... Buddhist monasticism and morality order the logic of values and social relations: Brahmanical values are satirized and kingly values subordinated, albeit that neither the Brahmanical hier-

> archy of discrete social classes nor kingship are contested as 'social facts' (in the Durkheimian sense). (Collins 1993, 317)

In a similar way, the Licchavi story does not deny that kingship is a social fact, nor does it deny that karmic precedents might precipitate a natural tendency for the Licchavis to return to their royal roots. And yet, the fact that they are 'made' royals by the cowherds suggests the contrived nature of class. That they are completely incapable of protecting themselves reads as a subtle critique of their ultimate power. The narrative trajectory that not only spits out these royals as royals but reifies the entire class structure suggests that the story works as a centrifuge to spin out the various types. Indeed, there is perhaps a striking resemblance between a certain Buddhist depiction of Hindu obsession with class and an Orientalist and demeaning tendency to depict caste in India as an inherent centrifugal force that can lead to problems (Inden 1990, 55–66). Like the Orientalists, the commentator inscribing the story of the Licchavis appears to be viewing the class system as an 'unchanging (substantialized) agent' (Inden 1990, 83), and imbuing it with a sense of malignant stagnancy. This story, like the *Vāseṭṭha Sutta,* views caste as a natural order of the world, a centripetal force based on occupation, an argument made by modern Indian apologists for the caste system, such as Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan (Inden 1990, 72). Yet on my reading of the story as critically otherising, it appears rather as a pointed critique of Brahmanical social values as something that must be surpassed. Caste here is both centripetal and centrifugal, to use Inden's terms, the former in terms of its naturalness and centrifugal in terms of its potential opposition to the classless ideal of the Saṅgha. Although the Licchavis are *khattiya*s, and thus the best when it comes to classes in this world according to this rubric, the story implies that they are, despite their adherence to *dharma* qua 'duty/nature', nevertheless inferior to the Buddha and the *dhamma* qua 'teaching'. Such a critical reading of the story becomes even more evident when read within the context of the Buddhist commentaries in which it appears.

Putting myth back into commentary

If the Licchavi origin story might be read as encoding a class taxonomy that is in turn a satire of class norms, then this implies that this story, rather than a silly myth that was either told by the Licchavis about themselves or a narrative built on incest or etymology, might actually contain a message in support of Buddhist teachings. This argument can be corroborated by attempting to read the story as supportive of the interpretive agenda of the commentaries in which it appears. With just a little prodding it becomes evident that the Licchavi story foreshadows the commentaries that follow it by providing an implicit critique of the class structure, rejecting the concept of *svabhāva*, and depicting the Buddha's superiority to *khattiya*s as the most efficient protector and powerful being.

The potential for a commentarial and contextual reading is readily apparent if we read the Licchavi story as prefiguring the Buddha's enunciation of the *Ratana Sutta* as recounted in the *Paramatthajotikā* commentary on the *Khuddaka Pāṭha.* The

themes of separation, class, and protection indicated in the earlier analysis of the story bleed into the account of the Buddha that follows the Licchavi narrative. The commentator gives a verse as a means of introducing his commentary on the *Ratana Sutta*: 'By whom 'twas spoken, when, where, why/ Are matters that we next descry/, Whereafter, when the time falls due,/ We comment on the meaning, too' (Ñāṇamoli 1960, 172; Pj I 158). The commentator proceeds to answer his own questions: it was spoken by the Buddha at Vesālī for the benefit of the Licchavis for the purpose of ridding the city of plagues (Pj I 158). The commentator insists that in commenting on the *sutta*, he follows 'the Ancients' (*porāṇas*) in first narrating the story of Vesālī (Pj I 159). It is not specified who these ancients were. It would be far too hasty to conclude that it refers to the Licchavis themselves. Despite the similarity in sound, it is doubtful that the *porāṇās* mentioned corresponds to the Hindu *Purāṇas* since those texts give rather different accounts for the founding of the Licchavis. The *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* says that Viśāla was the son of Tṛṇabindu and Alambuṣa (Law 1924, 35). According to various other *Purāṇas*, it was Viśāla who founded the city (Jha, 1970, 14). In any event, by implying that recounting the story is either handed down or told according to a fixed pattern, the commentator both historicizes the story and seems to disregard it. Additionally, in the text the commentator twice uses the word '*kira*', which has the sense of 'so it was told', which further puts the story into question. But if the story is questionable, why include it? Why the need to follow some precedent of including the tale in a commentary? If we ascribe intentionality to the inclusion of the Licchavi story, perhaps there *is*, after all, a significance pertaining to the message in the commentary on the *Ratana Sutta*.

Having recounted the story, the commentator details the events that necessitated the Buddha's utterance of the *Ratana Sutta*. Vesālī had been a flourishing city, but at some point during the Buddha's lifetime it was plagued by famine, 'non-human beings' (*amanussā*), and disease (Pj I 161). The citizens sought help and protection from the king. They initially suspected the purity of the king's lineage. Yet the lineage proved pure, a fact that the story's endogamy rules corroborate. One could argue that the unclear attribution of fatherhood and the fact that the fetus was originally born as a lump indicate an impurity or at least something amiss. Yet if one insists upon a simple reading of the origin story as proving purity of ancestry, its inclusion would seem to have been a lot of work to prove a small point in the commentarial context. It does show that the Licchavis are pure, but it also paves the way for the Buddha to intervene, proving his superiority to these purely descended Licchavis. Yet that interpretation still ignores quite a bit of the account's plot. The themes of protection surface yet again in the story of the Buddha's intervention.

In discussing whom to seek for help, some of the Licchavis mention the Buddha as 'mighty and powerful' (*mahiddhiko mahānubhavo*), and it is recommended that he be called upon (Pj I 161). The Licchavis then bring the Buddha to town, from Rājagaha, with much fanfare. He travels by way of the Ganges, and upon his arrival in Vesālī he causes the rain to sweep away all the corpses that had piled up, and he also makes it rain lotuses. With even more fanfare than the royal treatment given the Licchavi progenitors during their custody transfer from the ascetic to the

cowherds, the citizens escort him to Vesālī. Once there, a cohort of deities arrives, which frightens away most of the demons. Next, the Buddha instructs Ānanda to learn the *Ratana Sutta,* which the latter then recites while performing a protection ceremony around the city accompanied by the Licchavi princes. All ills are thus cured, demons dispersed, and the people prepare the city hall and a throne for the Buddha from which he teaches the *Ratana Sutta* to them all. The famous *Ratana Sutta* not only extols the three jewels of the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Saṅgha, but also discusses them in terms of that in which Buddhists should take refuge: its major theme is the possibility of offering protection. Furthermore, in the context of the commentarial story, it is suggested that, when used properly, the *sutta* is effective in providing protection against demons and disease. It is explicitly a *sutta* for the 'protection' (*rakkham*) (Pj I 165), to perform a safeguard ceremony (Ñāṇamoli 1960, 165), that we are told from the beginning is specifically for the protection of a city (*purārakkham*) (Pj I 157), or, according to a variant reading, the protection of others (*parārakkham*).[21]

The theme of protection carries over from the Licchavi origin story to the Buddha's interaction with them. Once again, the Licchavis are in trouble; once again they need protection. In this instance, however, the protection ceremony performed under the Buddha's aegis by means of the *Ratana Sutta* is successful, unlike the beginning of the Licchavi story where a similar ceremony is performed by the king of Benares for his queen. Furthermore, the Buddha's *Ratana Sutta* protection ceremony reestablishes the city founded by the Licchavi twins. Most significant in the commentarial context is that where the king of Vesālī fails as a protector is with respect to matters that a royal would be ineffective against without the assistance of religious specialists: malignant, demonically-induced disease, famine, and demon infestations. A king can protect a land from invasion through militaristic means, and he can avoid famine and disease through worldly means, such as agricultural support and doctors, but he needs the skillful intervention of someone more powerful in protecting the city from ill-tempered spirits. The necessity of the Buddha, the sequel in the Licchavi's narrative of needing protection, implies that sometimes a mere king is insufficient, and what emerges is an additional level to the class taxonomy supplied in the origin story. There is a need for a religious leader who is beyond and superior to the traditional tripartite class structure, namely the Buddha. The Buddha appears now as the ultimate protector, royalty cum religious figure, a *Cakravartin* and a *Dharmacakravartin*. The commentary insists that he alone can effectively protect a city from supernatural events and beings. This notion is further illustrated through the building of a throne for him in the city hall: he is treated as a royal *khattiya*, but a qualified one. While the story of the origin of Vesālī defines the essential nature of a *khattiya*, it is the Buddha who emerges here as an uber-*khattiya*, the epitome of not just royal but religious protection, the jewel in which one ought to seek refuge. The story of the origin of the Licchavis, in leaving open this possible lack of protective ability yet suggesting a class taxonomy, sets the stage for the commentator to laud the Buddha and proclaim the superior

21. See Ñāṇamoli, 1960, 172 n. 2 for the mention of the variant reading *parārakkham*.

value and ability of Buddhism for confronting problems and intervening with the supernatural.

The Licchavi origin story also appears in the commentary on the *Mahāsīhanāda Sutta* (MN 12), the Discourse on the Lion's Roar (Ps II 19–21). The commentary begins with a full recounting of the story. There are only minor variations in the introductory frame, such as the *porāṇās* not being mentioned. Upon the conclusion of the story, the commentary states that the Buddha was staying outside of Vesālī. Sunakkhatta, a Licchavi, departed from the Buddha's compound and went to the city hall where he, in brief, proclaimed that the Buddha lacked superhuman abilities, and merely taught a reasoned way to eliminate suffering.[22] Sāriputta overheard this and reported it back to the Buddha. The Buddha then embarked on a lengthy discourse refuting these charges. Having stated that Sunakkhatta was merely angry, the Buddha showed how Sunakkhatta had missed the point. The Buddha then listed his ten powers, which are not supernatural abilities but instead powers of understanding. Having recited these, he says, 'The Tathagata has these ten Tathagata's powers, possessing which he claims the herd-leader's place, roars his lion's roar in the assemblies, and sets rolling the Wheel of Brahma' (Ñāṇamoli 1993, 69). Finally, the Buddha asserted that unless the Licchavi renounced his views, he would surely be carried off to hell (Ps II 21).

If we again presuppose that the story was recounted here for a didactic reason, as a parable, there are various ways in which it seems to fit the context. While the carryover of the theme of protection is missing here, the story does appear to make a case for something being quite wrong or lacking among these Licchavis, something amiss in this lineage, as the account depicts a Licchavi as unintelligent. On a slightly satirical reading, of primary significance in this context is the idea of the Buddha as intellectually superlative in contradistinction to a Licchavi who, having been stereotyped in the story as locked in Brahmanical ideas of social structure, is also stuck in Brahmanical ways of thinking, and does not see the Buddha as a superior being. The story paints the Licchavis as stuck in *saṃsāra* and ignorance, and the Buddha as their protector and superior who offers a path beyond.

Yet the thrust of the story rests on the question of just what sort of religious figure the Buddha is and what sort he is not. Sunakkhata the Licchavi is depicted as doubtful of the Buddha's abilities, and rather insists on the Tathāgata's mundane humanity. This is to suggest that the Buddha is nothing particularly special. In his rebuttal, the Buddha does not necessarily establish himself as supramundane, but rather emphasizes his powers of insight. Perhaps most poignantly, the Buddha expresses his supremacy with a rather royal 'lion's roar' that shakes assemblies, thus establishing himself again as a superior sort of *khattiya*. Partaking of the 'lion roar' trope is to assert oneself as royalty, a conqueror, but in a very different manner. In short, the piece seems to suggest that the lion's roar of knowledge can surpass the lion's roar of *khattiya*s speaking in governmental assemblies. This moment echoes the sorting and class motifs of the Licchavi story's narrative by insisting

22. The critique seems to foreshadow modern, particularly Euro-American, attempts to craft a secularized Buddhism.

again on the Buddha's nature as the *Dharmachakravartin*, who surpasses even the royals by partaking of the best of both worlds, royalty and religious authority. Again, the narrative arc of the Licchavi story points toward a constricting nature of class identity and destiny, but in the commentarial story that follows, the Buddha shows a possibility of class transcendence that runs counter to that narrative.

Conclusion

The point of my analysis has not merely been to protect or rescue the Licchavis and their origin story from the turbulent river of history or from scholars who have ignored it or not sufficiently nurtured it. Instead, what I hope to have advocated here is more general: the need to take seriously the narratives in commentaries not for what they might say about our own curiosities or projects, (e.g. historical veracity and mythological tropes), but for what they might indicate as explicatory stories for Buddhist attempts to convey philosophical, ethical, and sociological messages. These stories are part of the commentaries and should be read as additional commentarial material. I hope that a reminder of this importance of narrative in commentary might spur fruitful studies in this direction by taking other narratives in the commentaries as examples. Despite a perduring Euro-American tendency to look askance at stories, the Pāli Buddhist commentators certainly used a lot of them, and thus we might consider them as less vestigial and more integral to the commentarial tradition.[23]

Beyond these projects of interpretation that have occluded the story for scholastic enterprises, historicist commentators have recycled the Licchavis and related *gaṇa-saṅghas*' republican form of government for Indian nationalist purposes, responding directly to colonial accusations that these states could not have been authentically Indian. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan referred to these states during debates leading to the drafting of the Indian Constitution, mainly to persuade small principalities to join the new nation,[24] but post-Independence nationalist scholars went further to make a case that a valorized governmental form usually associated with Western antiquity is also native to India. For example, A.S. Altekar draws explicit comparisons between *gaṇa-saṅghas* and the Greek and Roman city-states, and in a transparent footnote adds that Vesālī was about the same size as Sparta (3360 sq/m), and the Śākya republic about the same size as Athens (1060 sq/m) (Altekar 1958, 112–13, 122). In his book *Hindu Polity*, published in 1967, around the same time as the Hindu right-wing began gaining power in Indian politics, K.P. Jayaswal not only insisted on the Indianness of the Licchavis but their Hinduness as well (Jayaswal 1967, 174–177). He argues against the many theories that they are of Tibetan or Iranian origin, grants them 'orthodox' status within

23. For example, in her recent book, *Lives of Early Buddhist Nuns: Biographies as History*, Alice Collett mines the commentaries for stories of Buddhist nuns that she reads as evidence for social history. The author carefully specifies that the historical context of the commentaries is separate from that of the Pāli Canon, thus showing similarities and differences between the depictions of women in various categories of texts.

24. For a discussion of Radhakrishnan's speech, see Chakrabarty 2000, 10. For the full speech given to the Constituent Assembly on 20 Jan. 1947, see B. Shiva Rao *et. al.* 1967, 15.

Brahmanical tradition, and even goes so far as to say that the Greeks who supposedly describe the Licchavis as handsome in some texts would not have said the same of 'snub-nosed Mongoloids' (Jayaswal 1967, 177–179) that Smith made them out to be. Jayaswal avoids Buddhist sources for these states and instead argues that the Buddhist Saṅgha was founded on the republican and decidedly Hindu tradition of the *gaṇa-saṅgha*s. Yogendra Mishra, earlier mentioned as a modern etymology-maker, edited an entire volume in 1985 entitled *Homage to Vaishali,* the existence of which book, not to mention its contents, reveals an attempt to resuscitate Vesālī's glory as an exemplum of India's cultural heritage. This nationalist appropriation of the *gaṇa-saṅgha*s is evident in a more recent publication by a BJP politician who implicitly accuses the British and Muslim invaders of destroying India's ancient republican and democratic traditions (Jagmohan 2005, 22–23, 393).[25]

These nationalist writers thus craft a narrative of lost ancient Indian republicanism and co-opt the Licchavis as symbolic of an autochthonous republican propensity to be recovered in the modern Indian nation. What is most intriguing in this nationalist myth is how it mirrors the origin narrative of the Licchavis in Buddhist sources. Like the Licchavis' story, this nationalist myth suggests that Indians once had a glorious essential nature, but due to circumstances beyond their control they lost their knowledge of that status and government. Cast out on the river of history, India was protected by foreigners or outsiders to the group, who were nevertheless unsuited to the task, much like the ascetic and cowherds. Now India has its sovereignty and can return to its natural status, its political *svabhāva*, much like the Licchavis, abandoned children of Benares, became royalty in their own kingdom. Yet the modern political commentarial use of the Licchavis could also be read in contrast with the Buddhist commentarial context. Instead of the Licchavi story as an indication of the entrapment of class *svabhāva* and the superiority of the Buddha, the Licchavis and their ilk become evidence that a particular modern political structure is indeed part of the Indian *svabhāva*, thus valorizing that very essentialism of identity that the commentarial context, at different points, confirms or insists upon its transcendence.

With that in mind, I want to close with a suggestion that it is not just philosophy or sociology but identity and alterity that are at stake in the story. If Martha Nussbaum has argued that '[l]iterary form is not separable from philosophical content, but is itself, a part of content' (Nussbaum 1990, 3), and Hallisey and Hansen have expanded on this notion to show the significance of narrative for ethics in Buddhism (Hallisey and Hansen 1996), the example of the Licchavis reveals one further wrinkle in the application of narrative. The taxonomy encoded in the story and commentary shapes another taxonomy of an in-group (Buddhist) and a group that is not entirely alien but still deemed problematic (Licchavis, laypeople, a Brahmanical class-restrictive society). The Licchavi story identifies others in need of protection while separating and glorifying a purer Buddhism and Buddha from others who are less awakened. Therefore, it would be wise in future research

25. This strange book caught my eye while wandering the library bookstacks. As with jars floating in the Ganges, one never knows what one might find in the dusty corners of a library.

on the place of narrative in Buddhist commentaries and literature to note not only how narrative forms part of philosophy or ethics, but also how narratives such as these in the Pāli commentaries might shape Buddhist selves and cast out or taxonomically incorporate non-Buddhist or quasi-Buddhist others.

Abbreviations

AS	*Aggañña Sutta* as translated in Collins 1993, cited by section number.
Dhp-a	*Dhammapadatthakathā*: *The Commentary on the Dhammapada,* Vol. IV. Ed., Henry C. Norman. London: Luzac and Co. (for the Pali Text Society), 1970.
DN III	*Dīgha Nikāya: The Dīgha Nikāya,* vol.III, J. Estlin Carpenter. London: Luzac and Co. (for the Pali Text Society), 1911.
MN	*Majjhima Nikāya*: *The Majjhima Nikāya,* 3 vols. V. Trenkner and R. Chalmers. London: Luzac and Co. (for the Pali Text Society), 1888, 1898, 1899.
Pj I	*Khuddakapāṭha* Commentary (*Paramatthajotikā*): *Khuddaka-Pāṭha and Commentary*. Ed. Helmer Smith. London: Pāli Text Society, 1978.
Ps II	*Majjhima Nikāya* Commentary (*Papañcasūdanī*), Part II: *Papañcasūdanī Majjhimanikāyaṭṭhakathā of Buddhaghosācariya. Part II, Suttas 11–50.* Ed. James Haughton Woods and Damodar Dharmananda Kosambi. London: Pali Text Society, 1928.
Sn	*Sutta-nipāta*: *Sutta-Nipāta.* Ed. Dines Anderson and Helmer Smith. London: Pali Text Society, 1965.

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