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# Did the Buddha Have a Sense of Humour?\*

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This paper is the result of digressions accumulated over the years. Some years ago I was reading a collection of some of the early *Upaniṣads* that are said to predate the arising of Buddhism. The root Buddhist doctrine is “conditioned co-production” [*pratītya-samutpāda*]. It is the “root” doctrine in the sense that all other doctrines can be said to follow from it. As the Buddha himself is reported as saying, “One who sees conditioned co-production sees the Dharma; one who sees the Dharma sees conditioned co-production.”<sup>1</sup> Basically, *pratītya-samutpāda* states that all things come to be in dependence upon other things. Nothing has independent, autonomous existence. So too with the teachings of the Buddha: they too must arise in dependence upon conditions, and part of those conditions must be the religious culture that predated the Buddha. Although there are no direct references in the early Buddhist texts to the *Upaniṣads*, reading through these texts, as well as the *Ṛg Veda*, I noticed that there were some seemingly humorous allusions, especially cosmological ones, that showed the Buddhists were not only aware of at least certain aspects of these pre-Buddhist texts, but also that they possessed a satirical as-

\* *Editor's Note.* This article originally was given as the Numata Chair address at McGill University during the Fall semester of 2001 when Robert Morrison held this prestigious post. The oral nature of this lecture has largely been retained in the published version.

pect.<sup>2</sup> Writing this paper has given me the opportunity to gather together some of these “accumulated digressions” in one place.

### Importance of the **Pāli** Texts

Although no one these days doubts the historicity of the Buddha, that the Buddha did live in northern India during the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE, when western scholars first began to study Buddhism some thought the Buddha to be an entirely mythical figure. For example, two famous 19<sup>th</sup> century scholars, Senart and Kern, saw the Buddha as a solar god.<sup>3</sup> One reason for this view is that some of the first Buddhist texts studied belonged to the later *Mahāyāna* tradition, where the Buddha is often presented as a kind of cosmic Buddha with incredible magical powers, and the setting is often mythological rather than historical, with all kinds of beings in attendance, rather like a scene from *Star Wars*. It was only in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, when texts in Pāli preserved by *Theravāda* tradition were studied—the *Theravāda* tradition being the Buddhism of Sri Lanka, Burma, and Thailand—that the Buddha emerged as an actual historical figure. Therefore, if one wants to know anything about the historical Buddha, for example, whether he had a sense of humour or not, then it is to these texts that one must turn.

The texts that interest us here are called *suttas*, or “dialogues,” which are usually set out in the form of a didactic dialogue between the Buddha and some interlocutor, sometimes one of his own disciples, or a Brahmin priest, or a religious mendicant, a king, or an ordinary villager. Parallel texts from early schools other than those preserved by the *Theravāda* tradition do survive in Chinese translation, but unfortunately they are a rather neglected field of study. But fragments of parallel texts from other early schools are still being discovered in the deserts of central Asia. These fragments are in fact the earliest examples we possess of any Buddhist texts. And, interestingly, studies so far have shown that where a fragment has been identified with some *sutta* from the *Theravāda* tradition, there is little, if any, difference between them. The message is exactly the same.

## The Buddha Teaches

Buddhism begins with the Buddha's attainment of *bodhi*, "Awakening." The truth that the Buddha discovered, the Dharma, is according to these texts, "deep" [*gambhīra*], "difficult to understand" [*dudassa*], "subtle" [*nīṇa*], and "beyond the sphere of reason" [*atakkāvacara*]. It is beyond the "reach of concepts" [*paññatti-patha*], the "reach of language" [*nirutti-patha*], the "reach of designations" [*adhivacana-patha*], and the "sphere of [intellectual] understanding" [*paññāvaraṇa*]. From this we can surmise that the Buddha's Awakening did not directly provide him with any new concepts, teachings, or messages from some other world or being—there is no Buddhist version of those stone tablets engraved with the commands from the beyond directed at us mere mortals. According to the texts that deal with the Buddha's Awakening, what the Buddha "awakened" to was a "seeing with knowledge things as they really are" [*yathā-bhūta-nāṇa-dassana*]. As for the rest of us unawakened beings, and in the Buddhist tradition this includes all the "gods" [*devas* and the higher *brahmās*], including the god who thinks he created the universe—we shall meet him later—we are reckoned as seeing the world as it is not,<sup>4</sup> as if we were enraptured in some vivid dream. Indeed, our delusions are so entrenched, that, as we will see, the Buddha initially thought it would be futile trying to communicate to the world what he has discovered.

Although what the Buddha awoke to is said to be beyond the reach of language and concepts, when he eventually decided to tell the world what he had discovered he nevertheless had to use words, concepts, metaphors, idioms, etc. in order to communicate. And as his Awakening did not provide him with any new language or concepts, he had to use the words, concepts, metaphors, and idioms that already existed in the cultural environment in which he taught. These provided the only *means* of communication available to him. The Buddha's teaching, referred to as the Dharma,<sup>5</sup> developed in the context of an on-going debate with the religious culture of his time, within which there were two main factions.

Firstly, there was the *śramaṇas*, or “mendicants.” These mendicants had, like the Buddha, left home and entered the forests of northern India in search of “the meaning of life,” usually grouping themselves around some particular teacher. The Buddha himself was such a *śramaṇa*. Before his Awakening he studied under other teachers, but finding them wanting eventually set out on his own. After his Awakening, he became one of these teachers with his own group of disciples.

Secondly, there was the main group the Buddha debated with, the brahmins [*brāhmaṇas*], who were roughly the equivalent of the orthodox religion at the time. The brahmins accepted the Vedas and the Upaniṣads as revealed truth [*śruti*], their sort of Bible. And although the mendicants, like the Buddha, all had very differing views on the nature of reality, they were united by the fact that they rejected the religious authority of the brahminical Vedas and Upaniṣads. The mendicants were the unorthodox, or, as one modern scholar calls them, “the drop-outs” (see Williams 2000, 9).

Given that this is the cultural environment that Buddhism grew out of, it would obviously be helpful for us to understand the religious and cultural ideas and beliefs that existed at the time, as it is these ideas and beliefs that form the context within which the Buddha’s teachings developed. And it also follows that whenever the Buddha uses a specific idea in his teaching, we will gain a better understanding of what that idea meant to those to whom the Buddha was addressing if we have some knowledge as to how that idea was understood by them.

Unfortunately, that cultural environment, especially that of the religious ideas of his fellow *śramaṇas*, is no longer accessible to us. However, we do have the Brahminical texts, the Vedas and the early Upaniṣads. And when we look at some of these texts they not only shine a little light on how some of the Buddha’s doctrines would have been understood by those who heard them, but we also see that the object of some of the Buddha’s discourses is to have a bit of fun, mainly at the expense of the brahmins. But first two examples of the way Buddhism adopted current ideas for its own doctrinal ends.

## Examples

### Doctrinal

#### a) *Karman*

Buddhism, like some of the other śramaṇic traditions, inherited the notion of an impersonal universal law of cause and effect from the earlier ideology of Vedic ritualism. Within the Vedic tradition, ritual acts were performed by brahmin priests in order to bring about certain consequences. Given the nature of the universe, if a ritual “action” [*karman* (karma)] was performed correctly according to the liturgical texts, then an apposite “fruit” [*phala*] must follow of necessity. While Buddhism accepts the idea that the universe is so structured that certain actions gave rise to appropriate consequences, it rejected what it saw as the empty formalism of Vedic ritual action. It ethicises the notion of karma by shifting the crux of the action from the merely external and formal to the internal and conative. In Buddhism, action or karma becomes “intention” [*cetanā*].<sup>6</sup> Intentions, or acts of “will,” having their source in “non-greed” [*alobha* or *arāga*], “non-hatred” [*adosa*], and “non-delusion” [*amoha*],<sup>7</sup> expressed in thoughts, words and deeds, will have consequences that are, generally speaking, pleasant and conducive to spiritual welfare, while those actions rooted in greed, hatred, and delusion will have the opposite consequences. Thus, rather ironically, Buddhism regards the ritual actions of the Vedic sacrifices, which were thought to produce happiness, as in fact producing the opposite: they are expressions of greed (the desired ends were usually material and mundane), hatred (animals were killed), and delusion (wrong views of how the universe actually is).

#### b) *Anātman*

One of the most well known Buddhist doctrines is that of *anātman* [Pāli, *anattā*] or “no-self,” a doctrine that seems at first sight to be counter intuitive. But in order to understand what “no-self” implies we have to look at the context in which this doctrine arose, and ask what it probably meant to those who heard it at that time. Although the term *ātman*, when used in everyday parlance as a reflexive pronoun can mean “myself,” “himself,” “herself,” etc., when used as a substan-

tive noun it denotes the unchanging, immanent essence of all and everything, the central doctrine of the Upaniṣads. It is the existence of some such eternal essence, a kind of “soul,” that is being denied in the Buddhist doctrine of *anātman*. Buddhism, through its doctrine of *anātman*, is not claiming that our empirical self does not in fact actually exist, it is denying that there is such a thing as an *ātman* or “self” in this sense of some ultimate, permanent essence to anything, including ourselves. In Buddhism, therefore, there can be no such thing as an imperishable, divinely created soul. Even *nirvāṇa* has no unchanging essence—it too is *anātman*.<sup>8</sup>

Although there are no direct references to the Upaniṣads in the early Buddhist texts, the following quote from the *Alagaddūpama Sutta* or “Discourse on the Parable of the Water-Snake”<sup>9</sup> makes the connection with the Upaniṣadic doctrine clear, and gives us the first glimpse of Buddhist humour. According to the Buddha, some claim...

That which is the world, that is the *ātman*. After dying I will become permanent, lasting, eternal, not liable to change...he regards this [world] as: “this is me, this I am, this is my *ātman*.”

With a certain irony, the Buddha asks:

Monks, what do you think. If people carried off the grass, twigs, branches and foliage in the Jeta Grove, or burned them, or did what they like with them, would you think: “People are carrying us off or burning us or doing what they like with us?”

“No, Lord.”

What is the reason for this?

“Because that is neither our *ātman*, nor what belongs to the *ātman*.”  
[M i. 141]<sup>10</sup>

Here the Buddha is being somewhat satirical about the Upaniṣadic doctrine of the *ātman*: if “everything here is what the *ātman* is,” which is what the Upaniṣads claim,<sup>11</sup> then the *ātman* must also be these twigs and branches lying around the Jeta Grove. Therefore if someone burns

these twigs and branches they must be burning the *ātman*. Therefore the *ātman* is subject to the same frailties as any other mundane phenomenon. However, this is hardly a serious attempt to refute the Upaniṣadic notion of the *ātman*, but sounds more like an “in-house” joke.

Satire

a) *The Brahmin Tikaṇṇa* [A i. 163]

In a dialogue named after its the main interlocutor, a brahmin called Tikaṇṇa, the subject discussed is that of the *Tevijja* or “Three Knowledges,” which within the Brahminical tradition is essentially knowledge of the three Vedas: the *R̥g Veda*, *Sama Veda*, and *Atharva Veda*. Here the brahmin Tikaṇṇa comes to visit the Buddha and sings the praises of those brahmins who possess these “Three Knowledges,” as brahmins who know these three Vedas are the most exalted of brahmins. The Buddha listens to this, and then gives Tikaṇṇa his version of the “three knowledges”: firstly, that the Buddha, with powers gained through meditation, can remember his previous lives as far back as he wishes; secondly, that he can see with his “divine sight” beings dying and being born according to their deeds; and thirdly, that he knows that all those conditions that constitute unawakened existence have been totally destroyed in him, and that he knows the path to attain this state of Awakening.

But what is the joke here? Well, it is in the brahmin’s name, and we have to go back to how these three Vedas first became known in the world for the context.

At the beginning of the cosmos, the Vedas are revealed to the ancient “seers” [*r̥ sis*] through their hearing them. The term for “hearing” is *śruti*, and *śruti* becomes the term for “revealed text,” i.e. those texts—the Vedas—were revealed to the ancient seers by their hearing them, which were then passed on orally from one generation to the next. The faculty of hearing is the ear, so obviously ears play an important part here. And what does this name “Tikaṇṇa” mean? Well, it actually means “Three-Eared”! So this brahmin is so attuned to the three Vedas that he actually has a ear for each Veda. He has a *R̥g Veda* ear, a *Sama Veda* ear, and an *Atharva Veda* ear! In a footnote to

the title of this dialogue the bewildered translator comments: “I have not met this name (‘triangular’ or ‘three-eared’) elsewhere.” The reason being, of course, that it is not a real name, but a joke name.

*b) The Brahmin Uggatasāra [A iv. 41]*

A brahmin called Uggatasāra is about to sacrifice “five hundred bulls, five hundred steers, and as many heifers, goats, and rams.” He asks the Buddha whether this mass slaughter of living beings is going to be “very fruitful, very advantageous,” and whether the Buddha would teach him “so that it may be for my happiness, my welfare for many a day.”

What the Buddha tells him is that even just with the intention of setting up such a sacrifice, he will in fact accrue the exact opposite to what he thinks will be the karmic result of the sacrifice: he will reap only suffering for himself and others as a consequence of his priestly duties.

But again the satire is in the Brahmin’s name. The brahmins were viewed by the Buddhists as a greedy lot. After these sacrifices they had the choicest serving of the sacrificial food, and are said to have gorged themselves on it. So if you eat too much food, what is the result? You get fat. And what does “Uggatasāra” means? Well *uggata* means “extended” or “large,” and *sāra* just means the physical body. So putting these two terms together we have a brahmin literally named “large or extended body.” In other words, in very non-politically correct language, we have the dialogue of “fatso the brahmin.”

Again hapless translator says of Uggatasāra in a footnote: “He does not seem to be mentioned elsewhere.” So we don’t have to look far for this reason: it’s not a real brahmin name, but, no doubt, one invented by the Buddhists to satirize the brahmins.

*c) The Jains [M i. 91]*

One day the Buddha, after rising from his evening meditation, went to visit the Nigaṇṭhas (the Jains), and finds them practicing the austerity of “continuing standing,” where one stands still and never sits down. The effect of this practice is to create “painful, racking, piercing feelings.” The Buddha, somewhat puzzled, asks them why they are doing



this practice. He is told that through causing themselves so much pain, they will exhaust all their evil karma from the past, and will not create any future bad karma. In this way they will destroy all their karma, and be liberated from suffering.

The Buddha's response to this is to say: "those who were murderers and bloody handed evil doers in the world, when they are reborn among human beings [they obviously] go forth into homelessness as Nigaṇṭhas"!

*d) Sāriputta [D iii. 99ff.]*

Sāriputta, one of the Buddha's foremost disciples, approached the Buddha one day and said: "It is clear to me Lord, that there never has been, never will be and is not now another mendicant or brahmin who is better or more awakened than the Buddha."

The Buddha replies:

You have indeed spoken boldly with a bull's voice, Sāriputta, you have roared the lion's roar of certainty. How is this? Have all the Arahant Buddhas of the past appeared to you, and were the minds of all those Buddhas open to you, so as to say: "these Lords were of such virtue, such was their teaching, such their wisdom, such their way, such their liberation?"

"No, Lord."

And have you perceived all the Arahant Buddhas who will appear in the future?

"No Lord."

Then Sāriputta, have you not spoken boldly with a bull's voice and roared the lion's roar of certainty with your declaration?

Sāriputta, somewhat deflated, then tries to save face by recollecting all his wonderful experiences with the Buddha. And the Buddha, having made his point, lets the matter rest there.

*e) Cosmology*

In Buddhist cosmology, the universe has many levels of existence, from the depths of the hells up to the most refined and subtle forms of heavenly existence, each with its own class of beings. And this universe, which is understood to be beginningless, cycles through vast periods of creation and destruction. This is the backdrop to what follows.

In “Pāṭika Sutta” from the *Dīgha Nikāya*,<sup>12</sup> we find the Buddha having a discussion with the wanderer Bhaggava, and gives his account of why some people come to believe in a creator God, drawing on some material from the Vedas and Upaniṣads.

There are...some recluses and brahmins who declare as their doctrine that all things began with the creation by a God [*issara*], or by a Brahmā. I have gone to them and said: “Reverend sirs, is it true that you declare that all things began with the creation by a God, or by a Brahmā?” “Yes,” they replied. Then I asked: “In that case, how do the reverend teachers declare that this came about?” But they could not give me an answer, and so they asked me in return, and I replied:

There comes a time, friends, when sooner or later after a long period, when this universe devolves. At this time of contraction, most beings are reborn in the realm of “Streaming Radiance.” There they dwell, mind-made, feeding on rapture, self-luminous, moving through the air, glorious—and they stay like that for a very long time.

But the times comes, sooner or later after a very long period, when this universe begins to re-evolve. In this expanding universe an empty palace of Brahmā appears. And then one being, from the exhaustion of his life-span or of his merits, falls from the realm of “Streaming Radiance,” and arises in the realm called “Brahmā’s Palace,” which is empty. There that being dwells, mind-made, feeding on rapture, self-luminous, moving through the air, glorious—and he stays like that for a very long time.

“Then in this being who has been alone for so long there arises unrest, discontent and worry, and he thinks: ‘Oh, if only some other beings would come here!’ And other beings, from the exhaustion of their life-span or of their merits, fall from the realm of ‘Streaming Radiance’ and arise in the realm of ‘Brahmā’s Palace’ as companions for this be-

ing. There they dwell, mind-made...and they stay like that for a very long time.

Here we have a rather satirical parody of an account of creation found in the *Bṛ hadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*,<sup>13</sup> where it is said: “In the beginning this world was just *ātman* alone in the form of a Person [*puruṣa*]. Looking around he saw nothing but himself.” It then goes on to say: “He found no delight, because one who is alone finds no delight. He wanted a companion.” So, due to his loneliness, what he did was split into two, one half becoming male, the other female. They copulated, and creation as we know it, with all the various creatures, is born. He goes on to say: “I alone am the creation, for I created all this.” This is a good example of the Buddhists taking bits of the Upaniṣadic account of creation, and using it to tell their own story. But here the Buddhist version departs from that in the Upaniṣads, in order to send it up:

And then, friends, that being who first arose there thinks: “I am Brahmā, the Great Brahmā, the Conqueror, the All-Powerful, the Lord, the Maker and Creator, Ruler, Appointer and Orderer, Father of All That Have Been and Shall Be. These beings were created by me. How so? Because I first had this thought: ‘Oh, if only some other beings would come here!’ That was my wish, and then these beings came into this existence!” But those beings who arose subsequently think: “This, friends, is Brahmā, Great Brahmā...Father of All That Have Been and Shall Be. How so? We have seen that he was here first, and that we arose after him.”

The story the goes on to tells us that one of those beings is eventually born in this world, and goes forth from the household life into the forest as a mendicant. And one day, whilst in deep meditation, he recalls his previous existence with Brahmā, but recalls none before that. So he concludes: “That Great Brahmā, the Conqueror...he made us, and he is permanent, stable, eternal, not subject to change, the same for ever and ever. But we who were created by that Brahmā, we are impermanent, unstable, short-lived, fated to fall away, and we have come into this world.”

So here we have the Buddhists making a bit of a parody of one of the Brahminical creation myths, but turning it around for their own

ends so as to ridicule the notion of a creator god. The Buddha is not denying that there is a god who actually thinks he is the god of creation. Nor is he denying that in higher states of meditative consciousness a mediator might indeed actually meet this being. But, from the Buddhist point of view, this being who thinks he is the creator is actually a grossly deluded being who will one day die and pass over into some other form of existence, just like any other unawakened being. Thus the creator god of the brahmins is deemed by the Buddha to be an old fool—even an object of ridicule.

*f) Brahmā Sahampati [Vin. i. 5f.; S. i.137f.]*

The Indian religious traditions, being more overtly eclectic than their western counterparts, tend to incorporate the “opposition” by giving them a role in their own system. So we find Brahmā finding his role as Brahmā Sahampati in the account of the Buddha’s Awakening.

Just after the Buddha gained Awakening under the bodhi tree, it is said that when he considered communicating his discovery to the world, he thought better of it:

Enough now with trying to teach  
What I found with so much hardship;  
This Dharma is not so easily understood  
By those oppressed by lust and hate.

Those fired by lust, obscured by darkness,  
Will never see this abstruse Dharma,  
Deep, hard to see, subtle,  
Going against the stream.

Thinking it would be wearisome and fruitless task trying to teach, “his mind inclined to living at ease, not to teaching the Dharma.” The light of the Dharma has arisen in the cosmos for the first time in millions of years—so the Buddhist tradition would have it—and the whole spiritual future of the cosmos, at least until the next Buddha appears in the far distant future, hangs in the balance. And it is at this spiritual juncture that Brahmā comes to the rescue. Reading the Buddha’s mind, Brahmā exclaims, “Alas, the world is lost! Alas, the world is to perish, in that the mind of the Tathāgata, the Arhant, the Perfectly

Awakened One, inclines...not to teaching the Dharma.” In a state of distress, he exits the *Brahmā* world and appears in front of the Buddha. There, having “knelt down with his right knee on the ground [and having] raised his joined hands in reverential salutation towards the Blessed One,” he pleads with the Buddha to “teach the Dharma...There are beings with little dust in their eyes who are falling away because they do not hear the Dharma. There will be those who will understand the Dharma.”

The satire here is rather obvious: we have the creator god of the brahmins pleading with the Buddha to teach otherwise we are all lost! For us in the West to appreciate the audacity of this we have to imagine the god of the main monotheistic religions of the West getting down on one knee in order to beg the Buddha to teach, with the implication that in doing so he is saving the world from deluded beings like himself!

*g) Kevaddha Sutta [D i. 211ff.]*

Here a monk has a deep burning question. He wants to know “where the four great elements cease without remainder,” i.e. the elements of earth, fire, water and air.<sup>14</sup> Through his meditation he enters the realm of the “Gods of the Four Great Kings,” and asks them where these four great elements cease without remainder. As they don’t know, they send him “up stairs,” as it were, to the next higher realm, to the “Realm of the Four Great Kings.” And, of course, he gets the same negative answer there, and is told to try the next realm up in the cosmic hierarchy. So he goes up through the realms of the “Thirty Three Gods,” the “Yāma Gods,” the “Contented Gods,” the “Gods who Delight in the Creation of Others,” the “Gods who are Masters of the Creations of Others,” and eventually to the “Gods of the Retinue of *Brahmā*.” Although these gods don’t know the answer they ask him to wait around, as the Great God *Brahmā*, who resides a little way further up this cosmic hierarchy,<sup>15</sup> will be making an appearance soon. “When he arrives,” they say, “you can ask him.”

So when the Great *Brahmā* finally shows up, the monk pops his question to him: “where do the four great elements cease without remainder?” But all *Brahmā* can say is:

Monk, I am *Brahmā*, Great *Brahmā*, the Conqueror, the Unconquered, the All-Seeing, All-Powerful, the Lord, the Maker and Creator, the Ruler, Appointer and Orderer, Father of All That Have Been and Shall Be.

So the monk replies: “Friend, I didn’t ask you that, I asked where the four great elements cease.” But all *Brahmā* can do is repeat himself. After the monk asks the question for the third time, *Brahmā* finally relents. He takes the monk aside, out of hearing range of the other gods, and says:

Monks, these gods believe there is nothing *Brahmā* does not see, nothing he does not know, nothing he is unaware of. That is why I did not speak in front of them. But monk, I don’t know where the four great elements cease without remainder. And therefore monk you have acted wrongly, you have acted incorrectly by going beyond the Buddha and going in search of an answer to your question elsewhere. Now monk, you go to the Buddha and put this question to him, and whatever answer he gives, accept it.

And so he goes off to see the Buddha and gets an answer to his question, leaving *Brahmā* to carry on with his charade. Interestingly, the Buddha’s answer is:

Where consciousness is without attribute [*anidassana*], boundless, and all-luminous.

*h) Aggañña Sutta [D. iii. 80ff.]*

The dialogue begins with two ex-brahmins, who have become Buddhist monks, complaining to the Buddha that they are now being reviled and abused by the brahmins: “The brahmin caste [*vaṇṇa*] is the highest caste, the other castes are base; the brahmin caste is fair, other castes are dark; brahmins are purified, others are not, the brahmins are the true children of *Brahmā*, born of his mouth, born of *Brahmā*, created by *Brahmā*, heirs of *Brahmā*. And you, you have deserted the highest caste and gone over to the base caste of shaveling petty ascetics, servants, dark fellows born of *Brahmā*’s feet.”

This refers to the creation myth of the *R̥g Veda*,<sup>16</sup> where the “Cosmic Man” [*puruṣa*] is dismembered in the cosmic sacrifice. His mouth becomes the brahmins, his arms become the warrior caste [*kṣatriya*], his thighs become the merchant caste [*vaiśya*], and his feet become the serf caste [*śūdra*].

The Buddha then rather ironically says, but “these brahmins have forgotten their ancient tradition when they say this. Because we can see brahmin women, the wives of brahmins, who menstruate and become pregnant, have babies and give suck.” And yet these womb-born [*yonija*] brahmins actually talk about being born from Brahmā’s mouth, being the highest caste, etc. These brahmins misrepresent Brahmā, tells lies and earn much demerit.

The Buddha then satirizes this brahmin creation myth by replacing Brahmā with himself and the Dharma, saying that any *śramaṇa*, *brāhmaṇa*, *deva*, *māra*, or any other class of being who has faith in the Buddha, can say, regardless of the caste they were born into: “I am the true son of the Buddha, born of his mouth, born of the Dharma, created by the Dharma, and heir of the Dharma.”

What then follows is another satirical account of how the world came to be. And again we have the story of how the world contracts, beings are mostly born the realm of “Streaming Radiance,” where they dwell, mind-made, etc. for a very long time. But here the sequence changes. The world then begins to re-evolve, and those being from the realm of “Streaming Radiance” fall from that realm and fly around the newly evolving earth, “mind-made, feeding on delight, self-luminous,” etc. At this time earth is nothing but “one mass of water, and all was darkness, blinding darkness. Neither moon nor sun appeared, no constellations or stars appeared, night and day were not distinguished, nor months nor fortnights, no years or seasons, and no male and female, beings being reckoned just as beings.”

This is no doubt taken from the cosmological myth of the *R̥g Veda*, where it says that, in the beginning: “There was neither the realm of space nor the sky which is beyond...There was no distinguishing sign of day nor of night...Darkness was hidden by darkness in the beginning; with no distinguishing sign, all this was water.”<sup>17</sup>

The Buddhist creation story continues: “And sooner or later, after a very long period, savoury earth spread itself over the waters where those beings were. It looked just like the skin that forms itself over hot milk as it cools. It was the colour of fine ghee or butter, and it was very sweet, like pure wild honey.”

This is no doubt taken from one of the creation myths from the *Br hadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, which begins with Death, from whom the first element, water, springs. The text then goes on to tell us that “Then a milk-skin congealed on the waters and became earth.”<sup>18</sup>

The Buddhist version continues:

Then some being of a greedy nature said: I say, what can this be? and tasted the savoury earth on his finger. In so doing, he became taken with the flavour, and “desire” [*taṇhā*] arose in him. Then other beings, taking their cue from him, also tasted the stuff with their fingers. They too were taken with the flavour, and desire arose in them...And as a result their self-luminance disappeared...the sun and moon appeared, night and day were distinguished, months and fortnights appeared, and the year and its seasons. To that extent the world revolved.

If we return to the *R̥g Veda* creation myth, we have: “Desire [*kāma*] came upon that one in the beginning; that was the first seed of mind.” Creation then follows. In both versions it is “desire” that gets the cosmos evolving, but in the Buddhist version this is clearly a “fall,” it is “bad,” whereas in the Brahminical version it is good.

The Buddhists then go their own way at this point. As these once-luminous beings carry on stuffing themselves, their bodies are said to become coarser and coarser, until differences in *vaṇṇa* [Skt. *varṇa*] appear. So here we have a play on the term *vaṇṇa*, which can mean “colour, complexion, good looks,” as well as its social meaning of “caste”—the four *vaṇṇas* are the four castes, each having their own colour: the brahmins are of course “white,” the warriors “red,” the “merchants” yellow, and the serfs “black.” In this dialogue, the ones who are good-looking despise the ugly ones, and become arrogant and conceited. These, of course, are the brahmins. And so the “fall” continues until we have all the nasty things created by arrogance, conceit, unregenerate desires, stupidity, etc. So, what the Buddha appears to



be saying here is that although the Buddhists and the Vedas see “desire”—*kāma* for the Vedas, *taṇhā* for the Buddhists—as the source of creation, whereas for the Vedas it is a good for the Buddhists it is the root source of unawakened existence, *nirvāṇa* being the very cessation of *taṇhā*. Thus all the Vedic creator god creates is *saṃsāra*, which for the Buddhists is characterized as *dukkha*, “suffering and unsatisfactoriness,” and the only worthwhile goal of existence is to put an end to it, i.e. attain *nirvāṇa* and become totally liberated from the machinations of *saṃsāra*.

At this point we venture outside the Theravāda tradition, and look at a few other examples of Buddhist humour.

*i) Stories that Illustrate how Deep the Kleśas Are.*<sup>19</sup>

As Buddhism sees it, we carry over from life to life deeply ingrained habits and tendencies, the consequences of our previous relentless and habitual actions. Some are reckoned to be so deeply ingrained that even highly spiritually advanced beings are not entirely free from them. The following stories illustrate how deep these tendencies—here called *kleśas* or “afflictions”—are.

Śāriputta, who we saw above was one of the Buddha’s chief disciples, was said to have been a serpent in a previous life, and to have retained the spiteful stubbornness of that venomous creature. He was once invited by a householder for an especially delicious meal. Later, the Buddha chided him about eating such rich food. So Śāriputta, being the stubborn creature he was, promptly vomited it up, and swore never again to accept an invitation to someone’s home. Nothing would make him go back on his decision.<sup>20</sup>

Another famous disciple of the Buddha was Mahāmaudgalyāyana, who is said to have excelled all others with his magical powers. In some previous lives he had been a monkey, and in certain situations his past monkey habits could get the better of him: on occasions, whenever ever he heard some music, he would jump and skip about.<sup>21</sup>

In a previous age, there was a monkey who filled the Buddha’s bowl with honey. In a following life he was born into a brahmin family, where, because of his previous generosity to the Buddha, was given as much honey as he wished. In fact, he was named Madhuvasiṣṭha,

“Honey-Most-excellent.” When he grew up, he left home, became a Buddhist monk, and attained Arhantship. Nevertheless, his past monkey habits also used to re-emerge, and one would often find him perched on walls, and swinging from trees.<sup>22</sup>

Another famous disciple of the Buddha, *Mahākāśyapa*, an ex-*brahmin*, is said to have retained the severity and pride of his caste, and was famous for his extreme asceticism. There are two stories that illustrate his ascetic severity. *Mahākāśyapa*, when he went out on his daily begging round, always visited the poorer homes, so that the poor would get some merit from offering him food. Once, when out on his begging round in a leper colony, a leper put some food in his bowl. Unfortunately, the leper’s finger fell off and landed in the bowl with the food. But *Mahākāśyapa*, being the great ascetic, obeyed the rule of eating whatever was put in one’s begging bowl, and ate the finger without “any loathing thought.”<sup>23</sup>

Being such a great ascetic and disciple of the Buddha, *Mahākāśyapa* was viewed as a powerful “field of merit,” i.e. any offering made to him will bring much “fruit” to the giver. It is said that the *devas* were always trying to make him offerings so that they could gain the merit needed to maintain their divine status. But *Mahākāśyapa* used to shun them. One day Śakra, king of the *devas*, disguised himself as an old weaver and managed to trick *Mahākāśyapa* into accepting alms from him. When *Mahākāśyapa* found out he’d been duped, he admonished Śakra. Śakra begged forgiveness, but when he heard that in spite of his deception he would still get the merit, he let out an exclamation of joy. And when the Buddha heard this, he sympathized with Śakra.<sup>24</sup> However, despite his severe ascetic practice, his previous lives could also catch him out. Once, when hearing some divine music, he is said to have leapt up and began dancing about to the astonishment of his fellows.<sup>25</sup> *Mahākāśyapa*, in some previous lives, had been a dancer.

There was an *Arahant* called *Gavāmpati* [“cow-lord”], who had the detestable habit of bringing up his food and re-swallowing it. In other words, he behaved like a ruminant. When people complained of this to the Buddha, he replied, “What do you expect? He’s been a cow in his previous five-hundred lives!”<sup>26</sup>

Finally, there is the story of the Pratyekabuddha who used to make himself up like a disreputable woman. But what can one expect when he has been a prostitute in so many past existences.<sup>27</sup>

Although the Buddhists were clearly capable on occasions of having fun at their own expense, it does seem there are limits. For this example, we return to the Theravāda tradition.

*j) No Joking! [Vin. iv. 196]*

One hot day a brahmin brought a milk drink to a group of Buddhist monks dwelling in the forest. The monks then proceeded to drink the milk “making a hissing sound,” no doubt a sign of their satisfaction. One of their number, a “certain monk who had formerly been an actor,” commented, “It seems that this whole Order is cooled.”<sup>28</sup> But some of the other monks, the “modest” ones, did not find this funny, and went about saying “How can this monk make a joke about the Order?”

When the Buddha got to hear about this, he summoned the guilty monk:

Is it true, as is said, that you, monk, made a joke about the Order?

‘It is true Lord’.

Then the Buddha rebuked him:

How can you, foolish man, make a joke about the Order?

Then the Buddha addressed the Order:

Monks, a joke should not be made about the Buddha, the Dharma, or the Saṅgha. Whoever should make one, there is an offence of wrongdoing.

Then, as a sort of after thought, the Buddha adds another rule of training: “One should not drink making a hissing sound.”

So it seems that whilst it is fine to make jokes about other groups outside the Buddhist fold, there should be no jokes about the Buddha, the Dharma, or the Saṅgha!

## Conclusion

Did the Buddha have a sense of humour?

We cannot know for sure as we do not know whether these texts contain the literal word of the Buddha. We know that these texts were sometimes edited and added to by various redactors through the ages. But we can assume that as the commentaries on these texts, which were written at some later date,<sup>29</sup> completely miss the satire at the expense of the brahmins in these texts, this satire must have been there before the commentaries were written. Not only that, but the commentaries, which are clearly ignorant of the brahminical cosmological myths, also take these Buddhist cosmological satires as fact. This has led one Buddhist scholar to wonder whether the subsequent development of Buddhist cosmology was based on this lack of knowledge.<sup>30</sup> They failed to understand that these particular texts were the result of the Buddha's or other early Buddhists' sense of humour, and instead were the result of the Buddha's omniscience! So is the development of Buddhist cosmology a result of the later tradition taking satire as literal truth?

But what about the joke made by the monk recorded in the Vinaya? Is it the case that whilst the Buddha approved of making fun of the brahmins, he forbade any humour that involved himself, his teaching, or his Order? Or was this a rule made by a later humourless committee rather than the Buddha?

We can see that at least from the point of view of the later tradition, some of the Buddha's leading disciples were somewhat lampooned. But again, one can understand that the intention was not so much to make fun of these leading disciples, but to demonstrate just how deep the forces of *saṃsāra* go. Thus they can be seen as in-house teaching devices: if even these great disciples could be caught out by their past actions, how much more so us!

This leaves us with the larger question of the place and purpose of humour, especially satire, between different religious groups. One can certainly imagine, today, in the case of some religious groups, that if another group or individual satirized their founder or some other prominent religious figure, then the bloody hand of vengeance would rise up. But is this because they are defending “truth” or “honour,” or simply because they are full of that most irreligious of emotions, hatred, which would be the Buddhist view? This question as to the place of humour in religion obviously needs further study.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> M i. 190-91. Whether one takes “Dharma” here in the sense of the Buddha’s teaching or as “Truth and Reality,” this statement holds. Another text, the *Śālistamba Sūtra*, goes further and equates *pratītya-samutpāda* not only with the Dharma, but also the Buddhahood (28).

<sup>2</sup> This, of course, has been noted by others. Probably the best recent account is Gombrich 1996.

<sup>3</sup> See J. W. de Jong 1989, 26-27. Kern even thought that the twelvefold *nidāna* sequence of conditioned co-production represented the twelve months of the solar year, and that the six “heretical” teachers, who were contemporaries of the Buddha, were the planets.

<sup>4</sup> Buddhism says that all unawakened beings (*puṭhujjanas*, literally “the many folk”) in fact see the world “upside down” (*vipallāsa*), seeing what is “impermanent” (*anicca*), “foul” (*asubha*), “without unchanging, substantial essence” (*anattā*), and “painful and unsatisfactory” (*dukkha*) as permanent, beautiful, having an unchanging essence, and pleasurable.

<sup>5</sup> The term *dharma* has a wide range of meanings, the most general being any phenomenon whatsoever. But the two main Buddhist meanings are “Dharma” as Reality, and “Dharma” as the Buddha’s teaching. Although the Indian scripts that Sanskrit and Pāli were written in do not possess capital letters, it is usual for the term to be capitalized when used in these two main senses in roman.

<sup>6</sup> “Monks, I say that ‘action’ [*karman*] is ‘intention’ [*cetanā*]. By intending one performs action through body, speech, and mind” (Aiii. 415). To grasp the full meaning of this we have to remember that *cetanā* includes desiderative, conative, and cognitive aspects.

<sup>7</sup> These three grammatically negative terms are usually taken to imply their more positive counterparts: generosity, kindness, and mental clarity.

<sup>8</sup> Vin. v. 86.

<sup>9</sup> M i.130ff.

<sup>10</sup> No doubt some intellectually astute brahmin would not have acquiesced so easily as the Buddha's audience did here.

<sup>11</sup> For example, see *Br hadāranyaka Upaniṣad* IV.5.7.

<sup>12</sup> i.1ff.

<sup>13</sup> 1.4.3.

<sup>14</sup> This is another way of asking about *nirvāṇa*.

<sup>15</sup> But is rather low down in the overall cosmic hierarchy, which is all within *saṃsāra*.

<sup>16</sup> x90.

<sup>17</sup> x129.

<sup>18</sup> 1.2.

<sup>19</sup> The following examples are taken from Lamotte (1974, 91-104). However, Lamotte makes no reference to these being humorous. In quotes are provided the original sources from Lamotte.

<sup>20</sup> *Vinayas* of the Mahiśāsakas and Sarvāstivādins; *Mahāvibhāṣā*.

<sup>21</sup> *Mahāyānasaṃgraha-upanibandhana*. This, of course, is a Mahāyāna text.

<sup>22</sup> *Sarvāstivādvīṇayabhāṣā*.

<sup>23</sup> *Milindapañha*, 395; *Theragāthā* 1054-1056.

<sup>24</sup> *Udāna* iii. 7.

<sup>25</sup> *Mahāyānasaṃgraha-upanibandhana*.

<sup>26</sup> *Sarvāstivādvīṇayabhāṣā*; *Mahāvibhāṣā*.

<sup>27</sup> *Mahāyānasaṃgraha-upanibandhana*.

<sup>28</sup> Although the term for "cooled" here is *sītikata*, which means "made cool or tranquil," one of the meanings of *nirvāṇa* is recovering from a hot fever. *Nirvāṇa* also means "extinguishing"—the extinguishing of the three fires of greed, hatred, and delusion. Perhaps the monks remark alludes to this nirvāṇic "cooling."

<sup>29</sup> According to Norman (1983, 119), "there is evidence that some parts of the commentaries are very old," and that "A critical examination of the commen-

taries suggests that no additions were made to them after the first century A. D.”

<sup>30</sup> Personal communication from Professor Richard Gombrich.

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