

Mythology as Meditation: From the Mahāśudassana Sutta to the Sukhāvāṭivṃyūha Sūtra*

I. MYTHOLOGY AND THE STUDY OF THE PĀLI NIKĀYAS

The seventeenth sutta of the Pāli Dīgha-nikāya, the fourth sutta of the *Mahā-vagga*, is known in the manuscripts as the *Mahāśudassana suttanta* or *sutta* (MSud).¹ It tells of a king — Mahāśudassana — who lived long ago, of his fabulous city — Kusāvātī — of his fabulous possessions, of how he built a palace, entered that palace, and eventually died. In fact this king, we are told, was the *bodhisatta* in a distant previous life, and his city stood on the site of Kusinārā where the Buddha will shortly die. The whole sutta is thus a Jātaka, which links King Mahāśudassana, his city, and his death to the Buddha and his death.

The language, content, and structure of the *sutta* make its mythic qualities manifest.² There is nothing here that the modern mind would be tempted to read as history. And while two items of the technical theory of Buddhist meditation — the four *jhānas* and the four *brahmavihāras* — feature in passing, a reader might observe that the *sutta*'s thirty pages (in the PTS edition) contain no explicit mention of such “classic” items of Buddhist teaching as the eightfold path, the four truths, dependent origination, the five aggregates, not-self, nirvana.

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¹See D II 199.

²cf. Waldschmidt's (1944–48, II 341) comments on the mythic qualities of the *sutta*.

In this article I wish to pose and attempt to go some way towards answering a simple question: what is such a “myth” doing in the corpus of early Buddhist literature?, or, what did those who composed it and listened to it understand by it?

The scholarship concerned with the Pāli Nikāyas and early Buddhist thought has paid rather less attention to the mythic and narrative portions of early Buddhist literature than it has to, say, those portions concerned directly and explicitly with the classic teachings I have just mentioned. The reasons for this no doubt go back in part to the attitudes and assumptions that inspired the scholars of the latter half of the nineteenth and early part of the twentieth century to devote their energies to the exploration of the Pāli Nikāyas. The increasing knowledge among western scholars of the Pāli canon towards the end of the nineteenth century resulted in a feeling that knowledge of what the historical Buddha really taught was a possibility. The Buddha as depicted in especially the pages of the four primary Pāli Nikāyas was a more historically plausible figure than that found in later and Mahāyāna sources.³

The methods and motivations of the early scholars of the Pāli canon led them to believe that if they could trim away the mythic and fantastic from the texts, they would be left with the historical core of the Buddha’s life and teachings.⁴ This resulted in an emphasis on those portions of the canon which show the Buddha to have been a practical teacher of ethics, moral training, and common sense — those portions which show him as human rather than divine or superhuman. A *sutta* like the *Mahāsudassana Sutta* which depicts the Buddha as claiming in

³While Christian missionaries such as Gogerly (see Young and Somaratna 1996, 79–102) and scholars such as Burnouf had already by the middle of the nineteenth century studied closely certain portions of the Pāli canonical texts, it is particularly in the works of T.W. Rhys Davids (*Buddhism: Being a Sketch of the Life and Teaching of Gautama the Buddha*, first published 1877) and H. Oldenberg (*Buddha: Sein Leben, seine Lehre, seine Gemeinde*, first published 1881) that we find the suggestion that the Pāli texts represent especially reliable sources for the life of the Buddha. See de Jong 1997, 22–25, 30–32.

⁴cf. de Jong 1997, 28f.

some far distant life to have been a king who lived for 336 thousand years⁵ in a city with seven walls constructed of gold, silver, and precious gems, and with groves of palm trees similarly made of gold, silver, and precious gems, is hardly one that a late nineteenth century or early twentieth century scholar would adduce as evidence of the Buddha's ordinary common sense.⁶ Whether or not individual scholars have always shared precisely such attitudes, they have nevertheless often set the tone for the scholarly exposition of Pāli Buddhist literature and thought over the last century.

More recently some attention has been paid to some of these mythic narrative portions. Richard Gombrich (1992), for example, has explored the *Aggañña Sutta*. In significant ways, though, his approach relies on earlier assumptions about the place of myth in the Pāli canon. As early as 1899 T.W. Rhys Davids suggested that we might see a certain deliberate humour in some of the mythic narratives of the Pāli canon and in particular the *Aggañña Sutta*.⁷ Gombrich (1992) has argued in some detail that the *Aggañña Sutta* — especially in its use of *nirukti* or etymology — should be read as a parody of certain Brahmanical ideas and methods rather than a literal account of how the world and society came

⁵D II 196 : *rājā Ānanda Mahāsudassano caturāsīti vassa-sahassāni kumāra-kīlikam kīḷi. caturāsīti vassa-sahassāni oparajjam kāresi. caturāsīti vassa-sahassāni rajjam kāresi. caturāsīti vassa-sahassāni gihī-bhūto dhamme pāsāde brahmacariyaṃ cari*; cf. Matsumura 1988, 9,4-11

⁶See, for example, Almond 1988, 77–79, on the more general British tendency in the late nineteenth century to see the Buddha as something of “an ideal Victorian gentleman”, and Hallisey 1995 on the tendency for the early study of Theravāda Buddhism to become effectively reduced to the search for “original” Buddhism.

⁷Rhys Davids concludes some remarks on the *Aggañña Sutta* (1899, 105–107) by commenting: “We may not accept the historical accuracy of this legend. Indeed a continual note of good-humoured irony runs through the whole story, with its fanciful etymologies of the names of the four *vaṇṇā*; and the aroma of it would be lost on the hearer who took it *au grand sérieux*.” See also his comments on the *Kūṭadanta Sutta* (1899, 160).

into being and evolved.⁸ Reading the *Aggañña Sutta* as a humorous parody allows Gombrich to accept its myth as something the Buddha might have actually taught; but, on his reading, as time went on the Buddhist tradition failed to get the joke and ended up taking it literally.⁹

While Gombrich's account of the text certainly yields useful and important insights, I think it also embodies certain questionable assumptions, the most fundamental of which might be stated as follows: it is obvious from certain portions of the Pāli Nikāyas that the Buddha was "a reasonable sort of chap", therefore he couldn't possibly have meant all that obviously unreasonable stuff about beings falling from higher heavenly realms and the evolution of the four classes literally.¹⁰ That is, we play off the way the Buddha is depicted in certain portions of the canon against the way he is depicted in other portions.¹¹ There is an obvious danger of circularity here: we know that the Buddha didn't teach implausible myths because in the parts of the Nikāyas that present his genuine teachings there are no implausible myths; when we come across an implausible myth it must therefore not belong to his genuine teachings — unless, of course, it is just a joke. The problem here is that, despite a commitment to the disciplines of objective and scientific scholarship, as twentieth or twenty-first century admirers of much of what the Buddha is represented as teaching in the Pāli canon, we tend to become upset when things we do not find so congenial are put in his mouth. Yet there would seem to be no a priori reason why we should assume that an ascetic wandering the plains of northern India in the fifth century B.C.E. should share the same common sense and notions of plausibility that modern scholars do. Why should the Buddha not have

⁸But see Norman 1997, 159 on the problem of judging the intention that lies behind such etymologies.

⁹Gombrich 1992, 175.

¹⁰cf. Gethin, 1992, 11.

¹¹cf. Gombrich 1988, 84 (with reference to the *Cakkavattisihanāda Sutta*): "From the rest of what we know of him, we cannot think that the Buddha believed that one day people would literally be no more than ten years old and go hunting each other like wild beasts."

genuinely thought that the world and society evolved after beings fell from the realm of radiance as described in the *Aggañña Sutta*, or that in a previous life he had lived as a great king in a city made of silver, gold, and other precious gems? The suggestion that he did think such things cannot just be dismissed as intrinsically historically implausible.

But whether or not the historical Buddha did teach and believe in the myths of the Pāli canon as “literal truth” — whatever that might precisely mean — is not my main concern.¹² Steven Collins is perhaps the single scholar who has in recent years devoted the most thought to the mythic and narrative portions of the Pāli canon in his efforts to clarify the Theravāda Buddhist vision of happiness, ultimate and also relative. In response to Gombrich’s suggestion that in the case of the *Cakkavattisihanāda Sutta* (CSS) one must consider “either that the text is apocryphal or at least it has been tampered with”, Collins makes the following important observation :

Story motifs, especially in an oral culture, may often be found in other combinations in other contexts ; but one must still analyse particular motifs in particular texts, and attempt to understand those particular texts in their given, as-redacted-to-us form.¹³

So, whether or not the Buddha taught a text such as MSud in the form in which it has come down to us, the text as we have it must still belong to a relatively early stratum of the Pāli Buddhist literary tradition as a whole, and if we want to understand that tradition and its development we need to consider the text as we have it. Thus even if we conclude with Govind Pande (1974, 106) that the lateness of MSud (relative to certain suttas of the Nikāyas) is “manifest from the detailed and gorgeous descriptions that it contains of the royal city, the seven jewels, and the ‘Dhamma’ palace”, we still need to consider what such a text meant to those who put it together in its traditional form, and to those who read or, perhaps better, listened to it.

¹²See my comments on the problematic nature of the categories of “literal truth” and “mythic symbol” in Gethin 1997.

¹³Collins 1998, 480–81.

As a preliminary to exploring this question it is worth reminding ourselves that as a “mythic” text the MSud is not especially peculiar in the context of the Nikāyas. Admittedly identifying precisely what we might want to categorize as “mythic” is problematic; in practice nearly any narrative that is suggestive of a serious underlying meaning beyond its mere recounting of events or telling of a story might have to be considered as possessing mythic qualities;¹⁴ and in that case, one might argue that all the narrative portions of the Pāli Nikāyas have a mythic dimension. Nevertheless, some narratives stand out more obviously as mythic than others. I would suggest that ten or eleven of the thirty-four *suttas* of the Dīgha-nikāya are essentially mythic in content.¹⁵ By any reckoning this is a significant proportion, and while it may be true to say that the Dīgha-nikāya contains rather more mythic material than the other main Nikāyas, it seems clear that mythic narrative was a significant aspect of early Pāli Buddhist literature.

2. THE PLACE OF THE MAHĀSUDASSANA NARRATIVE IN EARLY BUDDHIST LITERATURE

Formally MSud is presented in the Dīgha-nikāya as a separate, free-standing, self-contained *sutta*. However, it might also be viewed as a kind of appendix to the Mahāparinibbāna-sutta (MPari), expanding and developing a particular section of the latter. The *nidāna* (and the opening portion) of MSud already occurs within the framework of MPari. This indicates a close connection between the two texts — a connection that is confirmed by the various versions of MPari that survive in Buddhist Sanskrit and in Chinese translation. In all cases, the full Mahāsudārśana narrative occurs within the framework of the MPari

¹⁴See, for example, the opening chapter of Kirk 1970 (1–41) for a discussion of the relationship of myth to religion, ritual, and folk-tale, and of some of the problems involved in capturing the elusive qualities of “myth”.

¹⁵Kūṭadanta, Mahāpadāna, Mahāsudassana, Janavasabha, Mahāgovinda, Mahāsamaya, Sakkapañha, Cakkavattisihanāda, Aggañña, Lakkhaṇa, Āṭṭhāṭṭhā.

narrative;¹⁶ it is only the Pāli MPari that does not contain the full Mahāsudassana narrative. Nevertheless the existence of the Mahāsudarśana narrative as a free-standing text outside the Pāli tradition is confirmed by the survival of the Gilgit manuscript of the Sanskrit Mahāsudarśanāvadāna edited by Matsumura, and a separate *Mahāsudarśana Sūtra* in the Chinese translation of the Madhyamāgama.¹⁷

In addition, the Mahāsudassana narrative, in part or in full, has come down to us or is referred to in a number of other contexts. In the Pāli tradition we find a portion of it in the Saṃyutta-nikāya (S III 144–47), while the *sutta* is referred to by name in the Cullaniddeśa as a *sutta* uttered by the Buddha indicating the past of both himself and others.¹⁸ Accordingly the story is included in the Jātaka collection (No. 95, Ja I 391–93), and also briefly recounted in the Cariyāpiṭaka (Cp 75). Looking beyond the Pāli tradition we find a relatively full treatment in the Da zhi du lun or *Mahāprajñāpāramitā-śāstra/upadeśa, traditionally attributed to Nāgārjuna (Lamotte 1949, 763–66).¹⁹

¹⁶Bureau 1970–71, II 76. In addition to the Pāli MPari we have six other versions: the Central Asian Sanskrit version (edited by Waldschmidt), a Chinese translation incorporated in the full Dīrghāgama translation (Taishō No. 1), three separate Chinese translations (Taishō Nos. 5, 6, 7), and a further Sanskrit version incorporated in the recently discovered manuscript of the Dīrghāgama; it is very likely that this also contains MSud, but this is as yet impossible to prove since this part of manuscript is still missing (Jens-Uwe Hartmann, private communication). The Mahāparinirvāṇa narrative (incorporating the Mahāsudarśana narrative) is also found as part of the Mūlasarvāstivādin Vinaya, surviving in Chinese and Tibetan translation; a German translation from the Chinese is found in Waldschmidt 1951, and a partial English translation from the Tibetan in Rockhill 1907.

¹⁷Taishō No. 26 (T. I 515b3–518c3); cf. Matsumura 1988, xv, xxxi.

¹⁸Nidd II (B^c CSCD) 164: *bhagavā ... mahāsudassaniya-suttantaṃ bhāsanto attano ca paresāṇ ca atītaṃ ādisati*.

¹⁹A full list of available primary textual sources for the study of the Mahāsudarśana narrative has in fact been set out by Matsumura in the introduction to his edition of the Gilgit *Mahāsudarśanāvadāna* and revised edition of Waldschmidt's Central Asian text (Matsumura 1988, xii–xvii); Matsumura

All this establishes not only the close association of the Mahāsudassana myth with the MPari narrative — certainly one of the most important narratives of the Pāli canon — but also its importance as a narrative in its own right. Moreover, as scholars have long recognized, certain descriptions of the Mahāsudassana narrative have clear resonances with passages that occur in a number of other contexts in Indian Buddhist literature: the descriptions of various cities in the Mahāvastu and Divyāvadāna;²⁰ the description of Amitābha’s “pure land” in the Sukhāvātīvyūha, the descriptions of heavenly “mansions” in the Vimānavatthu and its commentary.²¹ I shall consider the significance of some of these parallels later, but at this point I should like to give a brief outline of the Mahāsudassana narrative highlighting the basic similarities and some of the differences between the Pāli and Central Asian/Gilgit (CA/Gil) versions.²² While a comparison of all the available textual materials is clearly desirable these two versions seem sufficiently representative of the kinds of variation found in the different versions of the narrative to throw the distinctive features of each narrative into clear relief.

does not mention the reference in Nidd II and had, of course, no knowledge of the more recently discovered Dīrghāgama manuscript. Lamotte 1949, 763, n. 3, erroneously notes a further independent Mahāsudarśana text, the *Da zheng qu wang jing* (Taishō No. 45), which in fact corresponds to the Pāyāsi Sutta; I am grateful to Dr Kin Tung Yit for this information.

²⁰Waldschmidt (1951, 305) cites the following descriptions: of Sudarśana, the city of the Thirty-Three Gods, and Sudharma, the assembly hall of the gods (Divyāvadāna 220–22), of Bhadrāsīlā in Uttarāpatha (Divyāvadāna 315), of Dīpavatī, the city of King Arcimat, the Buddha Dīpaṃkara’s father (Mahāvastu I 194–96), of Uttara, the city of the Buddha Maṅgala (Mahāvastu I 249).

²¹As discussed by Collins 1998, 311–14, 478.

²²Matsumura (1988, viii–ix) concludes that the often verbatim coincidence between the Mahāsudarśana narrative embedded in the Central Asian manuscript of MPari and the Gilgit manuscript of the Mahāsudarśanāvadāna means that we can treat them as essentially a single version.

3. THE MAHĀSUDASSANA NARRATIVE :
THE PĀLI AND CENTRAL ASIAN/GILGIT VERSIONS²³

The narrative opens with the Buddha lying between the two sal trees at the time of his death.²⁴ Ānanda urges him not to die in a small insignificant town like Kusinārā (Kusīnagarī)²⁵ but in an important city. The Buddha responds by informing Ānanda that Kusinārā was once the royal city (*rājadhānī*) of a great king, Mahāsudassana, and called Kusāvati/Kusāvati, although in the CA/Gil version the person of the king is not introduced until later, after the initial description of the city.²⁶ He is introduced abruptly, as if he had already been mentioned, when we are told that he arranged for girls to hand out food, etc., at the city's lotus ponds. The formal introduction comes some lines later.²⁷

The Buddha proceeds to describe the city. It was twelve leagues in length on its eastern and western sides; seven on its northern and southern.²⁸ In the Pāli version the city is likened to Āḷakamandā, the city of the gods. We are told that it was filled with the ten sounds (a detail that

²³The Pāli version has been translated into English and other European languages several times: Rhys Davids 1959, 199–232, and Walshe 1995, 279–90 (English); Neumann 1912 (German). For a German translation of the Sanskrit MPari, see Weber 1999, 207–28; I am unaware of any English translation.

²⁴The Pāli version explicitly states this at the opening of MSud (D II 169,2–3); in the MPari narrative the Buddha has lain down between the sal trees at an earlier point, see D II 136 and Waldschmidt 1951, 294.

²⁵The first time a proper name or term occurs that is common to the Pāli and Sanskrit texts I give the Sanskrit in brackets; thereafter I give only the Pāli unless referring specifically to the Sanskrit text.

²⁶Matsumura 1988, 7,6–7 (≠ Waldschmidt 1951, 310): *tāsāṃ khalu puṣkariṇīnāṃ tīreṣu rājñā mahāsudarśanena kanyā sthāpitā yā annam annārthibhya prayacchaṃti ...*

²⁷Matsumura 1988, 9,1–2 (= Waldschmidt 1951, 310): *kuśāvatyām ānanda rājadhānyāṃ rājā mahāsudarśano nāma babhūva.*

²⁸D II 170,3–5: *puratthimena ca pacchimena ca dvādasa yojanāni... āyāmena, uttarena ca dakkhiṇena ca sattayojanāni vitthārena.* Matsumura 1988, 3,2–3: *dvādaśa yojanāny āyāmena sapta yojanāni vistāreṇa.*

is given later in the CA/Gil versions where twelve sounds are mentioned.²⁹

The city was surrounded by seven walls made, according to the Pāli version, of gold, silver, beryl, crystal, ruby, sapphire, and all kinds of gems. In the CA/Gil version the seven walls are made variously of just gold, silver, beryl, and crystal.³⁰ The city had four gates made of gold, silver, beryl, and crystal.³¹ At each gate there were seven pillars also made of gold, silver, beryl, crystal, ruby, sapphire, and all kinds of gems. These pillars are three times the height of a man in circumference and four times that of a man in height.³² CA/Gil has only pillars of the

²⁹Matsumura 1988, 7,11–15.

³⁰D II 170,17–21: *Kusāvati Ānanda rājadhāni sattahi pākārehi parikkhittā ahoṣi. tattha eko pākāro sovaṇṇamayo, eko rūpiyamayo eko veḷuriyamayo eko phalīkamayo eko lohitaṅkamayo eko masāragallamayo eko sabbaratanamayo.* Matsumura 1988, 3,3–5: *Kuśāvati Ānanda rājadhāni saptabhiḥ prākāraiḥ parikṣiptā babhūva, caturvidhaiḥ prākāraiḥ sauvarṇai rājatāir vaidūryamayaiḥ sphaṭīkamayaiḥ.*

³¹D II 170,22–171,1: *Kusāvatiyā Ānanda rājadhāniyā catunnaṃ vaṇṇānaṃ dvārāni ahesuṃ. ekaṃ dvāraṃ sovaṇṇamayaṃ ekaṃ rūpiyamayaṃ ekaṃ veḷuriyamayaṃ ekaṃ phalīkamayaṃ.* Matsumura 1988, 3,5–6: *Kuśāvatiyā rājadhāniyā caturvidhāni dvārāni māpitāni abhūvaṃ sauvarṇāni rājatāni vaidūryamayāni sphaṭīkamayāni.*

³²D II 171,1–5: *ekam ekasmiṃ dvāre satta esikā nikhātā ahesuṃ ti-porisaṅgā catu-porisā ubbedhena. ekā esikā sovaṇṇamayā ekā rūpiyamayā ekā veḷuriyamayā ekā phalīkamayā ekā lohitaṅkamayā ekā masāragallamayā ekā sabbaratanamayā.* Rhys Davids (1959, 200) translates E^c's *ti-porisaṅgā catu-porisā ubbedhena* as “in height as three times or as four times the height of a man” and is followed in this by Walshe (1995, 280). But this must be wrong and the commentary (Sv II 616) is surely right here in explaining *tiporisaṅgā* as *tiporisa-parikkhepā*. Other editions (B^c, C^c, S^c) of the Pāli text have *tiporisaṅgā tiporisanikhātā dvādasa porisā ubbedhena*: “three times the height of a man in circumference, set into the ground to a depth three times the height of a man, and in height twelve times that of a man”. Interestingly this seems closer to the Mahāvastu’s description of the royal city of Dīpavatī, the city of Dīpaṃkara’s father Arcimat, than to the CA/Gil Mahāsudarśana Sūtra. The Mahāvastu’s Dīpavatī is described in very similar terms to Kusāvati, and in front of its gates there were pillars “which were embedded in the ground to the depth of three men’s lengths, were three men’s lengths in circumference

four precious substances at the gates, in height seven times that of a man, and set into the ground to a depth three-and-a-half times the height of a man.³³ The CA/Gil version (Matsumura 1988, 3,9–11) adds that the city was surrounded by seven moats lined with bricks (*iṣṭikā*) of the four precious substances.

The city was also surrounded by seven rows of palm trees made of the seven precious substances. The trunks being of one substance and the leaves and fruits of another — apart from the trees of all kinds of gems which have trunks, leaves, and fruits of all kinds of gems. When stirred by the wind the trees made a lovely sound prompting those in the city who were revellers and fond of drink to dance round. According to the CA/Gil version the seven rows of trees were made, once again, of just the four precious substances, but with the same variation: the leaves, flowers, and fruits of the gold trees are silver, etc., *mutatis mutandis*.

The Pāli version continues with a long account (D II 172,6–178,20) of Mahāsudassana as a *cakkavattin* and of his seven treasures (the wheel, elephant, horse, gem, woman, treasurer, adviser) and of his four *iddhis* (good looks, long life, good health, popularity).

At this point in the narrative, the CA/Gil has still to introduce King Mahāsudarśana, and when it finally does, he is not given the title of *cakravartin*. We are told only that he possessed the seven treasures (which are simply listed). It is perhaps worth noting, though, that when Mahāsudarśana's six categories of 84,000 possessions are later listed,

and twelve men's lengths in height" (Mahāvastu I 196: *tripauruṣa-naikhānyāni tripauruṣa-pariḡohyāni dvādasa-pauruṣā udvedhena*).

³³Matsumura 1988, 3,6–8 (≠ Waldschmidt 1951, 306): *teṣu khalu dvāreṣu caturvidhā iṣṭikā māpitā abhūvaṃ sauvarṇā rājatāni vaiḍūryamayā sphaṭikamayā sapta-pauruṣā ardha-caturtha-pauruṣā ca nikhātā*. The reading *iṣṭikā* seems problematic and appears to have been restored from *i(s-)kā* in the mss; Matsumura 1988, 3,7 (following Waldschmidt 1951, 306) gives *i(ṣṭi)kā*. MW records *iṣṭakā* in the sense of "brick" and *iṣika* in the sense of "reed", while BHS gives *iṣikal/iṣikā* in the sense of "sign-post"; Mahāvastu I 196,1 has *iṣikāni* in this context. BHS gives *aiṣikā* as equivalent to Pāli *esikā* (cf. CPD s.v.).

four of them are connected with the treasures: the chief woman is referred to as the woman treasure (*strī-ratna*), the chief prince as the adviser treasure (*pariṇāyaka-ratna*), the chief elephant as “the king of elephants Uposātha”, the chief horse as “the king of horses Vālāha” (the elephant and the horse treasure in the Pāli version are called respectively Uposatha and Valāhaka). The CA/Gil version does give an account of the king’s four *ṛddhis* similar to the Pāli, but in a different order.

We are next told how Mahāsudassana decided to build lotus ponds among the palm trees with tiles of four precious substances. The lotus ponds have four flights of stairs made of four precious substances; the gold stairs have (a banister) with gold uprights and silver cross bars and handrail, etc. The ponds were surrounded by two railings with gold uprights and silver cross bars and handrail, etc. The CA/Gil (having not yet introduced the king) simply describes these lotus ponds in broadly similar terms.

Mahāsudassana then had various kinds of lotuses grown in the ponds. He provided bath attendants and *dāna* consisting of food, drink, clothing, transport, beds, wives, and money. In the CA/Gil version again the lotuses are simply stated as growing in the ponds, though curiously, as I have noted, when it comes to the account of the lotus ponds as places for distribution to the needy, Mahāsudarśana is abruptly introduced: he had girls hand out food, drink, clothing, and garlands, etc. And it is at this point that the CA/Gil version mentions how those who were fond of drink and wanted to enjoy themselves came and did so among the palm trees. Immediately after this the CA/Gil formally introduces Mahāsudarśana and describes him as possessing the seven treasures and four *ṛddhis*.

Brahmans and householders next approach the king and offer him money which he refuses. Considering it unfitting to take the money back, they offer to build the king a dwelling (*nivesana*); he accepts. Sakka learns of Mahāsudassana’s intentions and instructs Vissakamma to build a “palace of *dhamma*” (*dhamma-pāsāda*); Vissakamma

approaches the king who accepts his offer. We are not told where he builds the palace.

In the CA/Gil version town and country folk offer the king valuables which he turns down. They do not want to take the valuables back and so make a pile of them before the king, who then decides to use the wealth to build a *dharma-prāsāda*. A great number of princes hears of Mahāsudarśana’s wish and offers to build the palace for him. The king at first turns them down, but when eventually they prostrate themselves before him, he accepts, and they build the Dharma Palace to the east of Kuśāvati (*pūrveṇa Kuśāvatyā dharmam prāsādam māpayanti*).

A detailed description of the palace follows. While there are some variations in detail there is also substantial agreement between the Pāli and CA/Gil versions. The Palace is one league by half a league (one, in the CA/Gil version); it has columns, boards, and staircases all made of the four precious substances; it has 84,000 upper rooms with couches again made of the four precious substances; at the doors of the chambers there are palm trees of the four precious substances. The manner and detail of the description match closely the manner and detail of the description of the city as a whole: thus, in the golden room there is a couch of silver, and outside there is a tree with a trunk of silver and golden leaves and fruit.

The Pāli version mentions a central room, “the room of the great array” (*mahāvvyūha-kūṭāgāra*-). Presumably the epithet *mahāvvyūha* is intended to indicate that this particular room occupies the central position in the arrangement of rooms, perhaps also suggesting that it affords some kind of view over the whole arrangement of rooms and palace.³⁴

³⁴The word *v(i)yūha* is rare in the Nikāyas; it is used at D I 6, 65 in the sense of the array of an army (*senāvvyūha*). In the Vinaya it occurs in the sense of a cul-de-sac, or enclosed space of some sort (Vin IV 271: *vyūham nāma yen’ eva pavisanti ten’ eva nikkhamanti*); this usage is also found at S V 369, 371 in the expression *sambādha-vyūha* (Spk III 287: *sambādha-vyūhan ti vyūhā vuccanti avinibbiddha-racchāyo, yā pavitṭha-maggen’ eva niggacchanti*). Thus it might be possible to interpret *mahāvvyūha-kūṭāgāra*- as “the room [at the end] of the great avenue” depending on how we imagine the arrangement of the palace;

At the door of this room of the great array the king has a grove of golden palm trees made.

The king next decides to build a Dhamma Pond (*dhammā pokkharāṇī*) in front of the Dhamma Palace which is described in detail and in terms similar to those used of the earlier lotus ponds. In the CA/Gil version it is the 84,000 princes who take the initiative in building the Dharma Pond (*dharmī puṣkariṇī*); these princes also establish a “Dharma Grove” (*dharmā-tālavana*) in front of the pond.

Having seen to the needs of various ascetics and brahmans the king himself then enters the palace. Inside the palace the king practises the four *jhānas* followed by the practice of friendliness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity — or, in the CA/Gil version, just the first *dhyāna* at this point, and some time later the four *brahma-vihāras*.

We are then told how it occurs to the king’s wives that they have not seen the king in a long, long time, and so they decide that they should pay him a visit in the Dhamma Palace. At the sound of the great commotion caused by their arrival, the king comes out from the room of the great array (or the Dharma Palace, in the CA/Gil version). The chief queen then urges the king to arouse desire for his possessions, which are listed as consisting of fourteen times 84,000 lots of possession in the Pāli version and six times 84,000 lots in the CA/Gil version. At this the king is not pleased and explains that she should be urging him to let go of any desire he has for his possessions. She duly complies. In the Pāli version the king promptly dies and is reborn in the Brahmā world, while in the CA/Gil version the king now practices the *brahma-vihāras*, but his death and rebirth in the Brahmā world are then similarly described.

The story of the past is now finished, and we are returned to the present where the Buddha announces that it was he who was King Mahāsudassana and that he has died six times previously in this very

cf. Bollée (1989), pp. 143–49. The word *v(i)yūha* is used in the title of two Sn suttas apparently in the sense of “mental disposition”.

same place; his imminent death will be the seventh, there will be no eighth.³⁵

4. THE MAHĀSUDASSANA NARRATIVE AND THE MAHĀPARINIBBĀNA SUTTA

At this point it seems worth considering a little further the question of the Mahāsudassana narrative's relationship to MPari. Waldschmidt (1944–48 I 4, II 205, 341) emphasizes that the Mahāsudassana narrative must be seen as integral to MPari since it is common to all versions: prima facie this suggests that the Mahāsudassana narrative should date from a time prior to the division of the early Saṅgha into clearly defined schools, that is, the third or even the fourth century B.C.E.. Yet Waldschmidt is troubled by this conclusion since he feels that the mythic content and style of the Mahāsudassana narrative — its similarity in style to later (unspecified) descriptions of Buddhist heavens — are suggestive of a rather later date.

Bureau (1971, 76), none the less, suggests that we should see the initial conversation between Ānanda and the Buddha, in which Ānanda questions the appropriateness of the Buddha's dying in Kusinārā, as primary in the evolution of the MPari narrative. The Mahāsudassana

³⁵D II 198,24–199,3: *chakkhattuṃ kho panāhaṃ Ānanda abhijānāmi imasmiṃ padese sarīraṃ nikkhipitaṃ, tañ ca kho rājā vasamāno cakkavattī dhammiko dhamma-rājā caturanto vijitāvī janapadatthāvariyaṃ satta-ratana-samannāgato, ayaṃ sattamo sarīra-nikkhepo. na kho panāhaṃ Ānanda taṃ padesaṃ samanupassāmi sadevake loke ... yattha Tathāgato aṭṭhamāṃ sarīraṃ nikkhipēyyā ti.* Rhys Davids (1959, 232) and Walshe (1995, 290) have mistranslated this passage and have the Buddha incoherently declare that when he died in Kusāvati as a *cakkavattin* it was the seventh time, and there will be no eighth time. Matsumura 47,3–47,9: *yāvad Ānanda kuśinagarī yāvaṃ nadī hiraṇyavatī yāvad yamakasālavanāṃ yāvaṃ mallānaṃ mukuṭabandhanaṃ caityaṃ atrāṃtarā dvādaśa yojanāni sāmantakena yatra ṣaṭkṛtvāḥ tathāgatasya sarīranikṣepo babbhūva tac ca rājña kṣatriyasya mūrdhābhiṣaktasya idaṃ saptamaṃ vāraṃ tac ca tathāgatasyārhatāḥ samyaksambuddhasya nāhaṃ Ānanda taṃ pṛthivīpradeśaṃ samanupaśyāmi ... yatra tathāgata-syāṣṭamaḥ sarīranikṣepaḥ.*

narrative Bareau sees as secondary, having been added after the account of this conversation as an explanation of why the Buddha chooses to die in Kusinārā. Whatever the value of Bareau's suggestion as an explanation for the initial reference to Mahāsudassana and his city, it is inadequate as an explanation of the full Mahāsudassana narrative as it has come down to us: for example, thirty pages in the PTS edition of the Pāli text, and twenty pages in Matsumura's edition of the Sanskrit text. Clearly the Mahāsudassana narrative does rather more than just explain that Kusinārā was once an important city of an important king who was the Buddha in a previous life.

Bareau's suggestion would initially seem to imply that the Pāli MPari, which gives only a relatively brief account of Mahāsudassana and his city, represents a rather early stage in the development of the MPari narrative. On the other hand, the existence of a separate MSud in the Pāli tradition might suggest a later development relative to other versions of MPari, all of which still retain a full Mahāsudarśana narrative framed by the MPari narrative.

Yet, despite its status as an independent text, in comparison to the CA/Gil Sanskrit versions the content and narrative structure of the Pāli MSud seem to deliberately tie it more closely to the MPari narrative of the Buddha's death. Thus in the Pāli version the whole dialogue between Mahāsudassana and the queen (D II 190,23–195,29) takes place on Mahāsudassana's deathbed. So at D II 190,20 Mahāsudassana lies on his right side in the lion posture, just as the Buddha has done between the two sal trees at D II 137,16, whereas in the CA/Gil versions we are told that he sits on a golden seat prior to talking to the queen.³⁶ In the Pāli version, on seeing the king, the queen observes that his faculties are bright and his complexion pure and clear; she thus fears that he is about

³⁶Matsumura 1988, 37.3 (≠ Waldschmidt 1951, 342): *sauvarṇe bhadrāsane niṣaṇṇaḥ*.

to die.³⁷ This echoes the episode in MPari when Ānanda observes that the Buddha's complexion is pure and clear, and the Buddha announces to Ānanda that this indicates he will die that very night (D II 133,30–134,14). In contrast, while the CA/Gil version also tells us something about the king's senses at this point, it is that he lowers his eyes and averts them fearing that the presence of so many women in all their finery will provoke desire in him, whereupon the queen wishes that the king were not so uninterested in them.³⁸ Again in the Pāli version when the king instructs the queen how to address him, his instructions are explicitly related to his imminent death:

At these words King Mahāsudassana said to Queen Subhaddā: “Lady, for a long time you have spoken to me with words that are welcome, dear and agreeable, but now in these last hours you speak to me with words that are not welcome, not dear, disagreeable.”

“Then how should I speak to you, lord?”

“Lady, speak to me like this: ‘Lord, you should not die with longing. Unhappy and unfortunate is the death of one who dies with longing.’”³⁹

As we shall see, in the CA/Gil version the king's instructions are couched in more general terms without specific allusion to the king's imminent death. In the Pāli version we are told that soon after his con-

³⁷D II 190,24–26: *atha kho Ānanda Subhaddāya deviyā etad ahoṣi: vipassannāni kho rañño Mahāsudassanassa indriyāni, parisuddho chavi-vanṇo pariyaḍāto, mā h'eva kho rājā Mahāsudassano kālam akāsi ti.*

³⁸Matsumura 1988, 35,5–37,2 (≠ Waldschmidt 1951, 342): *adrākṣīd rājā mahāsudarśano ... sarvās tā striyaḥ pītavastramālyābharaṇāḥ pītānulepanā. dṛṣṭvā ca punar asyaitad abhavat atirañjanīyo bata māṭṅgrāma iti viditvā indriyāṇy utkṣīpati. adrākṣīt strīratnaṃ mahāsudarśanam indriyāṇy utkṣīpantaṃ. dṛṣṭvā ca punar asyā etad abhavad yathā khalu devo 'smān dṛṣṭvā indriyāṇy utkṣīpati, mā haiva devo 'smābhīr anarthiko bhaviṣyatīti.*

³⁹D II 192,10–20: *evaṃ vutte Ānanda rājā Mahāsudassano Subhaddaṃ devīṃ etad avoca: dīgha-rattaṃ kho maṃ tvaṃ devī iṭṭhehi kantehi piyehi manāpehi samudācarittha. atha ca pana maṃ tvaṃ pacchime kāle aniṭṭhehi akantehi appiyehi amanāpehi samudācarasī ti. – k a t h a ñ c a r a h i t a ṃ d e v a samudācarāmī ti – evaṃ kho maṃ tvaṃ devī samudācara: ... mā kho tvaṃ deva sāpekho kālam akāsi. dukkhā sāpekhasa kāla-kiriya, garahitā ca sāpekhasa kāla-kiriya.*

versation with the queen, the king died, whereas in the CA/Gil version the king returns to his Dharma Palace (*dharmaprāsāda*) to practice the four *brahmavihāras* (Matsumura 1988, 42–44). We are then told in the form of a general statement that as a result of developing the four *brahmavihāras* and his persistent practice of them (*tadbahulavihārī*), Mahāsudarśana was born in the Brahmā world.⁴⁰

In the Pāli recension we thus have presented as an independent *sutta* a text that is, however, closely and self-consciously tied to the MPari narrative; while in the CA/Gil Sanskrit recension we have a text that is rather less closely tied to the MPari narrative, nevertheless firmly embedded in that narrative. This complicates our understanding of the relationship between MPari and MSud. The basic question is whether we should view the MSud as originally a separate narrative that has subsequently been incorporated in the MPari, or as originally a minor episode in the MPari narrative that gradually grew and expanded until it outgrew its MPari frame and attained the status of a separate text in its own right.

Matsumura (1988, xxx–xxx) has little doubt that the independent Pāli MSud and the Chinese Madhyamāgama MSud have been extracted from their original context within the MPari. Part of the evidence Matsumura adduces is the correspondence between the Mahāsudassana portion of MPari (D II 146,10–147,11) and the opening of the MSud (D II 169,8–170,16). This “proves”, claims Matsumura, that the whole Mahāsudassana story had once been placed there. It is worth noting, though, that (pace Matsumura) the two passages do *not* show word-for-word agreement. At D II 146,23 (MSud) Mahāsudassana is described as *cakkavattī dhammiko dhamma-rājā*, while at D II 169,18–19 (MPari) he is described instead as *khattiyo muddhāvasitto*. The difference would appear to be quite deliberate. In MSud the narrative requires that he is not described as a “wheel-turning king” at the beginning, since he only

⁴⁰Matsumura 1988, 45,9–11: *atha rājā Mahāsudarśanaś caturo brāhmāṃ vihārāṃ bhāvayitvā kāmeṣu kāmaccchandam prahāya tadbahulavihārī brahmalokasya svabhāvatāyām upapannaḥ*.

becomes such later.⁴¹ In MPari, where the story of his becoming a wheel-turning king is not related, he can be summarily introduced as *cakkavattī dhammiko dhamma-rājā*. What this shows, once again, is that this portion of MPari and MSud has been carefully edited.

At a certain level the fundamental association between MSud and MPari seems firm: the name of Mahāsudassana's city, Kusāvati/Kuśāvati, clearly echoes Kusiṇārā/Kuśinagara, the place of the Buddha's death. Yet the association of a particular literary narrative with a particular period of or episode in the Buddha's life does not mean that its literary development as a text is tied to the literary development of all other narratives associated with that same period or episode. Indeed, in addition to the MSud narrative, a number of other episodes that constitute the MPari narrative appear elsewhere in the Nikāyas as independent *suttas*,⁴² and it seems likely that at least some of these developed and circulated as independent narrative units prior to — or even at the same time as — being incorporated in the extended MPari narrative.

It seems to me probable then that MSud developed as an independent narrative outside the context of MPari, yet always associated with the episode of the death of the Buddha through the name Kusāvati. That this is so is indicated by the simple fact that the Pāli Dīgha-nikāya and the Chinese Madhyamāgama preserve an independent text, and by the fact that, even while being incorporated in MPari, the CA/Gil version of MSud, as we have seen, remains less integrated with the MPari narrative framework in comparison to the Pāli version.

Moreover the notion of a free-standing independent *sutta/sūtra* seems to have remained somewhat loose during the formative phase of

⁴¹D II 172,12–17: *sutaṃ kho pana m'etaṃ: yassa rañño khattiyassa muddhāvasittassa tadahu 'posathe paṇṇarase sisaṃ nahātassa uposathikassa upari-pāsāda-vara-gatassa dibbaṃ cakkaratanaṃ pātubhavati ... so hoti rājā cakkavattī ti.*

⁴²Rhys Davids tabulated the parallels between MPari and other parts of the Nikāyas almost a century ago (1954, 71–72) pointing out that something like two thirds of the text of MPari is found elsewhere in the Nikāyas.

Buddhist literature. Thus the Gilgit manuscript of the *bhaiṣajya-vastu* of the Mūlasarvāstivādin Vinaya refers the reader to “the *Mahāsudarśana Sūtra* in the Dīrghāgama in the section of six *sūtras*” for the full text;⁴³ the recently discovered Sanskrit manuscript of DĀ, which appears to belong to the (Mūla-)Sarvāstivādins, possesses an initial section precisely entitled the “section of six *sūtras*”. The final *sūtra* of this section is the *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra*, and the section contains no separate text of the *Mahāsudarśana Sūtra*. This suggests that even when the Mahāsudarśana narrative was presented embedded in the MPari framework, it could be thought of as a free-standing, separate *sūtra/sutta*.⁴⁴

In suggesting that the Mahāsudassana narrative developed as an independent narrative I am not suggesting that, in preserving a version of that narrative as an independent text, the Pāli tradition has necessarily preserved a more “authentic” version closer to some hypothetical original. In fact, in certain respects, if the Mahāsudassana narrative did evolve independently from the MPari context, the Pāli version might be seen as representing a relatively advanced stage in so far as elements in its narrative seem to have been deliberately developed as counterpoints to the narrative of the Buddha’s death. The CA/Gil version despite being embedded in the MPari context still retains more of the character of a separate piece. There are perhaps other indications of the more developed character of the Pāli version: its tendency to talk of seven rather than four precious substances, as well as its enumeration of Mahāsudassana’s possessions as consisting of fourteen, rather than just six, sets of 84,000. And yet, we need to note that the CA/Gil version also in places shows evidence of additions and development in relation to the Pāli: thus the CA/Gil adds the detail that the city of Kuśāvati is surrounded by seven moats (*parikhā*) in addition to seven walls (Matsumura 1988, 3,9–11); it speaks of the city as being filled with

⁴³Matsumura 1988, 131,6–7: *vistāreṇa mahāsudarśanasūtraṃ dīrghāgame ṣaṣṭisūtrikanipāte*.

⁴⁴cf. also the discussion at Matsumura 1988, xxxiv.

twelve rather than ten sounds;⁴⁵ it mentions the making of the “Dharma Palm Grove” in addition to the Dharma Palace and Dharma Lotus Pond.⁴⁶

I noted above how Waldschmidt was forced to the conclusion that, since all versions of MPari are associated with a substantially similar Mahāsudassana narrative, the substance of that narrative must belong to a relatively early period — the third or even the fourth century B.C.E. — and yet, because of its mythic style, he was troubled by that conclusion. In response, Bareau (1971, 76) has proposed that this substantial agreement might be seen instead as evidence of later borrowing among the ancient schools of Buddhism. Bareau’s suggestion is echoed by the more recent arguments of Schopen about dating early Buddhist sources. Schopen (1985, 23–30) argues that strictly we must date the Pāli Nikāyas as we have them to the period of the composition of the Pāli commentaries in “the fifth to the sixth centuries C.E.,” since these provide the earliest incontrovertible evidence for the existence of the Nikāyas in the form in which they have come down to us.⁴⁷ Yet there are other forms of evidence to do with the development of Buddhist doctrine and Indian material culture, for example, that Schopen chooses to ignore. Elsewhere (1995, 475) Schopen complains that to treat the various canonical Vinayas as close in time to the lifetime of the Buddha is to conclude that “Buddhist monasticism had little or no real history or development, since by this argument monasticism appeared fully formed at the very beginning”. Significantly there are grounds for concluding that the Pāli Vinaya is a more recent document than the four primary Pāli Nikāyas.⁴⁸ And to

⁴⁵cf. D II 170,11–16 and Matsumura 1988, 7,11–15.

⁴⁶Matsumura 1988, 25,13–14: *puṣkarīṇyāḥ purastād dharmam tālavanaṃ māpayaṃti*.

⁴⁷Similarly the Āgamas cannot strictly be dated earlier than their translation into Chinese beginning in the second century C.E., and the date of the various manuscript fragments.

⁴⁸v. Hinüber 1996, 26: “Buddhist literature can be compared to the material culture in ancient India, which shows, e.g., that the cultural environment of the

insist on a date of the fifth or sixth century for Pāli Nikāyas is similarly to deny any real history or development for early Buddhist literature and doctrine. In terms of doctrinal development the four primary Nikāyas are clearly older than certain texts of the Khuddaka-nikāya and the texts of the Abhidhamma Piṭaka, which in turn are clearly older than the Pāli commentaries.

In the present context perhaps it is Waldschmidt's (and Bareau's) difficulty with mythic style as a feature of relatively early Buddhist texts that needs to be questioned. The style of Indian literature that predates or is contemporary with early Buddhist literature — the Vedas, Brāhmaṇas, Āraṇyakas, and earliest Upaniṣads, for example — does not suggest that the mythic or exaggerated numbers were alien literary motifs.

The issue of the origin and development of MSud — of whether we should view the MSud as originally a separate narrative that has subsequently been incorporated into the MPari, or as a minor incident that gradually grew and expanded until it outgrew its MPari frame and attained the status of a separate text in its own right — is not the main concern in the present context. The MSud is clearly an important narrative of early Buddhist literature: what is it doing? I want to consider this question primarily by reference to the Pāli version and Buddhaghosa's commentary, but also by reference to the CA/Gil version.⁴⁹

5. THE INTERPRETATION OF THE MSUD

The Pāli and CA/Gil versions are very similar in basic structure and contain the same basic elements, although each orders these slightly differently in places and has its own distinctive narrative emphasis. As we have seen, the Pāli is more closely tied to the narrative of the

first four Nikāyas of the Sutta-piṭaka is markedly older than that of the Vinaya-piṭaka.”

⁴⁹In what follows I refer to the page and line number of Matsumura's revised edition of Waldschmidt's Central Asian Sanskrit text, quoting Matsumura's Sanskrit text without any of his critical apparatus.

Buddha's death than the CA/G version. The Pāli narrative is thus more clearly and poignantly tied to the impermanence and passing of things. While in the CA/Gil version the dialogue between Mahāsudarśana and his chief queen is not so specifically related to death.

So what are we to make of this myth? Nineteenth- and early twentieth-century scholarship was often concerned with the question of origins. T.W. Rhys Davids thus commented in his introduction to his translation that the Mahāsudassana “legend is nothing more nor less than a spiritualized sun myth”.⁵⁰ But he immediately goes on to say (p. 197) that even if this is so, “it is still essentially Buddhistic”. Jean Przyluski posited Babylonian influences on Buddhist descriptions of the *cakravartin's* city, citing for example Herodotus's account of the ancient city of the Medes, Ecbatana:

[T]he city now known as Ecbatana was built, a place of great size and strength fortified by concentric walls, these so planned that each successive circle was higher than the one below it by the height of the battlements ... The circles are seven in number, and the innermost contains the royal palace and treasury ... The battlements of the five outer rings are painted in different colours, the first white, the second black, the third crimson, the fourth blue, the fifth orange; the battlements of the two inner rings are plated with silver and gold respectively.⁵¹

The parallel is certainly striking, yet even if we accept such an account as a source of the conception of Kusāvati, this will not help with the question of what a text such as the MSud meant to those who actually composed it and used it.

Texts describing kings and their ways in the Pāli canon have sometimes been read as offering a Buddhist theory of kingship and society, as providing prescriptions for how a good Buddhist king should behave, or as providing Buddhist legitimations of kingship and political power. Steven Collins (1998, 476–96) has recently, and rightly in my view,

⁵⁰Rhys Davids and Rhys Davids 1959, 196f. This view is presumably derived from the work of Senart on the life of the Buddha at the end of nineteenth century, on which see de Jong 1997, 28f.

⁵¹Histories I 98, translated by de Sélincourt and Burn 1972, 82.

criticized this rather narrow and literalist approach to such texts. He attempts to unpack rather more, and suggests that they can be read as ironical and satirical comment on kings and society from the perspective of the ascetic renouncer.

Collins comments only rather briefly on the MSud (1998, 476–79) and focuses most attention on the CSS, a sutta that recounts another myth concerning a *cakkavattin*, or rather *cakkavattins*. He sums up as follows:

CSS does not express a Buddhist social theory: it tells a witty story, by turns pleasantly farcical and fearsomely imaginative, with some familiar doctrinal motifs in unexpected narrative settings; the whole parable being a disbelief suspending morality tale. (1998, 495)

While I think some of what Collins says about the CSS may apply to the MSud, we also need to bear in mind Collins's observation, quoted above, concerning the need for understanding these suttas as redacted wholes. So, for example, following Rhys Davids and Tambiah, Collins reads the CSS account of the *cakkavattin*'s conquest of the world with the aid of his wheel-treasure and the admonition to his subjects to keep the five precepts as a parody, an ironical comment on the way in which ancient armies and kings actually did achieve their conquests. Collins comments:

If the *Sutta* were to be performed as a drama in modern dress I would have the king as a Mafia boss along with his sons and a crowd of hit-men, strolling calmly into opponents' territory and asserting his power by carefully worded homilies on Catholicism and family values. (485)

While this may vividly bring out a dimension of the text that we might otherwise miss, we must be careful. The account of the *cakkavattin*'s conquest of the world with the aid of his celestial wheel-treasure is common to both CSS and MSud, and Collins's reading seems to me problematic in the context of the MSud. In the MSud the *cakkavattin* is Mahāsudassana, and Mahāsudassana is the *bodhisatta*. Can we really read the tale of Mahāsudassana as the tale of how the Buddha in a previous life was once, as it were, a big Mafia boss who guarded his lucrative patch on the South Side? I am doubtful and in any case think it

possible only if we are prepared to read the MSud as a narrative of such a Mafia boss's reform and genuine renunciation of his former evil ways. Moreover we should note that the *cakravartin's* conquest of the world with the aid of his celestial wheel-treasure is not recounted in the CA/Gil version, while in the Pāli version it plays a quite different role and is rather less prominent in the narrative of the MSud than in that of the CSS. In the Pāli version of the MSud all seven treasures of the king are elaborately described, not just the wheel treasure as in the CSS. And significantly at one place in the Nikāyas we are explicitly told that the seven treasures of a wheel turning king correspond to another set of treasures, namely the seven constituents of awakening (*bojjhaṅga*):

As a result of the appearance of a *cakkavattin* king there is the appearance of seven treasures. Which seven? There is the appearance of the wheel-treasure ... of the elephant-treasure ... of the horse-treasure ... of the gem-treasure ... of the woman-treasure ... of the master-treasure ... of the adviser-treasure. As a result of the appearance of a Tathāgata, an *arahant*, a fully awakened one there is the appearance of the seven treasures that are the constituents of awakening. Which seven? There is the appearance of the treasure that is the constituent of awakening that is mindfulness ... of the treasure that is the constituent of awakening that is equipoise.⁵²

This to me is suggestive of the possibility of a certain symbolism operating in the myth of the MSud, of the possibility that the world of Mahāsudassana should be understood as not so dissimilar from the world of Buddhist practice and meditation. With this in mind I want to consider now a reading of MSud as essentially a mythic narrative of the Buddhist path.

⁵²S V 99: *rañño bhikkhave cakkavattissa pātubhāvā sattannaṃ ratanānaṃ pātubhāvo hoti. katamesaṃ sattannaṃ. cakkaranassa pātubhāvo hoti hatthiratanassa. assaratanassa. maṇiratanassa. itthiratanassa. gahapati-ratanassa. pariṇāyakanassa pātubhāvo hoti ... tathāgatassa bhikkhave pātubhāvā arahato sammā-sambuddhasa sattannaṃ bojjhaṅgaratanānaṃ pātubhāvo hoti. katamesaṃ sattannaṃ. satisambojjhaṅgaratanassa pātubhāvo hoti pe upekkhāsambojjhaṅgaratanassa pātubhāvo hoti.* The commentary (Spk III 154–55) explains the correspondence between the *cakkavattin's* treasures and the *bojjhaṅgas* in some detail; see Gethin 1992, 182–83.

6. MSUD AS A MYTHIC NARRATIVE OF THE BUDDHIST PATH

If one considers the MSud narrative as a whole, one might suggest that it is basically a narrative of a journey out of this world. This aspect of the narrative is apparent at a number of levels. First, the backdrop of MSud is the story of the Buddha's death, his final departure from the world of *saṃsāra*. Secondly, the story of Mahāsudassana's life and (especially in the Pāli version) death forms a literary counterpoint to the story of the Buddha's death. But there is a third level. The narrative of MSud also tells the story of Mahāsudassana's withdrawal from his city into its inner sanctum, the Palace of Dhamma — a journey from the outer world of the city to the inner world of the Palace of Dhamma — although in the CA/Gil version, where the Palace of Dharma is described as situated to the east of the city, the movement is perhaps away from the city, emphasising renunciation and the giving up of the household life. While it is explicit only in the CA/Gil version, in both versions the king's entering the Palace of Dhamma effectively marks the beginning of a life as a celibate ascetic removed from his possessions and his wives.

At the beginning of the sutta Mahāsudassana is established within his city within his kingdom where everything is well. The first half of the sutta emphasizes Mahāsudassana's *sīla* and *dāna*; he establishes *dāna* at the lotus ponds providing food and drink, etc. In the Pāli version as he enters the inner Palace of Dhamma he reflects on what has brought him to this state: "It is as a fruit and result of three kinds of action, namely giving (*dāna*), control (*dama*), and restraint (*saṃyama*), that I now have such great fortune and power."⁵³ The general implications of the latter two terms in the present context seem clear enough, but the commentary spells out specific meanings: while in the Āḷavaka Sutta (Sn 181–92) *dama* means "wisdom" (*paññā*), here it should be understood as keeping the observance day (*uposatha-kamma*);

⁵³D II 186: *tiṇṇaṃ kho me idaṃ kammānaṃ phalaṃ, tiṇṇaṃ kammānaṃ vipāko, yenāhaṃ etarahi evaṃ mahiddhiko evaṃ mahānubhāvo, seyyathidaṃ dānassa damassa saṃyamassā ti.*

saṃyama is just *sīla*.⁵⁴ If we think in terms of the division of Buddhist practice by way of the three bases of meritorious action (*puñña-kiriya-vatthu*),⁵⁵ so far, then, we have had *dāna* and *sīla*; we are now going to get *bhāvanā*.

As Mahāsudassana enters the Room of the Great Array he “breathed a sigh: ‘Stop here, thoughts of sensual desire! Stop here, thoughts of hostility! Stop here, thoughts of malice!’”⁵⁶ If the Palace of Dhamma is in general a place for a celibate ascetic, its innermost chambers are a place where not even thoughts of sensual desire, hostility, and malice are allowed. The commentary is explicit: the king is entering the house or room of meditation (*jhānāgāra*), and such thoughts have no place inside it.⁵⁷ We are then told how the king does indeed practise the *jhānas* in this meditation room: all four in the Room of the Great Array according to the Pāli version, while according to the CA/Gil version he practises just the first *dhyāna* in each of the different chambers — gold, silver, beryl, crystal.⁵⁸

⁵⁴Sv II 630–31: *damassā ti Ālavaka-sutte paññā damo ti āgato, idha attānaṃ damentena kataṃ uposatha-kammaṃ. saṃyamassā ti sīlassa*. This passage is missing from the CA/Gil and some other versions but is contained in two of the Chinese translations of the Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra which seem to reflect slightly different terminology (*dāna*, *kṣāntilāma*, *dhyānalmaitrī*); see Matsumura 1988, lii.

⁵⁵D III 218; A IV 241–43.

⁵⁶D II 186: *mahā-vyūhassa kūṭāgārassa dvāre ṭhito udānaṃ udānesi: tiṭṭha kāma-vitakka. tiṭṭha vyāpāda-vitakka. tiṭṭha vihiṃsā-vitakka*.

⁵⁷Sv II 632: *mahāvīyūhan ti rajatamayam mahā-kūṭāgāraṃ. tattha vasitu-kāmo hutvā agamāsi, ettāvatā kāma-vitakkā ti kāma-vitakka tayā ettāvatā nivattitabbaṃ, ito paraṃ tuyhaṃ abhūmi, idaṃ jhānāgāraṃ nāma, na-y-idaṃ tayā saddhiṃ vasanaṭṭhānaṃ ti, e vaṃ tayo vitakke kūṭāgāra-dvāre yeva nivattesi*.

⁵⁸According to the Da zhi du lun (Lamotte 1949, 765) he practises the first, second, third, and fourth *dhyānas* in respectively the gold, silver, beryl, and crystal chambers. The translation of the Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra included in T. 1 (= Dīrghāgama) and the independent translation T. 7 mention four *dhyānas*; the other two independent translations (T. 5 and 6) refer to the contemplation of impermanence; the independent Madhyamāgama

The Pāli commentary emphasizes the way in which the Mahāsudassana's Palace of Dhamma is suited to the practice of *jhāna* by pointing out that the king had no need for actual individual *kaṣiṇas* to use as a starting point for his *jhāna* practice, since wherever he looked sapphire served as a blue *kaṣiṇa*, gold as a yellow *kaṣiṇa*, ruby as a red *kaṣiṇa*, silver as a white *kaṣiṇa*.⁵⁹ In the Pāli version he proceeds straight from the practice of the four *jhānas* to the practice of the four *brahmavihāras*, though in the CA/Gil and other versions these come later.

The palace is thus a place only for those who practice the spiritual life, and a place where they can practise meditation. In entering the Palace of Dhamma Mahāsudassana has left behind all his possessions: the Pāli version enumerates fourteen lots of 84,000 possessions, the CA/Gil just six lots. But he has not put them behind him for good: they are about to come to remind him of their existence.

Dressed in all their finery and headed by the Woman Treasure Mahāsudassana's 84,000 wives along with his four armies come streaming into the Palace of Dhamma, knocking on the door of the inner room. The king hears the commotion and comes out from the room to tell the women that they are not to come inside. The queen then urges him to arouse desire for all his possessions and for life. But the king reprimands her: like all practitioners of the spiritual life he must not cling to his possessions but let go of them, he must see them as impermanent; while his possessions and good fortune may have come to him as the result of the practice of giving, control, and restraint, they are now obstacles to his progress.

Mahāsudarśana Sūtra (T. 26) again mentions just the first *dhyāna*; I am grateful to Dr Kin Tung Yit for this information.

⁵⁹Sv II 632 : *paṭhamajjhānan ti ādisu visuṃ kaṣiṇa-parikamma-kiccaṃ nāma n' atthi. nīla-kaṣiṇena atthe sati nīla-maṇiṃ, pīta-kaṣiṇena atthe sati suvaṇṇaṃ, lohita-kaṣiṇena atthe sati ratta-maṇiṃ, odāta-kaṣiṇena atthe sati rajatan ti olokita-olokita-ṭṭhāne kaṣiṇam eva paññāyati.*

The CA/Gil version describes how when the king sees the women he is wary lest they excite his desire and so averts his eyes and guards his senses.⁶⁰ This echoes the Buddha's advice to Ānanda on how to deal with women which is also found in some other versions of the MPari.⁶¹ When the queen sees the king lower his eyes she wishes that he were not uninterested in his wives and then urges him to arouse desire for all his possessions.

The CA/Gil version brings out the way in which his wives are now obstacles to his progress along the Buddhist path in a rather nice play on words. The king says to his chief queen: while in the past you have always acted as a friend (*mitra*), now you are acting as a rival (*sapatna*).⁶² The word *sapatna* which comes to be used of a rival, opponent, or obstacle in a general sense, is derived from *sapatnī*, a co-wife, a woman who shares her husband, which is, of course, exactly what the Woman Treasure is; she shares her husband M with 83,999 other women to be precise. So the attractions of life as a king outside in the city with wives and possessions represent rivals – obstacles which are opposed to life in the Palace of Dhamma with no wives and no possessions. The world of the senses outside is opposed to the world of meditation inside. And the way to overcome the opponent? Reflect on its impermanence and thereby lose desire for it. Both versions use the narrative to provide its listeners with what is in effect a long, twice repeated meditation on impermanence: first the king instructs the queen on how she should remind him of the impermanence of his possessions

⁶⁰Matsumura 1988, 35.4-6: *adrākṣīd rājā mahāsudarśano dharmaprāsādādhastāt sarvās tā striyaḥ pītavastramālyābharaṇāḥ pītānulepanā dṛṣṭvā ca punar asyāitad abhavat atirañjanīyo bata mātṛgrāma iti viditvā indriyāny utkṣipati.*

⁶¹D II 141; the Central Asian version edited by Waldschmidt does not contain this incident, but it is found in T. 1 (Dīrghāgama version) and the independent T. 7 as well as in an Ekottarāgama text. See Bareau 1971, 34-35; Matsumura 1988, Chart IV.

⁶²Matsumura, 1988, 39.1-2: *pūrve ca tvaṃ bhagini māṃ mitravat samudācarasi sā tvaṃ tarhi sapatnavat.*

and then she carries out his instructions. To quote from the beginning of the Pāli version:

We must lose and be deprived of and separated from everything pleasant and dear. Lord, you should not die with longing. Unhappy and unfortunate is the death of one who dies with longing.⁶³

Or as the CA/Gil version puts it:

Short is the life of man, troubles must be endured. Do what is good! Practise the spiritual life! There is no escape from death for one who has been born; the moment, instant, or second when you must give up this body completely is not known. Whatever desire ... you have for your 84,000 women ... give it up, be without desire for life.⁶⁴

It is worth noting here that the long and repetitive list of Mahā-sudassana's various possessions is repeated in full a total of six times in the second half of the Pāli version — a tedious repetition perhaps, unless one takes the second half of the *sutta* as a deliberately repeated meditation on the beauties and splendours of the world and crucially their impermanence. I shall return to the question of repetitions in the text of MSud presently.

Let me sum up this reading of MSud as a mythic narrative of the Buddhist path. The outer city is the place for the household life; it is in effect the ordinary world, the world of the five senses (*kāma-dhātu*). The Palace of Dhamma is the place for the celibate and spiritual life (*brahma-cariya*) of an ascetic; its rooms are for the practice of meditation, of *jhāna*, and to enter them is in effect to enter the world of pure

⁶³D II 192: *sabbeḥ' eva deva piyehi manāpehi nānā-bhāvo vinā-bhāvo aññathā-bhāvo. mā kho tvaṃ deva sāpekho kālam akāsi. dukkhā sāpekhasa kāla-kiriya, garahitā ca sāpekhasa kāla-kiriya.*

⁶⁴Matsumura, 1988, 39,6–11 (= Waldschmidt 1951, 346, 348): *alpaṃ jīvitaṃ manuṣyānaṃ gamanīyaḥ sāmparāyaḥ | kartavyaṃ kuśalam | caritavyaṃ brahmacaryaṃ | nāsti jātasyāmaraṇaṃ [Waldschmidt: na prāptajāta-syāmaraṇam] | so 'pi deva kṣaṇo lavo muhūrto na prajñāyate yatrāsyā kāyasya sarveṇa sarvaṃ niḥṣepo bhaviṣyati | yad devasya caturaśītiṣu strīsaḥsreṣu strīratnapramukheṣu cchando v ājanīto rāgo v ājanīta iṣṭakāntamanāptvaṃ vā jñītaṃ tad devaḥ prajāhātu niravekṣo devo bhavatu jīvite |*

form (*rūpa-dhātu*). Having practised *dāna* and *sīla*, the king is ready to move from the outer city to the inner Palace of Dhamma. Here he practises the *jhānas* and *brahma-vihāras*, following which he meditates on the impermanence of all conditioned things. This is a very straightforward and clear narrative of the Buddhist path: *dāna* and *sīla* followed by *bhāvanā* consisting of the practice of *samādhi* or *samatha* and *paññā* or *vipassanā*. As Rhys Davids observed, this is indeed a thoroughly Buddhist narrative.

7. MSUD AND VISUALIZATION

One of the features of especially the first half of MSud is the pervasive presence in the description of the various parts of the city of seven, or just four, precious substances or colours: gold, silver, beryl, crystal, ruby, sapphire, and all kinds of gems. These substances and colours form the basis of the description of the city's walls, its gates, its pillars, its trees, its lotus ponds, and their staircases. They form the basis of the description of the Palace of Dhamma, its staircases, its chambers, its couches, and also its groves of trees. They form the basis of the description of the lotus pond that lies in front of the Palace of Dhamma. Everything in the city is described as being made of gold, silver, beryl, crystal, ruby, sapphire, and all kinds of gems in a manner that the modern reader is tempted to characterize as simply boring. Why not just say everything is made out of these things and move on, why dwell on it at every possible chance? For not only are we told that everything is made of these seven or four precious substances, at a number of points we are laboriously informed that trees and railings made of one substance have leaves and fruit, crossbars and handrails, of another substance:

The trunks of the golden palm trees were gold, the leaves and fruits silver;
the trunks of the silver palm trees were silver, the leaves and fruits gold ...⁶⁵

What is going on? At the end of his introduction to his translation of MSud Rhys Davids refers to the aspiration of some Mahāyānists to “a life of happiness ... in a heaven of bliss beyond the skies”. He comments:

One of the most popular books among the Buddhists of China and Japan is a description of this heavenly paradise of theirs, called the Sukhāvāṭī-vyūha [*sic*], the “Book of the Happy Country.” It is instructive to find that several of the expressions used are word for word the same as the corresponding phrases in our much older “Book of the Great King of Glory [= MSud].” (1954, 198)

Some might hesitate to describe MSud so confidently as “much older” than the Sukhāvāṭīvyūha Sūtra, though there can, I think, be little doubt that the descriptions of Mahāsudassana’s city are earlier and that they provide something of a template for the descriptions of comparable cities in the Mahāvastu and Divyāvadāna, and of Amitābha’s Pure Land.

In a recent article entitled “Mediums and Messages: Reflections on the Production of Mahāyāna Sūtras”, Paul Harrison (2003) has drawn attention to what he sees as the early or proto-Mahāyāna extension of the mainstream practice of *buddhānusmṛti* to involve the visualization of Buddhas and their worlds — worlds which are described in texts like the Sukhāvāṭīvyūha. He comments that the descriptions of these worlds are often long-winded and certainly rather tedious to modern sensibilities. He cites a specific example from the Sukhāvāṭīvyūha Sūtra which describes at some length how the trees that grow in Sukhāvāṭī are made of seven precious substances gold, silver, beryl, crystal, sapphire, ruby, and emerald. The description here is elaborated in a way that echoes the MSud description in a specific way:

⁶⁵D II 171: *sovaṇṇamayassa tālassa sovaṇṇamayo khandho ahosi, rūpi-mayāni pattāni ca phalāni ca. rūpimayassa tālassa rūpimayo khandho ahosi sovaṇṇamayāni pattāni ca phalāni ca.*

There, Ānanda, the trees made of gold have roots, trunks, shoots, branches, flowers, and leaves made of gold, but fruits made of silver. The trees made of silver have flowers, leaves, branches, limbs, trunks, and roots made only of silver, but fruits made of beryl.⁶⁶

It continues in similar vein ringing the changes. Harrison points out that in the early Chinese recensions of this text this section is even more long-winded than in the more familiar versions. It is thus potentially even more tedious. He then suggests, however, that its tedium disappears once we understand this is a text not to be read but performed: the listener is being provided with detailed and precise instructions for an elaborate visualization. To quote Harrison directly:

This gives us a new way of reading the text, as a template for visualisation, the sheer detail of which now begins to make sense. What we are left with on the printed page resembles the wiring diagram for a television set, of interest only to electricians, baffling and tediously complex to anyone else. But when we “do” the text rather than read it, when we perform its operations ourselves, it suddenly becomes a little more interesting.

Harrison tends to focus on this kind of visualization as characteristic of early or proto-Mahāyāna meditation, yet if his intuition about this section of the Sukhāvativyūha is correct, then it should equally apply to MSud.⁶⁷ In which case we must reconsider the place of visualization in what Harrison refers to as “mainstream” Buddhism.

⁶⁶Sukhāvativyūha (ed. Muller and Nanjio), 34; (ed. Ashikaga): *tatrānanda sauvarṇānāṃ vṛkṣāṇāṃ suvarṇamayāni mūla-skandha-ṣaṅkhā-pattra-puṣpāni phalāni raupyamayāni. raupyamayānāṃ vṛkṣāṇāṃ rūpyamayāny eva mūla-skandha-ṣaṅkhā-pattra-puṣpāni phalāni vaiḍūryamayāni.*

⁶⁷It is true that the full Sukhāvativyūha passage is more elaborate, taking as its basis seven precious substances with seven parts of a tree, but the essential “visual” device would seem to be the sequence of different types of tree, with different types of leaves and fruit. The CA/Gil version uses only four substances to similar effect: “the leaves, flowers and fruit of the golden palms were silver ...” (Matsumura 1988, 3,13–5,1: *sauvarṇasya tālasya rājataṃ patraṃ puṣpaṃ phalaṃ māpitam abhūt*). That MSud might be understood as a visualization is a suggestion that Lance Cousins has made in my hearing on several occasions. The fact that both Harrison and Cousins have responded separately to essentially the same text possibly lends weight to it.

One obvious objection to the suggestion that MSud might be read as a visualization is the general lack of supporting evidence: the accounts of meditation preserved in the Nikāyas and such mainstream manuals as the *Vimuttimaggā*, *Visuddhimaggā*, and *Abhidharmakośa* do not seem to provide explicit instructions for the practice of visualization nor do they show much interest in it. Such an objection is perhaps not as strong as it might first seem.

One problem here is defining precisely what is meant by the English term “visualization”, a term which does not have a clear Sanskrit equivalent. In the proto-Mahāyāna and early Mahāyāna texts discussed by Harrison and others⁶⁸ the idea of visualization is largely inferred from contexts where “recollection of the Buddha” (*buddhānussmṛti*) is presented by reference to the appearance of the Buddha or buddhas, and by accounts of practitioners mentally “seeing” (simplex forms of the verbal roots *paś* and *dṛś* are used) the Buddha or buddhas. In the later esoteric Buddhism of the *vajrayāna* the notion of “visualization” appears to be commonly conveyed by use of that most universal of words for “meditation”, the causative (*vi*)*bhāvayati*, having as its object, for example, “an image of the Buddha” (*buddha-bimba*). While other words and expressions are also used to convey the general idea of visualization, what seems clear is that there is no specialized word or expression in Buddhist Sanskrit texts for “visualization”. Moreover the notion of “visualization” is somewhat loose, ranging from having some kind of vision, to deliberately cultivating a specific prescribed image. It seems worth considering the possible evidence in the non-Mahāyāna materials of a more general interest in the visual in a meditative context.

Certainly there is some. Harrison and Yamabe have pointed to the accounts of *buddhānussmṛti* in the Chinese Ekottarāgama (which mentions the use of an image as an aid to practice) and the Mahāvastu

⁶⁸See Harrison 1978, 1992; Yamabe 1999.

(which includes some account of the Buddha's appearance).⁶⁹ Yamabe (1999, 15) also cites a remarkable passage from the Central Asian meditation manual edited and translated by Dieter Schlingloff which describes a vision in connection with the practice of mindfulness of breathing in and out:

Moreover as he progresses with the practice of breathing in and out, the world and his body appear made of crystal; from his head a jewelled tree spreads out over infinite worlds. In the full-leafed branches of this tree there appear buddhas teaching the Dharma: jewels, flowers, and lotuses of various colours issue from their mouths in a rain that scatters across the world. The roots of the tree, which shine like beryl and are hollow within, appear set in a golden circle with the soles of the yogin's feet.⁷⁰

The mention of crystal, beryl, and jewelled trees with leaves and fruits of various colours also recalls the MSud and Sukhāvativyūha. In addition Yamabe (1999, 6–12) cites the practice of contemplating a rotting corpse as described in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta as an example of a visualization from the earliest sources,⁷¹ and argues that the fuller and more specific instructions for *asubha-bhāvanā* and *kaṣiṇa* practice found in such texts as the Visuddhimagga are in fact quite close to the

⁶⁹Harrison 1978, 37–38; 1992, 219–20; Yamabe 1999, 127–58. Yamabe (1999, 129–32) argues that the reference to the use of an image in Ehara's translation of the Vimuttimagga's account is based on a misunderstanding of the Chinese.

⁷⁰Schlingloff 1964, 79: *punar āśvāsprasvāsāt vāhayataḥ sphadīkamayo lokāḥ āśrayas ca dṛśyaṃte | tato mūrhdnaḥ ratnamayo vṛkṣaḥ anaṃtā lokadhātvaḥ spharivā tiṣṭhati | tasmīṃ vṛkṣe ghanapattraśākhāsu buddhā dṛśyaṃte dharmā deśayaṃtaḥ taṃmukhaniḥsṛtai ratnapuṣpapadmavarṣair nānāvarṇair loko vyavakīryate | vṛkṣamūlāni ca vaidūryābhāṃny antaḥsuṣirāṇi ... kāṃcanacakre pratiṣṭhitā dṛśyante*. My translation of this passage follows Schlingloff's German more closely than Yamabe's English.

⁷¹“Again, monks, a monk considers this body as though he were looking at a body left in a charnel ground, one, two, or three days dead, bloated, livid, and festering: This body is of the same nature, of the same constitution, it has not got beyond this.” (M I 58: *puna ca paraṃ, bhikkhave, bhikkhu seyyathā pi passeyya sarīraṃ sivathikāya chaḍḍitaṃ ekāhamataṃ vā dvihamataṃ v ā tīhamataṃ vā uddhumātakaṃ vinīlakaṃ vipubbakajātaṃ. so imam eva kāyaṃ upasaṃharati: ayam pi kho kāyo evaṃdhammo evaṃbhāvī etaṃ anatīto ti*).

instructions for visualization of the Buddha found in the fifth century C.E. compilation *Wumen chanjing yaoyong fa*.

Further examples can be cited. Sally Mellick's work on the late canonical Apadāna has brought to light an important passage of several pages that quite clearly describes a visualization of a "palace" (*pāsāda*) carried out by the Buddha himself in terms that once more resonate with the Mahāsudassana narrative:

Mentally I collected in full the incalculable gems in the sky and on the earth; there on the silver ground I created (*māpayiṃ*) a jewelled palace with many storeys ... It had colourful pillars ... the first storey was of beryl ... it possessed fine gabled rooms — blue, yellow, red, white, and pure black — decorated with the seven jewels.⁷²

The use of the verb *māpeti* here — the same verb employed in MSud in connection with the construction of the Dhamma Palace — in the sense of "[mentally] create" is worth noting.

The Abhidharmakośa provides a further clear example of a visualization in connection once more with the practice *aśubha-bhāvanā*:

The ascetic who wishes to develop [the meditation on] ugliness first fixes his mind on some part of his own body. ... Cleansing the bone at that point by progressively visualizing⁷³ the flesh as saturated with moisture, he sees the full skeleton. Then, in order to extend his vision, he visualizes a second skeleton in exactly the same way until by progressively taking in the monastery, park, and countryside, he visualizes the earth encircled by the ocean as full of skeletons. Then, in order to gather in his mind, he gathers in [his vision] until he visualizes just his own skeleton.⁷⁴

⁷²Ap 1 : *ākāsaṭṭhā ca bhūmaṭṭhā, manasā sabbam āhariṃ // tattha rūpiya-bhūmiyaṃ pāsādaṃ māpayiṃ ahaṃ / 'nekaḥkammaṃ ratanamayaṃ ... // vicittathambhaṃ ... // paṭhamāveḷuriyā bhūmi ... // nīlā pītā lohitaḥkā odātā suddhakāḷakā kūṭāgāravaruṇetā sattaratanabhūsitā //* My translation is adapted from Mellick 1993, II 435–38.

⁷³This passage appears to employ *adhi-* √ *muc* in a sense that approximates to "visualize"; cf. *BHSD* s.v. *adhimucyate* and *CPD* and *DOP* s.v. *adhimuccati* for the use of these verbs in the sense of "transform (something, acc.) by magic into (something else, acc.)".

⁷⁴Abhidh-k VI 10 a–b (*ḥhāṣya*): *aśubhāṃ bhāvayitukāma ādīto yogācāraḥ svāṅgāvayave cittam nibadhnāti pādāṅguṣṭhe lalāte yatra cāsyābhiratiḥ | sa*

Finally it is worth drawing attention to the description of the “sign” (*nimitta*) that, according to the Pāli commentaries, is seen by the successful practitioner of mindfulness of breathing in and out:

It appears to some like a star or a cluster of gems or a cluster of pearls, to others with a rough touch like that of silk-cotton seeds or a peg made of heartwood, to others like a long braid string or a wreath of flowers or a puff of smoke, to others like a stretched-out cobweb or a film of cloud or a lotus flower or a chariot wheel of the moon’s disk or the sun’s disk.⁷⁵

More generally the “counterpart sign” (*paṭibhāga-nimitta*) associated with the attainment of concentration is said to appear to the meditator “like a looking-glass disk drawn from its case, like a mother of pearl dish well washed, like the moon’s disk coming out from behind a cloud”.⁷⁶

It seems to me that these passages provide sufficient evidence of the importance of the “visual” in the context of Indian Buddhist meditation generally. We should perhaps also consider that one reason for the relative lack of formal instruction in “visualization” may also be that the visual aspect of certain passages — the fact that they were meant to be imagined and brought to life — may have been largely taken for granted. If we conceive of these texts as being composed orally, being transmitted orally, then the visual dimension may have come alive more

tatra māṃsa-kleda-pītādhimokṣa-krameṇāsthiviśodhayan sakalām asthisamkalāṃ paśyati | tathaiiva ca punar dvitīyām adhimucyate yāvadvihārārāma-kṣetra-krameṇa samudra-paryantām pṛthivīm asthisamkalāṃ pūrṇām adhimucyate ’dhimokṣābhivardhanārtham | punaś ca samkṣīpan yāvadv ekām eva svām asthisamkalām adhimucyate citta-samkṣepārtham |

⁷⁵Sp II 427 = Paṭis-a II 500 = Vism 285 (VIII 215): *idaṃ hi kassaci tārakarūpaṃ viya, maṇigulikā viya, muttāgulikā viya ca kassaci kharasamphassaṃ hutvā kappāsaṭṭhi viya, sārādārusūci viya ca kassaci dīghapāmaṅgasuttaṃ viya, kusumadāmaṃ viya, dhūmasikhā viya ca kassaci vitthataṃ makkaṭaka-suttaṃ viya, valāhakapaṭalaṃ viya, padumapupphaṃ viya, rathacakkaṃ viya, candamaṇḍalaṃ viya, sūriyamaṇḍalaṃ viya ca upaṭṭhāti*. Translation from Ñāṇamoli 1956.

⁷⁶Vism 126 (IV 31): *paṭibhāganimittaṃ thavikato nīhaṭādāsa-maṇḍalaṃ viya, sudhota-saṅkhathālaṃ viya, valāhakantarā nikkhanta-canda-maṇḍalaṃ viya*.

or less spontaneously to those reciting and listening to the texts. An oral culture may well nurture a more active visual imagination than a culture transmitted via TV, cinema, and computer screens.

One place one might look for confirmation that MSud should be taken as a visualization is obviously the commentary of Buddhaghosa. It must be said that the evidence of the commentary is inconclusive. I have already referred to one or two passages which certainly suggest that the commentary, in places at least, read MSud as a myth of the Buddhist path. Certainly there appears to be little if any evidence that the commentarial tradition was interested in finding some social theory embedded in the sutta, or in drawing lessons about how kings should behave. While there appear to be no specific instructions about visualization, none the less, the commentary does seem interested in the visual dimension of MSud. So, for example, the commentary is concerned to add further details about the city's walls, the pillars, and the palm trees.

The innermost and highest wall is the one made out of all kinds of gems, and it is sixty cubits in height. However, some elders say that it is to those standing surveying it from within that the city looks lovely, therefore it is the outermost wall that is sixty cubits, the others being increasingly lower; some elders say that it is to those standing surveying the city from without that the city looks lovely, and it is therefore the innermost wall that is sixty cubits, the rest being increasingly lower. And some elders say that it is to those standing and surveying the city from both within and without that it looks lovely, and it is therefore the middle wall that is sixty cubits, and the three outer and inner walls are increasingly lower.⁷⁷ Given that Yamabe (1999, 174–79) suggests that Sanskrit (vy)avalokayati should be seen as part of the technical vocabulary of meditative visualization, it is worth noting that the verb I have translated above as “survey” is the Pāli equivalent *oloketi* and that, as

⁷⁷Sv II 616.

Yamabe himself notes, this is the verb used for surveying the initial object in the practice of *asubha* and *kaṣiṇa* meditation.⁷⁸

In the light of the comparison made between the *nimitta* seen in meditation and a chariot wheel and the disks of the sun and moon, it is perhaps also significant that the commentary devotes considerable space to elaborating on the description of the wheel treasure (Sv II 617–19) telling how some mistook its appearance as a second full moon. Furthermore when the king sees the wheel treasure his body is suffused with strong joy and gladness, and he gets up from his seat to look through the window.⁷⁹ Such an account recalls the uplifting (*ubbegā*) and suffusing (*pharaṇā*) joy that according to the standard commentarial account of the attainment of *jhāna* arises with the attainment of concentration and the appearance of the counterpart sign.⁸⁰

The possibility of reading aspects of the Mahāsudassana narrative as a visualization raises the possibility of a further connection with much later Buddhist ideas and practices, namely those associated with *maṇḍala* in the esoteric Buddhism of the Vajrayāna. In his work on Barabudur originally published in the 1930s Paul Mus posits and explores the possible continuities between the construction of the Vedic fire altar, the architecture of stūpas and temples, the description of the city of the cakravartin, and *maṇḍalas*.⁸¹ All these constructions in their different ways define a sacred space that is at once a diagram of the cosmos and a point of access between the levels of that cosmos. It seems to me that the Mahāsudassana narrative bears a rather marked resemblance to aspects of the later accounts of *maṇḍalas*. Anthony Tribe (2000, 227–28, 230) sums up the nature of a *maṇḍala* as a tantric deity's residence conceived of as a temple-palace comprising a series of

⁷⁸e.g. Vism 114 (III 119), 185–86 (VI 50).

⁷⁹Sv II 620: *atha rājā balava-pīti-pāmojja-phuṭa-sarīro pallaṅkaṃ mocetvā utthāy' āsanā sīhapañjara-samīpaṃ gantvā taṃ cakka-ratanaṃ disvā.*

⁸⁰See D I 73–74 (the canonical description of the first *jhāna* and its simile) and Vism 125–6 (IV 31); 143–44 (IV 94–99).

⁸¹See Mus 1998, 11, 105–06, 111–13, 265, 341–2.

concentric square courtyards with decorated gateways in the middle of each side and the main deity enthroned at the centre; typically a *maṇḍala* is constructed both ritually and mentally as a visualization that is subsequently dissolved. The narrative of MSud seems to prefigure aspects of this in quite remarkable ways. The narrative takes the listener from the ordinary world — an insignificant village of huts in the jungle — to a fabulous city where a many-roomed jewelled palace is constructed to be entered only by the royal seer who follows the path of meditation. And having given its listeners this fabulous vision, the narrative proceeds to slowly and deliberately dissolve it, bringing the listeners back to the present: the ordinary world, the village of mud huts. While the significance of this possible affinity between the Mahā-sudassana narrative and much later tantric practice must be a matter for speculation, it is perhaps worth in conclusion recalling certain of Mus’s own reflections (1998, 341):

Our interpretation of early Buddhism and Buddhism of the middle period would indeed find useful confirmation in the facility with which it can be applied to the late forms: for whatever may have been said about them, the greater part of the latter have their origins in the early doctrine, or its first specifications ... [T]he stūpa of the Pāli tradition with their effigies of the Buddha, of his disciples, etc., are already illustrated *maṇḍala*: ... Buddhist Tantrism therefore invented nothing; or rather what it invented was a cipher. It transcribed the ancient values with the help of more limited conventions.

8. CONCLUSION

To return to the question posed at the beginning of this article: what is the Mahā-sudassana “myth” doing in the corpus of early Buddhist literature? It seems to me that, as Collins (1998, 495) has suggested in the case of CSS, the text works in the first place by placing certain familiar doctrinal and especially meditative motifs in an unexpected narrative setting — a narrative setting that is “by turns pleasantly farcical and fearsomely imaginative”. Thus, while I think there is undoubted humour and wit in the MSud — especially, for example, in the account of the king’s wives bustling into the palace to see the king — this humour and wit is not so much satirical as simply an aspect of an entertaining nar-

rative that would have engaged a monastic audience concerned with the celibate life.

Even if we hesitate to regard the MSud as a formal visualization in, say, the manner of the tantric *maṇḍala*, yet its meditative and contemplative dimensions remain manifest. The slow, unhurried description of the city with its groves of jewelled trees with tinkling bells and its lotus ponds, of the palace with its jewelled rooms and couches, evokes an image and sense of wellbeing and calm. The story of the king's conversation and of his death, especially in the Pāli version, is of considerable emotional intensity: it is a story of letting go, of the passing of the things to which we are deeply attached — the passing even of the Buddha himself. It is thus a perfect complement to the story of Ānanda's weeping when it sinks in that his teacher will soon die.⁸² The MSud thus has the power to move and arouse — certainly in its ancient listeners — religious emotion in the manner so well brought out by Steven Collins in his discussion of the *Vessantara Jātaka* (1998, 497–554). It is in this sense — the sense in which, after all, the recollections of the qualities of the Buddha, Dhamma, and Saṅgha are classified as meditations (*kammaṭṭhāna*) in the Pāli commentaries — that we might characterize the MSud myth as a form of early Buddhist “meditation”.

Rupert Gethin

⁸²D II 143; Waldschmidt 1951, 294–96.

APPENDIX

COMPARATIVE TABLE OF THE MSUD PĀLI AND CA/GIL

Mahāsudassana-sutta / Mahāsudarśana-sūtra

Pāli version

Central Asian/Gilgit version

169,1–3. The Buddha is lying between the two sal trees at the time of his death.

169,4–15. Ānanda urges the Buddha not to die in a small a town like Kusinārā.

169,16–170,2. Kusinārā was once the royal city of King Mahāsudassana and called Kusāvati.

[*Later*: 170,7–11]

170,2–5. It was 12 × 7 leagues.

170,7–11. It was prosperous, like Ālakamandā, city of the gods.

170,11–16. It was filled with the ten sounds.

170,17–21. It was surrounded by 7 walls – of gold, silver, beryl, crystal, ruby, emerald, and all kinds of gems.

170,22–171,1. It had 4 gates made of gold, silver, beryl, and crystal.

171,1–5. There were 7 pillars at each gate made of gold, etc. (7 kinds).

[*Missing*.]

171,6–21. The city was surrounded by 7 rows of palm trees of gold, etc. (7 kinds); trunk–leaves–fruits variation.

171,22–172,3. Stirred by the wind the trees make a lovely sound.

172,3–5. The drunkards of the city dance to the sound.

172,6–7 M had 7 treasures.

172,8–177,14. Detailed account of M's 7 treasures: wheel, elephant,

The Buddha is lying between the two sal trees at the time of his death.

Ānanda urges the Buddha not to die in a small a town like Kuśinagarī.

3,1. Kuśinagarī was once the royal city called Kuśāvati. [Mahāsudarśana is introduced later.]

3,1–2. It was prosperous.

3,2–3. It was 12 × 7 leagues.

[*Earlier*: 3,1–2]

[*Later*: 7,11–15]

3,3–5. It was surrounded by 7 walls – of gold, silver, beryl, crystal.

3,5–6. It had 4 gates made of gold, silver, beryl, and crystal.

3,6–9. There were pillars at each gate made of gold, etc. (4 kinds).

3,9–11. It was surrounded by 7 moats with bricks of gold, etc. (4 kinds).

3,12–5,3. The city was surrounded by 7 rows of palm trees of gold, etc. (4 kinds); (trunk–)leaves–fruit variation.

5,3–5. Stirred by the wind the trees make a lovely sound.

[*Later*: 7,8–10]

[*Later in brief*: 9,2–4]

[*Missing*.]

horse, gem, woman, treasurer, adviser.

177,15–178,20. Account of 4 *iddhis*: good looks, long life, good health, popularity.

178,21–179,12. M builds lotus ponds among the palm trees with tiles of gold, etc., flights of staircases of gold, etc.; surrounded by two railings with gold uprights and silver cross bars and hand rail, etc.

179,14–19. M has various kinds of lotuses grown in the ponds.

[Missing.]

179,20–25. M provides bath attendants.

179,26–180,5. M provides *dāna*: food, drink, clothing, transport, beds, wives, money.

[Earlier: 172,3–5]

[Earlier: 170,11–16]

[Earlier: 169,16, 172,6–7]

[Earlier in full: 172,8–177,14]

[Earlier: 177,15–178,20]

180,6–12. Brahmins and householders offer money to the king: turned down.

180,13–21. They do not want to take the money back and offer to build the king a dwelling (*nivesana*); the king accepts.

[Later: 9,4–13,2]

5,5–13. There are lotus ponds among the palm trees; similarly described.

5,13–7,2. Various kinds of lotuses grow in the ponds.

7,2–5. Various kinds of flowers grow on the banks of the ponds.

[Missing.]

7,5–8. M⁸³ has girls hand out food, drink, clothing, garlands and perfume.

7,8–10. The drunkards enjoy themselves and dance among the palm trees.

7,11–15. The city is filled with the 12 sounds.

9,1–2. Kuśāvati was the city of King Mahāsudarśana.

9,2–4. He possessed 7 treasures: wheel, elephant, horse, gem, woman, treasurer, adviser.

9,4–13,2. Account of 4 *iddhis*: long life, good looks, good health, popularity.

13,3–12. Town and country folk offer valuables to the king: turned down (× 3).

13,12–15,8. They do not want to take the valuables back and make a pile of them before the king, who

⁸³Mahāsudarśana is abruptly mentioned for the first time here.

180,22–181,11. Sakka hears of M's intentions and instructs Vissakamma to build a *dhamma-pāsāda*; the king accepts Vissakamma's offer.

181,12–182,21. Description of the Dhamma Palace: $1 \times \frac{1}{2}$ a league, with columns, boards, staircases, 84,000 chambers (4 kinds) with couches (4 kinds) and palm trees at the doors.

182,22–28. The king has a grove of golden palm trees made at the door of the 'Room of the Great Array'.

182,29–183,21. The Dhamma Palace is encircled by 2 railings and 2 strings of bells.

[Missing.]

183,22–184,2. When completed, the Dhamma Palace was difficult to look at.

184,3–185,21. The king decides to build a Dhamma Pond in front of the Dhamma Palace; described in detail.

[Missing.]

185,22–26. When the Dhamma Palace and Pond were completed, M saw to the wishes of well-known ascetics and brahmins and went up into the palace.

185,28–186,11. M reflects on the actions that have led to his present circumstances: *dāna*, *dama*, *saṃyama*. At the door of the Room of the Great Array he renounces thoughts of

then decides to build a *dharma-prāsāda*.

15,8–17,10. 84,000 princes hear of M's wish and offer to build the palace for him; the king turns them down three times; finally they prostrate themselves before the king and he accepts.

17,11–23,12. They build the Dharma Palace to the east of Kuśāvati: 1×1 league, with columns, boards, staircases, 2 railings, and more; with 84,000 chambers (4 kinds) with couches (4 kinds) and palm trees at the doors.

[Missing.]

[Earlier (only railings): 21,11–15]

23,11–13. The Dharma Palace is strewn with gold dust, sprinkled with sandal scented water, etc.

[Missing.]

23,14–25,11. 84,000 princes build a Dharma Pond in front of the Dharma Palace; described in detail.

25,12–29,2. They build a Dharma Grove (*dharma-tālavana*), and then inform M everything is ready.

29,2–9. M reflects that he should not live in the Dharma Palace immediately and so first entertains well-known ascetics and brahmins there and clothes each in a pair of robes.

29,9–31,2. He further reflects that he should not enjoy sense pleasures in the Dharma Palace so decides to practice the holy life in the Dharma Palace as a royal seer with a single

sense desire, hostility and malice.

186,12–26. In the Room of the Great Array seated on a golden couch he dwells having attained the first, second, third, fourth *jhānas*.

186,27–187,5. He then enters a golden chamber and seated on a silver couch dwells suffusing the directions with *mettā, karuṇā, muditā, upekkhā*.

187,6–188,11. The king's 14 × 84,000 possessions are listed (first listing).

188,12–189,8. The curious incident of the elephants.

189,9–190,6. Queen Subhaddā reflects that it is long since she has seen the king, and suggests to the women of the harem that they should wash their hair, put on yellow clothes and go to see the king. She has the Adviser make ready the fourfold army and they all enter the Palace of Dhamma, and stand at the door of the Room of the Great Array.

190,7–22. At the noise, the king comes out and tells the queen that she cannot enter; he instructs a man to bring out a golden couch; he lies down on his right side in the lion posture.

190,23–192,9. The queen is struck by his serene senses and clear complexion and fears he is about to die. She urges him to arouse his desire for his 14 × 84,000 possessions (second listing).

attendant.

31,3–12. He enters the Palace; in a golden chamber seated on a silver couch, in a silver chamber on a golden couch, in a beryl chamber on a crystal couch, in a crystal chamber on a beryl couch, he dwells having attained the first *dhyāna*.

[Later: 43,8–45,8]

[Missing.]

[Missing.]

30,15–32,15. The 84,000 women of the harem complain to the Woman that it is long since they have seen the king; she informs the Adviser that they are eager to see the king. He tells them to make themselves ready while he summons the king's 84,000 princes, elephants, horses, and chariots; they all come and make a great noise beneath the Dharma Palace.

33,1–35,4 / 32,16–34,12. The king asks a man about the noise; he explains. The king tells him to prepare a golden seat beneath the palace for him to sit on and survey the crowd.

35,5–39,1. On seeing all the women he averts his senses. The queen sees this and wishes the king not to be uninterested in them. The king comes down from the palace and sits on the seat. The queen approaches him and urges him to arouse desire for his 6 × 84,000 possessions (first listing).

192,10–194,7. The king responds that her words have always been pleasing but that now they are not. She asks what she should say. He tells her that she should tell him to give up his desire for his 14 × 84,000 possessions (third time).

194,8–195,29. The queen weeping tells him to give up his desire for his 14 × 84,000 possessions (fourth listing).

[Earlier: 186,27–187,5]

195,30–196,8. Soon after, the king died and was reborn in the Brahmā world: for 84,000 years he had been a prince, for 84,000 years viceroy, for 84,000 years king, for 84,000 years a householder practising the holy life in the Dhamma Palace.

196,9–198,17. The Buddha explains that he was M and the 14 × 84,000 possessions (fifth listing) were his; of each of the 14 types of 84,000 possession (sixth listing) he used just one.

198,18–23. The Buddha reminds Ānanda that all conditioned things are impermanent.

198,24–199,3. The Buddha announces that he has died six times in this place, this is the seventh, there will be no eighth.

39,1–41,9. The king responds that previously she has addressed him as a friend, but that now she addresses him as an enemy; he calls her ‘sister’ (*bhagini*). At this she weeps and asks him what she should say as a friend. He tells her that she should tell him to give up his desire for his 6 × 84,000 possessions (second listing).

41,10–43,7. The queen tells him to give up his desire for his 6 × 84,000 possessions (third listing).

43,8–45,8. Then the king goes up into the Dharma Palace: in a golden chamber seated on a silver couch, in a silver chamber on a golden couch, in a beryl chamber on a crystal couch, in a crystal chamber on a beryl couch, he dwells suffusing the directions with respectively *maitrā*, *karuṇā*, *muditā*, *upekṣā*.

45,9–13. When the king died he was reborn in the Brahmā world. (Details of the four periods of the king’s life are given at 9,4–11 in connection with the first *ṛddhi*: during the last he was a “royal seer”.)

45,14–47,2. The Buddha explains in brief that he was King Mahā-sudarśana.

[Missing.]

47,3–47,9. The Buddha announces that he has died six times in this place, this is the seventh, there will be no eighth.

199,4-7. Closing verse: Impermanent are conditioned things! It is their nature to arise and fall. Having arisen, they cease. Their stilling is happy.

47,10-11. Closing verse: That which leads to existence is cut out; wandering through births is destroyed; there is now no rebirth

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