

THE WEARY BUDDHA
OR WHY THE BUDDHA NEARLY
COULDN'T BE BOTHERED

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I want to focus in this article on a tiny fraction of the Pali canon of Theravāda Buddhism. It is not an obscure section, and is found on numerous occasions.¹ Indeed, we even find the same incident applied to more than one individual, but I will return to that later.

The version of this incident that I am going to use is found in the *Ariyapariyesanā Sutta* in the Majjhima Nikāya. The incident itself forms part of the most well known narrative of all Buddhist literature—the life of the historical Buddha. The most commonly recounted aspects of this story are those leading to the enlightenment—to the man Gotama becoming a Buddha. What interests me here, though, is what occurs in the gap between Gotama becoming a Buddha, and the Buddha becoming a teacher.

We should not underestimate the significance of the Buddha's entry into teaching. He had been a loner for much of the time² and the formation of the Saṅgha is a big step. The Buddha becomes much more involved with interacting with people again, more so than at any time since his renunciation. These interactions now involve lay people as well as ascetics. His role changes from that of a *samaṇa* to that of something akin to a *guru*.³ One might even go as far as to say that he has to re-

¹ In addition to M 1 168, we also find it at S vi 1, Vin 1 4 and D 11 36.

² He did spend the extended period, around 6 years with the five ascetics, but this group, especially considering the kind of activity they were engaged in, hardly constitutes a community. Furthermore, the Buddha and the others appear to not have had any clearly defined roles within this group—it was certainly a way of living far removed from the Saṅgha that was to come.

³ Although this word is not applied to the Buddha in the early Pali texts, it does describe rather aptly the kind of role he, albeit in some respects rather reluctantly, takes on.

establish a sense of himself as part of a community, albeit ultimately as the leader of that community. This change is one that is perhaps not always recognised by either scholars or Buddhist practitioners for the significant change in the Buddha's interpersonal status that it surely is.

However, during the aforementioned period the Buddha is *not* a teacher. Here is one who has attained the goal, won the prize, and having focused all on so doing, might now be seen as in something of a teleological vacuum—there is no obvious purpose to his existence. (Of course, at one level there is no *point* to anyone's existence, but most of us have goals—things we would like to achieve, even if it is all ultimately futile.)

We might assume that the Buddha is here without desire. At least he is without *taṇhā*, and while he later clearly does possess some of the positive forms of *chanda* (if we translate this term as 'a desire to do' or as a 'desire for')⁴ it may not even be clear if he 'wants' anything at this stage.

As yet this might not sound like a particularly exciting part of the Buddha's life. Why should we pay attention to it? The reason is that the Buddha wobbles: he seems to be disinclined towards teaching that which he has discovered. What could it be that might turn Gotama into a Pacceka Buddha?⁵ What leads him to the statement *my mind inclined to inaction rather than to teaching the Dhamma?*⁶

The obstacle—that which he saw as inclining him away from the declaration of Dhamma—was the realization of just how far most people are from the goal. After revelling in his attainment, we find, prior to the statement I have just quoted, him spelling this out:

I considered: 'This Dhamma that I have attained is profound, hard to see and hard to understand, peaceful and sublime, unattainable by mere reasoning, subtle, to be experienced by the wise. But this generation delights in adhesion, takes delight in adhesion, rejoices in adhesion.'⁷

⁴ See PED, p. 274, for a discussion of the varieties of *chanda*.

⁵ A Buddha who discovers the path, but does not go on to teach.

⁶ M 1 168; I. B. Horner (trans.), *Middle Length Sayings*, 3 vols (London: Pali Text Society, 1954–1959), *Middle Length Discourses*, 1 260.

⁷ *Ibid.*

The term that Bodhi and Ñāṇamoli here render as ‘adhesion’ (*ālaya*) others have given as ‘sense-pleasures’, but it also includes the craving after such pleasures. Also, note that even in the Buddha’s day we find people bemoaning the youth of the day! The Buddha continues in this vein, emphasising the difficulty of his attainment, ending with the statement:

If I were to teach the Dhamma, others would not understand me, and that would be wearying and troublesome for me.⁸

This is where it gets interesting. Now, this may not seem to be a particularly fruitful area for investigation, being just a demonstration of how difficult to understand the Buddha’s newly won-prize and the Path to it are. However, if we look at this passage and its implications more closely we can see that it does a number of things.

We can see this section and the following one—where the *deva* Brahmā Sahampati persuades the Buddha to teach, and which runs up to the actual start of the first sermon—as a rhetorical device for establishing certain specific aspects of the Buddhist position. For example, the discussion with Brahmā Sahampati places the Buddha above the gods, but not in conflict with them. The whole piece can be viewed as an arena for the Buddha to clarify his status. The position presented acknowledges Brahmanical cosmology, but expands upon it and alters the significance and status of those who inhabit it. While this may be a particularly appropriate location to establish these notions, as a framework for what follows, it is not the only place in the Canon that does this, and it is not all that is significant in this passage.

What is most startling here is the admission that a ‘thus-gone’ might suffer—the Buddha’s seeing himself as capable of undergoing ‘weariness’ (*kilamatha*) and what some translate as ‘vexation’ (*vihesā*)—and, almost as importantly, not seeming to want to—having a desire to avoid them.

What is going on? Can the Buddha be feeling these things? We may think that he would just be physically tired, but the context seems to imply that he would be frustrated by such a fruitless task. Before I com-

⁸ Ibid.

ment on this, the status of the Buddha as a *tathāgata*—one who has gone beyond, a ‘thus-gone’ one—needs clarifying.

The state of the *tathāgata* might be compared to that of the *yogin* who has gone-beyond (for example at *Bhagavadgītā* 5.20). The outer person may be shaken but within he is steady, calm and unshakeable. This is also expressed in the *Milindapañha*, often seen as a standard presentation of Theravāda orthodoxy:

The King said: ‘He who will not be reborn, Nāgasena, does he still feel any painful sensation?’

The Elder replied: ‘Some he feels and some not.’

‘Which are they?’

‘He may feel bodily pain, O King; but mental pain he would not.’

‘How would that be so?’

‘Because the causes, proximate or remote, of bodily pain still continue, he would be liable to it. But the causes, proximate or remote, of mental agony having ceased, he could not feel it. For it has been said by the Blessed One: “One kind of pain he suffers, bodily pain: but not mental.”⁹

This seems fairly clear, and is reinforced in Book IV, 6, 41.¹⁰ Furthermore the *Milindapañha* contains a great many such discussions on the status of the Buddha in particular and ‘thus-gone’ ones in general. For example, in Book IV, the twenty-second and thirtieth dilemmas concern whether or not the Buddha felt anger (he did not, we are told), and for a passage that drives home the message that a ‘thus-gone’ cannot be mentally disturbed we can look to the thirty-ninth dilemma (in Book IV still). This begins with the familiar premise, presented here by the ever-questioning (but to my mind rather easily impressed), King Milinda:

‘Venerable Nāgasena, it was said by the Blessed One: “The Arahats have laid aside all fear and trembling.” But on the other hand ...’¹¹

The problem arises when King Milinda considers the occasion when the Buddha and five hundred Arahats encounter a ‘man-slaying’ elephant.¹²

⁹ Mil 44. T. W. Rhys Davids (trans.), *The Questions of King Milinda*, 2 vols, The Sacred Books of the East; vols 35–36 (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1890/94), I 69.

¹⁰ Mil 253; dilemma 57.

¹¹ Mil 207–9; Rhys Davids, *Questions of King Milinda* I 297–300.

The problem occurs because the elephant charges and as it is bearing down upon the Blessed One, all the five hundred Arahats forsook the Conqueror and fled, one only excepted, Ānanda the Elder, the one monk who is not yet an Arahāt.

The dilemma then is clear, why do the Arahats flee? Are they scared, or do they just wish to get a good view for when the Buddha deals with this threat? To cut to the chase, Nāgasena solves the dilemma by claiming that the Arahats withdrew (a polite word for fled?) so that the goodness of Ānanda could be made clear to the people of the city (Rājagaha), and then this would contribute to the result whereby 'great masses of the people attain to emancipation from the bonds of evil'.¹³ So, the Arahats withdrew not from fear, but 'for the advantages they foresaw'¹⁴ in so doing.

Perhaps more directly relevant here are not the reasons Nāgasena gives for the Arahats withdrawing, but the reasons he gives explaining why they *cannot* be scared. It is not that they are just not scared on this occasion, rather their fear is seen as an impossibility. The unequivocal nature of this assertion is such that it is worth looking at how Nāgasena presents it to the king:

'Is the broad earth, O King, afraid at people digging into it, or breaking it up, or at having to bear the weight of the mighty oceans and the peaked mountain ranges?'

'Certainly not, Sir.'

'But why not?'

'Because there is no cause in the broad earth which could produce fear or trembling.'

'Just so, O King. And neither is there any such cause in Arahats. And would a mountain peak be afraid of being split up, or broken down, or made to fall, or burnt with fire?'

'Certainly not, Sir.'

¹² The story is also related, albeit with some minor and some major variations from the version which Mil gives, in the Vinaya Piṭaka, *Cullavagga* VII 3, 11–12 (Vin II 194–5). One of the main differences, a vital one in this context, is that in the Vinaya account the Arahats do not flee as they do here, and Ānanda does not remain behind. In Mil the elephant is known as Dhanapālaka, but in the Vinaya as Nālāgiri.

¹³ Mil 209.

¹⁴ Mil 209.

‘But why not?’

‘The cause of fear or trembling does not exist within it.’

‘And just so, O King, with Arahats. If all the creatures of various outward form in the whole universe were, together, to attack one Arahata in order to put him to fear, yet they would bring about no variation in his heart. And why? Because there is neither condition nor cause for fear (in him, whence fear could arise).’¹⁵

So, Arahats are not scared of anyone or anything—that is clear. A line I find striking here is that the attack of the final paragraph would lead to: *no variation in his heart*.¹⁶ This image conveys exactly the kind of view of both Arahats and the Buddha we find throughout canonical and non-canonical Theravāda texts. They are unshakeable within, not contingently, but necessarily: it is their nature to be so.

This, however, only deepens our problem. How, after all this, can we understand the idea that the Buddha may feel mental suffering, *nāma dukkha*? Perhaps we should return to the quotation itself. If we take the words *so mam’ assa kilamatho, sā mam’ assa vihesā* (‘that would be wearying to me, that would be troublesome for me’), can we find any assistance?

Perhaps they are just words for physical tiredness? Maybe this is a pseudo-problem that I have here conjured. The first term, *kilamatha*, is defined in the PTS’s Pali-English Dictionary (p. 216) as ‘tiredness, fatigue, exhaustion’, so this may add to the suspicion that I am just looking for trouble here, but what of *vihesā*?

PED (p. 643) gives this as ‘vexation, annoyance, injury, worry.’ This is more troubling and does seem to support the idea of some kind of mental disturbance. Elsewhere it is translated as ‘vexation’—indeed in the *Saṅgīti Sutta*¹⁷ it is used to partly describe the things an enlightened one is free from—the ‘vexations and fevers that arise from sense-desire’.¹⁸ Here it clearly does seem to be a form of mental distress.

¹⁵ Mil 208–09; Rhys Davids, *Questions of King Milinda* 1 299–300.

¹⁶ Mil 209: *na bhaveyya arahato cittassa kiñci aññathattam*. I. B. Horner *Milinda’s Questions* 2 vols (London: Luzac, 1963–64), 1 303) translates ‘there would yet be no faltering whatever in his mind’.

¹⁷ D III 240 ff.

¹⁸ M. Walshe (trans.), *The Long Discourses of the Buddha* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1995), p. 497.

We do find the term applied to himself by the Buddha at another point. In the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta* we find the Buddha seeming to get a little bored of people asking him what has become of various individuals after death. He says to his companion Ānanda ‘that you should come to Tathāgata to ask the fate of each of those who have died, that is a weariness to him’.¹⁹ Here the term *vihesā* is used. And the implication of this paradox is so strong that the commentary points out that a Buddha can feel only physical weariness.²⁰ That such a comment is needed demonstrates, I feel, that the original context and expression implies that this is not the case. So we do seem to have a puzzle here.

Now, although it might be fun to pretend otherwise, I am not the first to notice something going on in this passage. The Pali commentary to the *Ariyapariyesanā Sutta* passage picks up the baton a little,²¹ but only with respect to why he might be in doubt, having desired for so many previous lives to become a fully enlightened (and teaching) Buddha.

The commentarial solution is to suggest that the Buddha could only see the full extent of people’s ignorance and attachment once he himself was fully free of such things, and furthermore that he wished Brahmā to play his role such that people would value his message—the gods holding it in such high esteem.

All very interesting, no doubt, but it does not get at the heart of what I am looking at here. What is noteworthy though, is that this incident is not seen as either an accident or as unique. In the account of the enlightenment of a previous Buddha, in the *Mahāpadāna Sutta*, we find the same words in the mouth of the long-past fully enlightened Buddha Vi-passī.²² Indeed, when the *Milindapañha* discusses this issue of the Buddha’s disinclination to teach, Nāgasena explains this event is one which happens to all Buddhas in all ages:

And this, too, is an inherent necessity in all Tathāgatas that it should be on the request of Brahma that they should proclaim the Dhamma.²³

¹⁹ D II 93; Walshe, *Long Discourses of the Buddha*, p. 241.

²⁰ Sv II 543, as Walshe notes (*Long Discourses of the Buddha*, p. 568, n. 375).

²¹ Ps III 74.

²² D II 36.

²³ Mil 41 (IV,5:37).

Here we seem in danger of being caught up in concerns with the problems of free-will and pre-destination. What I feel is more useful is to concentrate on the nature of the Buddha's concern—that he may have a frustrated desire.²⁴

So, we have come this far but I see no real solution at hand. It may just be that I am being pedantic here, but pedantry is—as surely the Abhidhamma shows—a badge of honour in the study of Buddhism. Those that have examined this area seem preoccupied with the *fact* of the hesitation, rather than the precise nature of it. Damien Keown quotes an unpublished paper by M. Wiltshire claiming that:

If he had taught automatically and without hesitation as the natural consequence of his enlightenment, then the act of teaching would not have been seen as a distinct achievement.²⁵

Here the choice is vital—the carrying out of an act of compassion for this world of misery-drenched beings. Keown himself describes the incident in even more significant terms:

²⁴ The topic is discussed in the fiftieth dilemma of Book iv of the *Milindapañha* (Mil 232–34). The discussion begins with Milinda contrasting the Buddha's slow, directed development 'through millions of years, through aeon after aeon,' with the hesitance to teach that we have been reflecting upon. As Milinda puts it: 'But on the other hand (they say): "Just after he had attained to omniscience his heart inclined, not to the proclamation of the Truth, but to rest in peace."' Milinda sees, at least to some extent, the problem that lies here: out of what does this hesitancy arise?

'Now was it from fear, Nāgasena, that the *tathāgata* drew back, or was it from inability to preach, or was it from weakness, or was it because he had not, after all, attained to omniscience? ... This too is a double-edged problem, now put to you,—a problem profound, a knot hard to unravel,—which you have to solve.' (Rhys Davids, *Questions of King Milinda* II 39–40)

So, our problem is now Nāgasena's problem. His response is in accordance with the canonical accounts I have referred to, but does not add as much to these accounts as one might hope. Nonetheless, it is an attempt to solve this problem, and as such may provide us with some basis for a fresh insight into this riddle. Nāgasena's account, that the *tathāgata*'s heart inclined to inaction rather than teaching is a function of two specific conditions. Firstly, the complexity of the teachings, and secondly the ignorant/craving nature of beings—this adds nothing new to the commentarial account.

²⁵ D. Keown, *The Nature of Buddhist Ethics* (London: Macmillan, 1992), p. 42.

This initial hesitation and subsequent decision by the founder of the tradition to teach can be seen as emblematic of the new scale of values introduced by Buddhism into the contemporary religious scene.²⁶

All very well, but this still fails to address the given *reason* for the hesitation. Indeed some seem to describe the passage and pass right over this problem, as Carol Anderson seems to when she writes:

Thinking of how difficult it would be to teach this, and how frustrating it would be for people not to understand, the *sutta* says that the Buddha was not particularly inclined to teach *dhamma*.²⁷

The hesitation has—through all that I have discussed so far—be seen as a device: be it cosmological, rhetorical and moral, but still we seen no attention paid to this notion of the possibility of a weary Buddha.

Are we to see it as a canonical slip-up? Or an incident so enmeshed into a narrative that bickering over doctrinal niceties is inappropriate given the context? Were Buddhist texts usually less coherent (by whatever means applied by their redactors), it might be easy to brush this off. However, I think this is not only an entertaining little incident to look at, but one which seems to reveal a very human side of the accounts of the Buddha found in the Pali canon. There are only so many of these incidents (such as in the *Poṭṭhapāda-Sutta* where the Buddha sets out to a village for alms, before realising—presumably once already en route—that it is too early in the day),²⁸ but they add a charm to the texts, a sense of a person which many later texts seem somewhat devoid of.

Another area that this topic might act as a starting point for is an inquiry into the nature of the mind-body relationship in Buddhist thought. There does seem room for some discomfort here. On the one hand, Buddhist thought seems to deny any strict Cartesian split between mind and body. However, the split between the mental and non-mental

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ C. Anderson, *Pain and its Ending: the Four Noble Truths in the Theravāda Buddhist canon* (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon, 1999), p. 60. While reading this without the *sutta* we might think that the frustration would be felt by the hapless learner; the *suttas* clearly attribute the potential vexation to the Buddha.

²⁸ D I 178.

we have seen with regard to the potential for suffering looks as though it makes quite a strict distinction between the two.

There is certainly a close interaction between mind and body, which differs from Cartesian Substance Dualism. A further difference is that we can have a much more significant analysis of ‘mind’ in Buddhism than in a Cartesian approach.²⁹ However, just because the interaction is more explicit and multi-level, does this mean that we cannot disentangle the two? Peter Harvey suggests that, rather than Substance Dualism, Pali Buddhist texts, especially earlier ones, propose a model which he terms ‘twin-category process pluralism’.³⁰

While this is not the place to follow further Buddhist understandings of mind-body relationships too far, what is of interest here is the view that while *nāma* and *rūpa* are mutually conditioning and interact, they are still separate things.³¹ As Harvey writes: ‘There is a clear differentiation between *dhammas* which are intentional (part of *nāma*) and those which pertain to material form (*rūpa*).’³² So, if we accept Harvey’s view, the *nāma-rūpa* distinction is sufficiently secure for us to be able to rule out the possibility of *nāma dukkha* in a being who can experience *rūpa dukkha*.

In coming to a conclusion here, one approach is to suggest that this incident represents a relatively ‘human’ portrayal of the Buddha, which later traditions were unable to reconcile with prevailing doctrinal orthodoxies. However, this can only remain as a tentative suggestion, and as a partial answer.

So, sadly, I offer no conclusive answer to this puzzle. Why does a text so central to the key Buddhist narrative seem to indicate something in contradiction to the great mass of teaching on the nature of a Buddha?

²⁹ Buddhism seems removed by the ability to examine mental phenomena from that Cartesian view where ‘mind’ is more mysterious and elusive—what has been called ‘the dogma of the Ghost in the Machine’ (G. Ryle, *The Concept of Mind* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1973), p. 17).

³⁰ P. Harvey, ‘The Mind-Body Relationship in Pali Buddhism: A Philosophical Investigation’, *Asian Philosophy* 3 (1993), pp. 29–41 (29).

³¹ They are not, then, a single organism by necessity. In normal circumstances, neither *nāma* nor *rūpa* are independent, but what has happened in an Arahāt is that the nature of *nāma* has been radically altered.

³² Harvey, ‘The Mind-Body Relationship in Pali Buddhism’, p. 39.

In a way, the answer is of course, that it just does. Perhaps I should take it easy here, and abandon the attempt to make it all fit coherently together. Maybe such a seeming contradiction cannot be solved when holding on to wanting to solve it. Like a Zen Koan it may only open before me when I let go of it. But if only an enlightened being can explain the type of frustration envisioned by the Buddha here, I may have to wait an exceedingly long time for an answer.

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Abbreviations

A *Āṅguttara Nikāya*

D *Dīgha Nikāya*

M *Majjhima Nikāya*

Mil *Milindapañha*

PED T. W. Rhys Davids and W. Stede, *Pali-English Dictionary* (London: Pali Text Society, 1921–25).

Ps *Papañcasūdanī*

S *Saṃyutta Nikāya*

Sv *Sumaṅgalvilāsini*