



PROJECT MUSE®

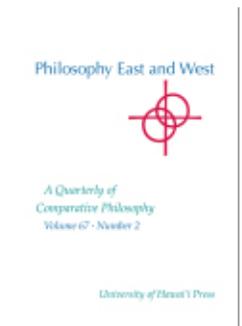
Psychological solutions to Metaphysical problems in the
Pārāyaṇa-vagga

Eviatar Shulman

Philosophy East and West, Volume 67, Number 2, April 2017, pp. 506-530
(Article)

Published by University of Hawai'i Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/pew.2017.0037>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/656835>

PSYCHOLOGICAL SOLUTIONS TO METAPHYSICAL PROBLEMS IN THE *PĀRĀYAṆA-VAGGA*



Eviatar Shulman

Department of Comparative Religion and Department of Asian Studies
Hebrew University of Jerusalem
Eviatar.shulman@mail.huji.ac.il

The understanding of early Buddhist philosophy oscillates between two binary opposed interpretations. On the one hand we find a metaphysical system that hinges on the doctrine of karma and the attempt to exit *saṃsāra*. Here the Buddha is thought to attain a transcendence that takes place in some indescribable existential or ontological realm. On the other hand we encounter an empirical approach that sees the Buddha as a thinker who denied the credibility of metaphysical speculation and who advocated the relinquishing of philosophical positions, which is grounded in a concrete perception of impermanence and conditionality. There are also many intermediary positions between these two extremes and various formulations of their interaction or interpenetration, which become especially compelling when they are connected to contemplative theory and practice.

Interestingly, these two paradigmatic approaches to early Buddhist thought find relatively distinct expression in the two earliest textual collections that exist in the Pāli canon. The second position is voiced by the *Aṭṭhaka-vagga* (*AV*), “The Chapter of Eights,” a text that has naturally received a fair amount of attention since it corresponds to the ideological vectors of Buddhist modernism. The first, more metaphysical interpretation is articulated in the *Pārāyaṇa-vagga* (*PV*), “The Chapter on Going Beyond,” a text that has quite interestingly remained outside the limelight of scholarly inspection, even though it is acknowledged as being just as old as the *Aṭṭhaka*, if not older. These two collections are the fourth and fifth books of the *Sutta-Nipāta* (*SN*), a rich collection of poems that is placed in the *Khuddaka Nikāya*. Together with “The Rhinoceros Horn Discourse” (*Khaggavisāṇa-sutta*) from the first book of the *SN*, these are accepted as the earliest surviving textual records of Buddhism, since (1) they are characterized by archaic poetry, (2) are mentioned by name and quoted in the prose suttas of the major four Nikāyas, and (3) are the only texts to have a commentary on them included within the *Sutta-Piṭaka* (the *Mahā- and Cūḷa-Niddesa* of the *Khuddaka Nikāya*).¹

The goal of the present essay is to fill in this large scholarly lacuna and to conceptualize the philosophical position of the *PV*. In a subsequent essay in the following edition of *Philosophy East and West*, titled “The Polyvalent Philosophy and Soteriology of Early Buddhism,” I will consider the significance of the *PV* and the relations between it and the *AV* and the *Khaggavisāṇa-sutta* for the broader understanding of the philosophical and contemplative culture of early Buddhism in its historical context.

A short word about the text itself is in order. Although I treat the main body of the *PV* as a coherent whole, this does not mean that I see it as univocal and as necessarily having been composed by a single author. The heart of the text is a series of sixteen sets of questions and answers between the Buddha and his students. As it exists today, this part of the text is preceded by an introduction (*vatthu-gāthā*) that provides a narrative framework for the sixteen poems. It is commonly accepted that this opening section was not part of the original version of the text, since the old *Cūḷa-Niddesa* commentary does not include it. There are other considerations that would support this understanding, mainly that the questions posed to the Buddha by Bhadravuddha and Mogharāja assume a different setting than the one introduced in the opening section.² Without the organizing narrative framework, it is difficult to decide what the true relation between the sixteen sets of questions and answers is and whether they were collected from different sources. Whatever the origin of the poems, I will demonstrate that they share a thematic unity; this will support the idea that the text is more than an assembly of poems that originally circulated independently.

The Message of the Pārāyaṇa-vagga

The *PV* defines one main problem with the human condition: humanity is continuously attacked by a “flood” (*ogha*). This is a poetic expression for the conditioned and inevitable human movement toward death and decay. Human beings are weak and vulnerable in the face of birth, old age, and death, and their experience is heavily constricted by karma. Normally, in the context of Buddhist thought, this painful reality is thought to be part of an endless and beginning-less cycle of transmigration, yet there is no mention of such a comprehensive perspective in the text; the term *saṃsāra* is not used and there is no precise notion of transmigration. Remarkably, the Buddha says again and again in the *PV* that this intense pain can be healed by attentive awareness, wisdom, and control of passion. Moreover, one can fully alter the impending reality of death and rebirth through the correct use of attention. Thus, the central aim of the *PV* is to delineate a *psychological solution to a metaphysical problem*: old age and death will be vanquished by careful use of awareness.

That Buddhism hopes for a psychological solution is not new. By this I mean that Buddhism believes that human pain can be cured by changing the dynamics of mind and perception. Yet the *PV* demonstrates that this solution is not to a psychological problem of suffering, but to a metaphysical reality of pain that is realized through death and rebirth. That is to say that man’s “problem” is “metaphysical” in the sense that it results from the very nature of existence: suffering is not personal but inherent in the conditioned reality of “the flood.”³ The crux of pain is in the afterlife and in the very fact that human beings live in a transient, conditioned, ephemeral world. The fact that the Buddha believes that he can remedy this situation through a sensitive application of attention is itself of metaphysical significance.

We begin in the middle of the collection, with the question of Kappa:

1092

*majjhe sarasmiṃ tiṭṭhatam oghe jāte mahabbhaye / jarāmaccuparetānaṃ dīpaṃ pabrūhi
mārisa / tvaṃ ca me dīpaṃ akkhāhi yathayidaṃ nāparaṃ siyā //*

For those situated in the middle of a lake
In which a terrifying wave (*ogha*) has arisen,
Afflicted by old age and death—
Point an island out to me, wise one, and explain it as it is
So it may not recur.⁴

Although metaphorical, Kappa's question is clear: beings suffer from old age and death; in this they are likened to people who are in the middle of a lake in which a great, ominous wave has arisen. The Buddha⁵ knows where safety lies, which will provide a permanent cure so that the trouble will never return. He replies:

1094

*akiñcanaṃ anādānaṃ etaṃ dīpaṃ anāparaṃ /
nibbānaṃ iti naṃ brūmi jarāmaccuparikkhayaṃ //*

Being without a thing, without taking anything up,
This is the island, and no other.
I call it *nibbāna*,
The complete extinction of old age and death.

1095

*etad aññāya ye satā diṭṭhadhammābhiniḅbutā /
na te mārasānugā na te mārasa paddhagū'ti //*

Knowing this, the mindful have blown out,
Having seen the truth directly.
They do not go to Māra's power;
They are not his servants.

Nibbāna is clearly portrayed in these verses as the solving of the problem of "old age and death." In fact, the Buddha says that *nibbāna* is only the word he uses to speak of the extinction of birth and death. Those who have attained this state are said to be freed from the grasp of Māra, the personified power of passion and death. This may be realized by those who are mindful, who have reached "the island" of having nothing.

The next dialogue with Jatukaṇṇi continues these ideas. Jatukaṇṇi asks:

1096

*sutvānaṃ viraṃ akāmakāmiṃ oghātigamṃ puṭṭhum akāmaṃ āgamaṃ /
santipadaṃ brūhi sahājanetta / yathātacchaṃ brūhi me taṃ //*

Having heard of the hero who has no desire for sense objects,⁶
I have come to question him
Who has no passion and has crossed the flood—
Explain the quiet place, Oh Seer-of-innate-vision,⁷ explain it to me as it really is.

1097

*bhagavā hi kāme abhibhuyya iriyati / ādicco 'va paṭhaviṃ teji tejasā / parittapaññassa me
bhūripañña / ācikkha dhammaṃ yaṃ ahaṃ vijaññaṃ / jatijarāya idha vippahānaṃ //*

The lord goes about having vanquished desires,
Like the sun lighting the earth with its brilliance.
You of broad knowledge, show me of limited knowledge,
The *dhamma*, the destruction of birth and old age, here,
So I will know it.

Jatukaṇṇi sees the Buddha as a man who has crossed the flood, who has defeated passion and is deeply knowledgeable. He asks for an explanation of how to destroy birth and old age *here* (*idha*), which he defines as the *dhamma*, the Buddha's teaching. This statement is the clue to comprehending the whole of the *PV*'s message: one can destroy birth, old age, and death *here*, that is, within the psychological reality of this very life. *Idha*, "here," is an important term used to characterize life in this world, as opposed to *huraṃ*, "there, in the other world." With the inclusion of birth as part of the human predicament, we see that the Buddha and his interlocutors are concerned not only with the reality of death and decay, but also with forthcoming rebirth; we can therefore comfortably say that they are troubled by the prospects of repeated rebirth and transmigration.

In his answer, the Buddha explains how this goal can be realized:

1098

*kāmesu vinaya gedhaṃ nekkhammaṃ daṭṭhu khemato /
uggahītaṃ nirattaṃ vā mā te vijjittha kiñcanaṃ //*

Lead greed toward the passions to its end;
Having seen renunciation as safety,
There should not be anything you hold on to or reject.

In order to quit birth and death, the Buddha recommends a strict psychological regimen: one should hold on to or reject nothing, having adopted the path of renunciation and relinquished all passions. He continues:

1099

*yaṃ pubbe taṃ visosehi pacchā te mā 'hu kiñcanaṃ /
majjhe ce no gahessasi upasanto carissasi //*

Dry up all that is earlier; let there be nothing for you later;
If you will not hold on to anything in between,
You will go about in peace.

Similar instructions appear in other places in the *SN*.⁸ They guide the practitioner not to grasp at anything present, past, or future and may be read as a more specific meditative training. One is to remain focused in the present moment, but with no valorization of it as more true than the past and the future—it, too, is not to be grasped at.

Notice the subtle over-play of meaning here, which gently alludes to the malady of birth-and-death for which the Buddha is offering a cure. Indeed, when reading these verses from the *PV* we must keep in mind that we are dealing with poetry and that the verses often generate multiple layers of meaning.⁹ The verse first instructs the student to renounce anything earlier or later. This should be read as referring also to earlier and later rebirths,¹⁰ so that the practitioner is situated “in the middle” (*majjhe*), that is, in this very moment *and* in this very rebirth. The correct cognitive stance in relation to the events that take place “in between” allows one to attain a deeper freedom not only in relation to the past and future in this life, but also in respect to the reality of transmigration.

In this verse, one is instructed to “dry up” (*visosehi*) past things (*pubbe*). This may be thought to resonate with the ideal of “extinguishing” or “drying up” the “inflows,” the *āsava*, the conditioning streams of past experience that carry its determining influence into the present and future.¹¹ “Drying up” or “destroying” the “inflows” is equal to liberation, according to the central theories of liberation in the *Nikāyas*. The extinction of the *āsavas* is, in fact, referred to in the next, final verse of the poem:

1100

sabbaso nāmarūpasmim vītagedhassa brāhmaṇa /
āsavā 'ssa na vijjanti yehi maccavasam vaje'ti //

Brahmin, for him who is thoroughly devoid of greed
In relation to name and form,
There are no inflows by which
He may turn to the power of death.

Whatever the precise relation between the destruction of “inflows” here and in the prose *Nikāyas*, the claim here is unambiguous—one who has no more greed (in relation to “name and form”¹²) is freed from the power of death; the man who re-configures his mind to go thoroughly beyond passion surpasses death. This confirms that the practice outlined in the previous verse to be unattached to past, present, and future, was designed to allow one to cope with the reality of transmigration.

We may question what precisely the author of these verses had in mind when he spoke of “destroying birth and old age here.” He could have intended that one is no longer troubled by death, in a personal or existential sense. He may also have thought that one who reaches this attainment will move on from this life to a wonderful, painless destination of sheer beatitude. Or, he may have had a negative notion in mind regarding the end of transmigration in the relief of annihilation. Possibly he contemplated some or all of these options combined or an inconceivable reality beyond them. What is primary for us is to grasp what one is liberated from—death and transmigration are obviously the main concern. In this respect, we should mark the conception of the *āsava* as what makes one “turn to the power of death.” Inflows are produced through action motivated by greed and have the power to impel one to continue in the rounds of transmigration. Relinquishing this influence is liberation.¹³

The dialogues with Kappa and Jatukaṇṇi helped define the main logic of the *PV*—one amends the pains of death and rebirth through a correct direction of attention. Let us now return to the earlier sections of the poem and see how this theme is developed. The first question to the Buddha is submitted by Ajita, who speaks metaphorically:

1032

*kenassu nivuto loko kenassu nappakāsati /
kissābhilepanaṃ brūsi kiṃ su tassa mahabbhayaṃ //*

What envelops the world?
Because of what does it not shine?
Tell me what are its pollution and terror?

The question is poetic, the Buddha's answer more concrete:

1033

*avijjāya nivuto loko vevicchā pamādā nappakāsati / jappābhilepanaṃ brūmi dukkhaṃ
assa mahabbhayaṃ //*

The world is enveloped by ignorance;
Because of avarice and negligence it does not shine;
I say it is polluted by chatter;
Pain is its great terror.

The opening of the poem has a metaphysical air, yet the obscurations the Buddha defines are psychological or behavioral; these are subjective attitudes we are all familiar with, such as negligence and "chatter," although we probably have limited understanding regarding the subjective structures the Buddha defined as "ignorance." Ajita's next question is more enigmatic:

1034

*savanti sabbadhī sotā sotānaṃ kiṃ nivāraṇaṃ /
sotānaṃ saṃvaraṃ brūhi kena sotā pithiyyare //*

The torrents flow everywhere—what is their hindrance?
Explain to me the restraint of these torrents—
By what are they obstructed?

Here we inevitably wonder what a "torrent" or a stream (*sota*) is; this may, however, be a poetic expression with no definite, pinpoint meaning. "Torrents," perhaps, cannot be reduced to a controllable, easily identifiable, psychological function. It is also hard to decide whether they relate to conditioning that originated prior to this life. The question thus suggests meanings that refer both to personal, phenomenological reality and to a more metaphysical notion of conditioning concerned with transmigration. Once again the Buddha's answer is impressive in its psychological precision:

1035

*yāni sotāni lokasmiṃ sati tesam nivāraṇaṃ /
sotānaṃ saṃvaraṃ brūmi paññā’etepi pithiyyare //*

Those torrents in the world—
Mindfulness¹⁴ is their hindrance.
I explain the restraint of the torrents—
They are obstructed by wisdom.

Correct employment of attention and of understanding will allow one to dam the flood. This is a powerful attestation to the concrete, psychological inclination of the text. Yet we have seen that the psychological orientation of the *PV* is couched in a mature metaphysical framework, which positions the personal, subjective, psychological effort toward freedom in relation to the reality of human decay and death. This predicament was no more than hinted at by the image of the streaming torrents in Ajita’s questions; one could read them as saying nothing beyond the psychological. In dexterous poetic technique, the metaphysical will be gradually teased out as the poem develops. As we have seen in the questions posed by Jatukaṇṇi, the images of the flood, torrents, and turbulent streams are explicitly related to the suffering involved in death and rebirth.

The next student who approaches the Buddha is Tissa Metteyya. The dense question he submits and the answer he receives repeat the themes we have seen so far, but still only with implicit reference to the afterlife:

1040

*ko ‘dha santusito loke kassa no santi iñjitā /
ko ubhantam abhiññāya majjhe mantā na lippati /
kaṃ brūsi mahāpuriso’ti ko idha sibbanim accagā //*

Who is content here in the world?
For whom are there no vacillations?
Who is the man of truth (*mantā*), who having known both extremes
Is situated in the middle, without becoming stained?
Tell me who you call a great man
And who, here, has gone beyond the seams?

Again the expression is poetic and suggestive, and we cannot show conclusively that the “seams” are those between this life and the next, or that being “in the middle having known both extremes” is an achievement in relation to the previous life and the future one. Nonetheless, these readings are part of the associations that these verses and similar ones like them raise. See, for example, the following from the *AV*:

801

*yassūbhayante paṇidhīdha n’atthi bhavābhavāya idha vā huraṃ vā / nivesanā tassa na
santi keci dhammesu niccheyya samuggahītā //*

He who has no aspiration here in relation to the two extremes,
Toward states of being and non-being, this life and beyond—
For him there are no abodes he grasps at,
Having reached determination in relation to things.

The extremes one is to avoid relate to rebirth—they are “states of being and non-being” (*bhavābhava*) that one may aspire to in this life or the next (*idha vā huraṃ vā*). Rebirth is also hinted at by the allusion to relinquishing grasping at “abodes” (*nivesanā*). In light of this verse, Tissa Metteya’s question appears to relate to the overcoming of rebirth. Once again, the Buddha’s answer emphasizes overcoming passion, being always mindful and understanding:

1041
*kāmesu brahmacariyavā vītataṇho sadā sato /
saṃkhāya nibbuto bhikkhu tassa no santi iñjitā //*

The monk who practices renunciation of desires,
Who has no passion, always mindful,
Who is quiet, having understood—
For him there are no vacillations.

If we had begun reading the poem from the start and read only this far, we might have felt that the idea of rebirth was too implicit to be defined as the main concern of the text. This begins to change in the third exchange between Buddha and Puṇṇaka, who inquires into the merits of Brahmanic sacrifice, only to be told by the Buddha that “those seers, men, rulers, and Brahmins who each performed the sacrifice to the gods here in this world were hoping for existence here (*itthabhāva*); they performed the sacrifice holding on to old age.”¹⁵ This polemical, sarcastic answer drives Puṇṇaka to ask directly whether these heroes who were “attentive to the path of sacrifice, crossed beyond birth and old age?”¹⁶ Naturally, the Buddha’s answer is negative, and he offers his own, mature characterization of the people who have crossed beyond the painful reality of human decline. His evaluation of the true sage in this case is full of pun:

1048
*saṃkhāya lokasmiṃ parovarāni yass’iñjitaṃ nathi kuhiṃci loke / santo vidhūmo anigho
nirāso atāri so jātijaraṃ’ti brūmī’ti //*

He for whom, having understood high and low,
There are no vacillations anywhere in the world,
Quiet, “smokeless,” passionless, having no wishes;
Him I call one who has crossed birth and old age.

By now the theme of rebirth and “crossing birth and old age” has risen to the surface. The poem presents Indian religion of the day as a search for a method to end “birth and old age.” Only the Buddha offers a true solution, through his change of focus

from brahmanical sacrifice to psychological transformation and a controlled, renunciate regimen. This calm is untroubled by the smoke of sacrifice.

The discussion with the next student, Mettagū, is one of the more vivid exemplifications of our theme in the *PV*. Mettagū raises a question regarding what is the origin of “these diverse types of pain that have arisen in this world?”¹⁷ The Buddha explains that they are “conditioned by possessions” (*upadhi-nidāna*); “possessions” is used here in a strong sense—anything one sees himself as possessing, such as a body, mind, and so forth, are the things he “places near” (*upa<dhā>*) and appropriates, thereby investing them with the psychic energy that will condition rebirth. *Upadhi* is the “burning material” by which the fire of cyclic existence is kept ablaze.¹⁸ The Buddha elaborates:

1051

*yo ve avidvā upadhiṃ karoti punappunaṃ dukkham upeti mando /
tasmā hi jānaṃ upadhiṃ na kayirā dukkhassa jātipabbhavānupassī //*

The ignorant fool creates possessions
And heads toward suffering time and again.
Therefore, the man of understanding,
Who sees the generation of birth as suffering,¹⁹
Should not make possessions.

One who lacks understanding will create more and more “possessions,” which will direct him toward further suffering, which itself is to be experienced mainly in future lives. People are reborn in direct relation to their *upadhis*—what one takes for oneself or as one’s self. The relation between maintaining *upadhis* and rebirth is raised in the second half of the verse by speaking of suffering as that which is created “time and again” (*punappunaṃ*) and by saying that the wise “see the generation of birth as suffering”; the wordplay suggests that birth (*jāti*) and coming into being (*pabhava*) are, indeed, suffering.

Mettagū now asks—“How do the wise cross the flood, birth and old age, pain and distress?” (*kathaṃ nu dhīro vitaranti oghaṃ jātijaraṃ sokapariddavaṃ ca*). Note the equation of “birth and old age,” that is, transmigration, with pain and especially with “the flood.” The Buddha replies:

1053

*kittayissāmi te dhammaṃ diṭṭhe dhamme anītihaṃ /
yaṃ viditvā sato caraṃ tare loke visattikaṃ //*

I shall proclaim the *dhamma* to you,
Which I have realized myself, not from hearsay—
He who goes about mindful, having understood it,
Will cross grasping at the world.

We may mark another synonym for the “flood” of transmigration—one should hope to cross “grasping at the world.” The Buddha elaborates:

1055

*yaṃ kiñci saṃpajānāsi uddhaṃ addho tiriyaṃ cāpi majjhe /
etesu nandiṃ ca nivesanaṃ ca panujja viññāṇaṃ bhava na tiṭṭhe //*

Anything you are aware of—

Above, below, across, or in between—

Having dispelled all investment in these things and pleasure toward them,
Consciousness will no longer be situated in existence.

1056

*evaṃ vihārī sato appamatto bhikkhu caraṃ hitvā mamāyitāni / jātijaraṃ sokapriiddavaṃ
ca idheva vidvā pajaheyya dukkhaṃ //*

Abiding in this way, mindful, aware,

The monk who goes about

Having relinquished anything “mine”

Will destroy the pain of birth and old age, of sorrow and distress,

Here, knowing, in this very life.²⁰

I avoid a discussion of the soteriological significance of this statement so that we may concentrate on what is of primary importance for our analysis.²¹ Here the text is straightforward and unambiguous: the sensitive application of attention will bring one to the far shore of suffering, which itself consists in the inevitability of repetitive birth and old age. This end can be reached in this very life, through a psychological transformation. This interpretation is confirmed by the ending statement to Mettagū, in which the Buddha says that “the Brahmin who is identified as possessing understanding, who has nothing, and who does not grasp at states of desire” has at the same time “crossed the flood, crossed beyond” and “crossed old age and death.”²²

Some of the poems we have seen do not express the idea of bringing about a psychological solution to a metaphysical problem as strongly as others. In the next exchange, with Dhotaka, no direct allusion is made to rebirth or transmigration. The poem does, however, relate to the theme of “the flood,” reiterates the concern with “crossing beyond grasping in relation to the world,” and relates this act of grasping to “desire toward states of existence and non-existence.” It thus would not be unfair to take the Dhotaka poem to reiterate the themes of the one with Mettagū; in fact, the former appears to be modeled on the latter.²³ The same themes are important also to the discussions with Hemaka and Todeyya.²⁴ The discussion the Buddha conducts with Bhadravuddha, Mogharāja, and Piṅgiya vividly echoes the central themes we have delineated and are very similar to the first texts we analyzed with Kappa and Jatukaṇṇi. The discussions with Upasāva (see in the following section) and Nanda are clearly concerned with the “problem of death.” Only two series of questions and answers, the ones with Udaya and Posāla, do not seem to relate to our theme. Nonetheless, given the overwhelming majority of texts in the collection that do so overtly, they should also probably be thought to frame their discussion with this understanding in the background.

The poems of the *PV* obviously do not need to be taken as the expression of one unified, fully coherent and cohesive philosophical position. Their central trend is that correct use of awareness—through attention, lack of passion, and wisdom—can free one from the pain of being born and passing away. Yet this message is appropriated in different ways by different students, and each interlocutor focuses on a particular aspect of the Buddha’s message. Nanda, for example, is more interested in the no-view and no-reliance position that is popular in the poems of the *AV*. Udaya and Posāla apparently practice specific types of *jhānic* meditation, as discussed by Wynne (2007; see below). We can see that the philosophical position serves as an orientation, a pattern of thought, or an ideational climate in relation to which each student finds space to define himself and his practice.

To summarize this section, let us observe the final poem of the *PV*, the set of questions and answers that the Buddha conducts with Piṅgiya. Piṅgiya, too, hopes to bring about a psychological transformation that will remedy his upcoming reality of death and rebirth: he says that he is old and worn out, but still confused and unpurified; he is afraid that he will perish while still in confusion (*mumoha*). He asks for instruction in words we have already seen: “Explain the *dhamma*, so I will know it, the destruction of birth and old age, here” (*acakkhi dhammaṃ yam ahaṃ vijaññaṃ jātijarāya idha vipphānaṃ*). The Buddha’s answer is a potent encapsulation of all we have seen so far:

1121

*disvāna rūpesu vihaññamāne ruppanti rūpesu janā pamattā /
tasmā tuvaṃ piṅgiya appamatto jahassu rūpaṃ apunabbhavāya //*

Observing forms, struck by them,
Negligent people are oppressed in relation to them.
Therefore, Piṅgiya, being attentive,
Relinquish form for the sake of no more rebirth.

Attention allows one to relinquish “form” so that she will not be reborn again; a correct mental stance will cure the miseries involved in rebirth. Piṅgiya now hails the Buddha as the knower of all worlds and repeats: “Explain the *dhamma*, so I will know it, the destruction of birth and old age, here.” The Buddha replies:

1123

*taṇhādhipanne manuje pekkhamāno santāpajāte jarasā parete / tasmā tuvaṃ piṅgiya
appamatto jahassu taṇham apunabbhavāya //*

see people controlled by desire,
burning, afflicted by old age.
Therefore, Piṅgiya, being attentive,
Relinquish craving for the sake of no more rebirth.

The Buddha’s response is lucid: thanks to inattention and desire, people suffer and burn through birth, rebirth, and old age. There is one cure for this misery: attention. In the following section we will observe the expression of this theme in the more complicated poem with Upasīva.

Formless Meditation in the PV

There exists only one study that devotes focal attention to the *PV*, *The Origin of Buddhist Meditation* by Alexander Wynne (2007).²⁵ It is therefore pertinent to discuss Wynne's reading and synthesis, especially with regard to his treatment of the dialogue with Upasīva, which he sees as the heart of his contribution and reads in a way that works against the interpretation I offer here. Here I will show that this dialogue fits well with the theme of solving the problem of rebirth through psychological effort. In fact, this happens to be one of the most interesting dialogues in the collection in this respect, which enhances its depth and complexity.

Wynne develops a unique perspective on early Buddhist meditative practice in light of three dialogues from the *PV*, which he places in the broad perspective of ancient Indian Yoga. He suggests that the Buddha's exchanges with Upasīva, Udaya, and Posāla expound a meditative technique that focuses on the "formless attainment" (*arūpya-samāpatti*) of "nothingness" (*ākiñcañña*, commonly called "the base of nothingness," *ākiñcaññāyatana*).²⁶ Wynne connects the instruction to Upasīva and the teachings of Aḷāra Kālāma, the purported teacher of the Buddha prior to his enlightenment, according to the *Ariyapariyesanā-sutta* of the *Majjhima Nikāya*, under whose tutelage the Buddha-to-be reached this attainment. Wynne identifies in the *PV* a reworking of the meditative attainment of *ākiñcañña*, so that the Buddha develops the Indian meditation theory of his day by taking liberation to maintain a degree of awareness during the deep meditative state of "nothingness," which was earlier considered beyond awareness.

This is an intriguing suggestion that is worthy of consideration as a reflection of early Buddhist meditative culture. Nonetheless, there are undeniable problems with Wynne's approach and especially with his reading of the dialogue with Upasīva. One concern regarding his overall position is why, if the *Ariyapariyesanā-sutta* is taken as the main map of the Buddha's path to enlightenment, the more sophisticated and profound meditative attainment of "the base beyond perception and non-perception" (*nevasaññānāsaññāyatana*), which the Buddha gained under Uddaka Rāmaputta, is ignored by the authors of the *PV*. Another problem is Wynne's confabulation of literary and historical reality: he reads the dialogues of the *PV* as transcriptions of real discussions between the Buddha and his students.²⁷ Finally, it is unclear whether this discourse is concerned with the attainment of the same state of nothingness referred to in the prose Nikāyas, as Wynne and the traditional commentators on the text believe.

Most notable from our point of view is that the dialogue between Upasīva and the Buddha is most easily and straightforwardly taken as an example of the reading I advance here. At the heart of the *PV* is the position that a strict regimen of conscious effort and dedicated personal commitment can solve the problem of repeated death and rebirth and bring one to the most meaningful peaks of existence. Indeed, this discourse may be seen as one of the most intriguing expressions of this idea in that it connects meditative attainments and results in the afterlife. The opening question posed by Upasīva recalls others we have seen:

1069

*eko ahaṃ sakka mahantam oghaṃ anissito no visahāmi tārituṃ / ārammaṇaṃ brūhi
samantacakkhu yaṃ nissito oghaṃ imaṃ tareyya //*

Alone, Sakya, with nothing to rely on,
I am unable to cross the great flood.
You of comprehensive vision—describe an object
I may rely on in order to cross this flood.

Upasīva knows that reality is a flood and has even made an attempt to cross it. He feels, though, that he has had no real success and asks the Buddha for specific instruction, for an *ārammaṇa*, a meditative object that he may focus on that will serve as his raft. The Buddha offers this:

1070

*ākiñcaññaṃ pekkhamāno satimā n’atthīti nissāya tarrasu oghaṃ / kāme pahāya virato
kathāhi taṇhakkhayaṃ nattamahābhipassa //*

Viewing nothingness, mindful,
Relying on “(this) does not exist,”
Cross the flood. Having let go of desires,
Refraining from discussions,
Observe the destruction of craving night and day.

I agree with Wynne that this is a meditative instruction, even a specific and relatively clear one. The Buddha provides his student with the meditative support (*ārammaṇa*) of nothingness, which he is to observe continuously. Aware that nothing is real or worth his interest, he should harbor no desire and turn from idle chatter; maintaining this attitude, he should attentively and continuously observe the destruction of craving. This is not the same instruction that the Buddha gave to his other students in the *PV*, but is easily related to it. Perhaps it can be taken as an intensified version of the same practices of cultivating mindfulness, dispassion, and wisdom.

Wynne, together with the classical commentaries on the texts, sees the allusion to *ākiñcañña*²⁸—“nothingness”—as a reference to the meditative state of “(the base of) nothingness.” This is certainly a possible reading for this term, although a direct link between it and the traditional lists of *samādhi* states may be too strong. Wynne himself is suspicious of the identification between “nothingness” here and the seventh state in the canonical list of nine *samādhi* states that begins with the four *jhānas*, proceeds through the four *ārūpya* attainments, and culminates with *nirodha* (“cessation”). Reading the precise words of the verse generates mixed results: *nattīti nissāya*—relying on “(this) does not exist”—may be seen as parallel to *nattī kiṃcīti*—“there is nothing”—which is part of the common description of the entrance into the base of nothingness in the prose *Nikāyas*;²⁹ “having let go of desires” (*kāme pahāya*) and especially “uninterested in talk” (*virato kathāhi*) are, however, irrelevant to practice at this advanced stage. Another question is whether “nothingness”—*ākiñcañña* (long ā)—in this discourse and in the one with Posāla, should be robustly distinguished from the envisioning of “nothing”—*akiñcañña*

(short a)—that is a prominent concept in the *PV* and that does not necessarily relate to a specific meditative technique or attainment.³⁰ There are still other instructions in the text that resonate with the advice to reflect on and hold on to nothing, none of which demand the assumption of a meditative practice in the background, let alone of a deep *samādhi* like *ākiñcaññāyatana*.³¹ It is also interesting to notice that the opening verse of the *PV* (976) presents the Brahmin Bāvaṛī as “searching for nothingness” (*ākiñcaññaṃ patthayāno*) in a way that probably does not reflect the attainment of “the base of *ākiñcañña*.”

These considerations are not conclusive but they raise doubt regarding the direct identification between “nothingness” in the discourses with Upasīva and Posāla and the “state of nothingness” described in places such as the *Ariyapariyesanā-sutta*. Wynne’s interpretation should be taken seriously, but it should also be related to the overall picture developed in the *PV*—if these verses relate to the meditative state of “nothingness,” this attainment is apparently considered an extension of the more regular instruction not to hold on to anything. Most importantly, a reliable reading of the teaching to Upasīva demonstrates a vivid interest in reaching a conscious state that by its very nature will put an end to birth and death. It is at this point that my interpretation differs most significantly from Wynne’s, who argues that the Buddha makes no point regarding the afterlife. The concern with rebirth is evident in Upasīva’s next question:

1071

sabbesu kāmesu yo vītarāgo ākiñcaññaṃ nissito hitvamaññaṃ / saññāvimokkhe parama vimutto tiṭṭhe nu so tattha anānuyāyī //

He who has no passion in relation to all pleasures,
Who relies on nothingness, having discarded (everything) else,
Liberated in the highest liberation from perception—
Does he remain that way without proceeding?

Upasīva seems to be aware of the logic advanced by the Buddha in the *PV*—he knows that dense, committed direction of attention is meant to solve the problem of death and rebirth. Upasīva, who has been provided with a meditative technique as a raft to cross the flood, now asks what will happen to one who perfects his practice—will he proceed anywhere or remain in the state he is in? What will he achieve and where will he go? Upasīva, like other interlocutors in the text, asks for details about the reality he can expect after he dies.

Wynne, however, sees this verse as another expression of the observation that one carries out in the state of nothingness. First, like other translators³² and together with the commentators, he takes *hitva-m-aññaṃ*—“having discarded (everything) else”—as relating to the earlier stages of *jhāna* practice. This reading in itself is not implausible. He then follows surprisingly close upon the heels of the commentators and takes the Buddha to say that the adept is now “concentrated (Wynne reads *adhimutto* for *vimutto*)³³ in the highest meditative release of perception” (*saññā-vimokkhe*),³⁴ intending that this is the highest meditative absorption in which

perception still functions.³⁵ This is an unconvincing reading that makes inconsistent use of the voice of the commentators, adopting their position regarding *ākiñcañña* being the highest liberative state in which perception still functions, but rejecting their conventionalized list of the nine successive *samādhi* states. Wynne then takes *anānuyāyī* not as referring to one who “does not proceed” but to one who “does not follow,” in the sense that he pays no attention to, other meditative states. This last reading is problematic since the meaning “to follow” comes from the root <yā>, “to go, move, proceed” and not from “to follow” in the sense of applying attention. The inquiry thus must be whether one who accomplishes this practice continues to any future destiny.³⁶

The Buddha’s answer reiterates the words of the question in order to say that one who is liberated in this way proceeds no further, that is, that he quits rebirth.³⁷ Upasīva understands this and proceeds to ask for more detail:

1073

*tiṭṭhe ce so tattha anānuyāyī pūgaṃpi vassānaṃ samantacakkhu /
tath’eva so sītisiyā vimutto cavetha viññāṇaṃ tathāvidhassa //*

And if, you of comprehensive vision, he remains in this way
Without proceeding, for a great many years,
Would he right there become cool and be liberated
[and] would consciousness fall away for him here, in such a state?

Upasīva asks whether one who does not proceed may remain in this state for many years, whether he “becomes cool” and if his consciousness “will fall away.”³⁸ These are complex questions we cannot analyze here; surely there are ideals at work in these verses that see liberation as an abysmal quiet, which one may even maintain for centuries, or, in the words of the commentaries, for hundreds of thousands of aeons.³⁹ For our concerns, it will suffice to notice that Upasīva is asking about the afterlife results of correct practice and that he has in mind particular images regarding the nature of this reality.

The Buddha’s response strives for closure, as he explains that no more answers can be supplied at this stage, apparently since thought cannot capture the true solution. He says:

1074

*accī yathā vātavegena khitto atthaṃ paleti na upeti saṃkhaṃ / evaṃ munī nāmakāyā
vimutto atthaṃ paleti na upeti saṃkhaṃ //*

Like a flame upset by the wind,
Which returns to its source⁴⁰ and cannot be measured,
So, too, the sage who is released from name and body
Returns to the source and cannot be measured.

There are two central conceptual elements operating at this stage of the dialogue. One is the question regarding the nature of the realized being after death. The second is the position that language is limited and cannot describe one’s aftermath. The

problem is how these two points are related: it is one thing if the state of the realized being after death is known but impossible to describe; it is quite another if any discussion of one's nature is absurd in the first place.

Wynne is committed to the second of these options. His focus is not on the nature of language,⁴¹ but on the claim that liberation occurs during life. He aims to show that Upasīva's question in the previous verse was whether the attainment of nothingness is an anticipation of a state that will be reached in the afterlife, while the Buddha insists that liberation relates only to this life. He argues this through a complex treatment of the term "becoming cool" (*sītisiyā*), which leads Upasīva to assume that liberation is to be attained upon death, while the Buddha understands the same term to refer to liberation in life.⁴² For Wynne, the claim that the sage "cannot be measured" ends up being equal to the Buddha saying that no one can know anything about the state a realized person attains in the afterlife.

There is, however, a preferable understanding of the Buddha's response, which is that words cannot capture the state that realized people attain when they die. The Buddha is not avoiding a response, but rather there is positive content to his claim, which is that there is a specific reality one reaches that cannot be conveyed through available thought structures; the Buddha knows what his postmortem reality will be like, but he considers inadequate the theoretical definitions that Upasīva suggests. The sage who has attained realization is "beyond consideration" (*na upeti saṃkham*) and has "returned to the source" or "gone home" (*atthaṃ paleti*). Whatever this "source" or "home" may be is probably best interpreted in light of the simile of the fire introduced by the Buddha—the state of an extinguished fire cannot be grasped with words; the same is true of the nature of the sage after death. In the penultimate verse Upasīva again asks if the sage has "gone to the source, or does he not exist, or is he rather beyond disease forever?" The Buddha's reply echoes his previous one:

1076

atthaṃ gatassa na pamāṇam atthi yena naṃ vajju taṃ tassa natthi / sabbesu dhammesu samūhatesu samūhatā vādapathā'pi sabbe'ti //

For one who has gone to the source,
There is no measure, there is nothing
By which he may be known.
All things being abolished,
Abolished are the paths of speech as well.

The idea here and in the previous verse is that one cannot describe the reality attained by the realized after they die. When the Buddha says that the sage cannot be known or that the paths of speech are abolished he has a specific philosophy in mind: if one holds on to nothing, he or she will, after death, be beyond all things. The Buddha is not saying that no one knows what happens after death, but that regarding those who have stopped all grasping there is nothing that defines them and therefore no term applies to them, especially after death. This statement is rooted in a metaphysics that connects one's present and afterlife states. The adept has entered into himself so deeply that he cannot be described through objective standards. What he

is, and especially what will be the future outcomes of his present state of being, is beyond the cognitive grasp of regular people whose understanding consists of meanings generated by words.

As Wynne acknowledges, the discussion here has a strong textual parallel in the *Aggīvacchagotta-sutta* of the *Majjhima Nikāya*, where the Buddha introduces the simile of the fire in order to answer the mendicant Vacchagotta's inquiry regarding what happens to the awakened being after he dies. In this more elaborate text, Vacchagotta asks where the realized monk is born (*upapajjati*) after death.⁴³ This question follows the Buddha's responses to the ten "unanswered questions," which end with a focus on the issue of whether after the Buddha passes away he "comes to be (or, exists, *hoti*), does not come to be, both, or neither."⁴⁴ Vacchagotta wonders how it can be that the Buddha denies all four possibilities, and the Buddha says that they all "do not apply" (*na upeti*). Here he introduces the simile of the fire in order to point to the nature of the sage after death, who cannot be described in terms of existence or non-existence. Like the fire that has consumed its burning material and cannot be thought to have proceeded in any of the cardinal directions, the sage has consumed all his burning material, that is his grasping at the aggregates, and cannot be said to arise or not to arise. Now the Buddha says that for the Tathāgata the five aggregates are forsaken, and therefore that they will fade away after he dies so that there remains nothing that can propel his rebirth:

That form, Vaccha, by which the Tathāgata is known or may be known, for the Tathāgata is forsaken, its root severed, made like an uprooted palm tree, [is] eradicated *with no future arising*. The Tathāgata, Vaccha, liberated from being understood in terms of form,⁴⁵ is deep, unfathomable, and difficult to penetrate, like the ocean—"to be reborn" does not apply; "not to be reborn" does not apply; "to be reborn and not to be reborn" does not apply; "not to be reborn and not to not be reborn" does not apply.⁴⁶

It is important to notice that the position the Buddha advocates only has meaning if the metaphysics of karma are implied: he assumes that rebirth is conditioned by one's acts of grasping. Specifically, the Buddha is attempting to explain why it is mistaken to say that the adept is reborn or not reborn, rather than to make a point regarding the unreliability of language. It is not that he does not know the answer to Vacchagotta's questions, but that such an answer cannot be supplied with words.⁴⁷ This reading of the *Aggīvacchagotta-sutta* suggests that in the *PV*, Buddha is telling Upasīva that there are important consequences for realization that occur after one dies, but that these cannot be grasped through conceptual discussion. This means that reaching the formless attainment of *ākiñcañña*, or another practice of cultivating "nothingness," creates an opportunity to deal with the painful reality of repeated birth and death.

The Upasīva dialogue offers an interesting perspective on the central concern of the *PV*, saying that the mental stance that will have a permanent impact on the reality of transmigration should be cultivated in states of deep meditation. Regarding Wynne's overall thesis, his suggestion that the Buddha remodeled central traditions of meditation of his day, is highly compelling. His attempt to define the Buddha's

teaching as pointing to liberation that is to be experienced only in the present life is, however, far less convincing. He may or may not be right that Upasīva is instructed to pursue the state of “nothingness,” but this achievement relates to the central theme of the *PV* that aims to overcome the flood of conditioning and rebirth through the cultivation of a specific psychological state. Deep mediation is one form of a psychological solution to a metaphysical problem.

Notes

This article was written during my post-doctoral tenure at the Mandel Scholion Center of Hebrew University, Jerusalem. I thank the Center and all the people behind it for affording such comfortable material support and such a rich intellectual atmosphere. I also thank Rupert Gethin, Chakravarthi Ram-Prasad, and the anonymous readers at *Philosophy East and West* for their remarks on earlier versions of this article.

1 – See, e.g., Gomez 1976, p. 139; Hinüber 1996, pp. 49–50; Nakamura 1989 [1980], pp. 45–46; Norman 1983, p. 63. The style, language, and use of meter in the *PV* are exceptionally old; see Warder 1967, pp. 199, 224. For a good summary of the understanding regarding the antiquity of the *PV*, see Wynne 2007, pp. 73–75. Nakamura (1989 [1980], p. 45) is among the scholars who sees the *PV* as older than the *AV*. For studies of the *AV*, see Premasiri 1972; Gomez 1976; Vetter 1988, appendix, and 1990; Burford 1991; Norman 1992; Shulman 2012 [2013]. Regarding the *Khaggavisāṇa-sutta*, see Salomon 2000.

2 – Bhadravuddha, after praising the Buddha, opens his question by saying:

1101

*nānājanā janapadehi saṅgatā tava vīra vākyam abhikaṅkhamānā / tesam tuvaṃ sadhu
vyākaroḥi tathā hi te vidīto esa dhammo //*

Many people have assembled from the villages, eager (to hear) your speech, hero!
Explain this *dhamma* well for them, as you have understood it.

Here it seems that a different audience has assembled from the one joined by the sixteen students of Bāvarī, as related in the introduction. Later, Mogharāja begins his dialogue by mentioning two times in which he has posed the same question to the Buddha (verse 1116), which again implies a different history from what we find in the introduction.

3 – I am aware that not all would define the human condition as a metaphysical problem in the sense I do in this article. Philosophical problems are generally theoretical, and metaphysical ones focus on the nature of being, causality, etc. Yet I see metaphysics to be very much the issue here, since many questions that are deemed metaphysical relate to the question of rebirth, such as the relation between mind and matter or the question of free will versus determinism. Furthermore, the doctrine of rebirth is ultimately a statement about the nature of

causality, even if in the Buddhist context a first cause is denied. Finally, the philosophical orientation of early Buddhism is suspicious of pure theory and inevitably relates to the human condition (see Shulman 2014, chap. 2). Although the solution to the problem of transmigration can easily be called soteriological, its metaphysical aspects are the more interesting ones from a philosophical perspective. I therefore intend by “metaphysics” to refer to the fundamental truths of existence whose nature transcends the empirical.

- 4 – For the Pāli text of the *PV* I rely on the Pali Text Society 1913 edition of Andersen and Smith, together with the Bapat (1990 [1924]) and the Vipassana Research Institute (VRI) editions. My transcription of the verses is closer to the style of the latter two, as it brings out the flow of the poetry in preferable ways.
- 5 – In speaking of “the Buddha” I am not referring to “the historical Buddha,” but to the literary hero who is the primary narrative voice of the *PV*. I assume that there were narrative or poetical elements in the way the Buddha was perceived by his audiences in ancient India, as well as in the way he perceived himself; the *PV* probably resonates with some of these approaches.
- 6 – *Kāma* here implies both “sense objects” and the desire for them (see in the next verse).
- 7 – *Sahājanetta*, a term with interesting tantric resonance.
- 8 – E.g., from the *Muni-sutta* (*SN* 208):

yo jātam ucchijja na ropayeyya jāyantam assa nānuppavecche / tam āhu ekaṃ muninaṃ carantaṃ addakkhi so santipadaṃ mahesi //

He who has cut what has grown [and] does not plant [anew], will not engage with what grows for him in the present—He is called the sage who walks alone; he is the great seer who has seen the quiet place.

See also *SN* 851, 913, 949 (all from the *AV*).
- 9 – In Shulman 2012 [2013] I offer a more elaborate discussion of the *Khuddaka Nikāya* and *SN* as collections of Buddhist poetry, with specific reference to the *AV*. There (section I) a broader definition for what is intended by poetry in this context is also supplied.
- 10 – Compare *SN* 801, quoted below, as well as *SN* 849 from the *AV*'s *Purābheda-sutta*.
- 11 – *Āsava* derives from the root *ā<sru>*, “to flow,” and hence the common translations “inflows” and “outflows,” aside from “taints” or “cankers.” See Johansson 1979, chap. 9; Schmithausen 1992, 2.2.2; Norman 1997, pp. 34–35. Andrew Olendzki (personal communication) has suggested that given this derivation of *āsava*, their “destruction,” derived from Pāli *khāyati* or *khiṇoti*, should be taken to mean “drying up.”
- 12 – The precise meaning of “name and form,” *nāmarūpa*, is questionable. In *sutta* literature it can refer to (1) subject and object or mind and body/matter, (2) ob-

jects or perceptual objects, (3) the psycho-physical potential in the womb that combines with consciousness to produce conception. See Bucknell 1999, pp. 320–326, and Schmithausen 2000; cf. *SN* 872–873.

- 13 – For a more elaborate discussion of the central theory of liberation in the Nikāyas as the destruction of inflows in the 4th *jhāna*, see Shulman 2014, esp. chaps. 1 and 4.6.
- 14 – What is precisely meant by “mindfulness” here is an open question. If the term is similar to its use in the prose Nikāyas, it could be defined as a determined focusing of attention in a manner that is informed by Buddhist thought. See Shulman 2010 and 2104, chap. 3.
- 15 – 1044: *ye keci’me isayo manujā khatiyo brāhmaṇā devatānaṃ yaññaṃ akappayimsu puthū idha loke / āsiṃsamānā puṇṇaka itthabhāvaṃ jaraṃ sitā yaññāṃ akappayimsu //*
- 16 – 1034: *te bhagavā yaññapathe appamattā atāru jātiṃ ca jaraṃ ca.*
- 17 – 1049: *kuto nu dukkhā samudāgatā ime ye keci lokasmiṃ anekarūpā.*
- 18 – For the translation of *upadhi* as “burning material” and as a metaphor for the aggregates, see Hwang 2006, chap. 2, and Gombrich 2009, pp. 115–116. For further discussion of this term and its relation to the afterlife, see Harvey 1995, pp. 108–184.
- 19 – Literally, perhaps “(who sees) the generation and birth of suffering.”
- 20 – Other translations of this verse are possible. One could translate *idheva*—“Here!”—less strongly, and think that it does not refer to this very life. Another question is whether it is correct to take *jātijaraṃ* and *sokapariddavaṃ* as descriptions of *dukkhaṃ*. Finally, there is a question on where exactly to apply *vidvā*—“knowing” or “having known.”
- 21 – For statements that see the stopping of consciousness as a favorable ideal, see *SN* 1037, 1111. For verses that suggest that liberation is rather a conscious achievement, see 1086–1087, 1091.
- 22 – 1059–1060:

yaṃ brāhmaṇaṃ vedagaṃ ābhijaññā akiñcanaṃ kāmabhava asattaṃ / addhā hi so ogham imaṃ atāri tiṇṇo ca pāraṃ akhilo akaṃkho //

The Brahmin who one knows to have attained understanding, to have nothing, who grasps not at states of desire, he has verily crossed this flood, crossed beyond, with no doubt and confusion.

vidvā ca so vedagū naro idha bhavabave saṃgam imaṃ visajjā / so vītataṇho anigho nirāso atāri so jātijaraṃ’ti brūmiti //

The man who has attained understanding, who has relinquished here this bond to states of being and non-being, he who is devoid of desire, who has no perplexity, no longing—he, I say, has crossed old aging and death!

- 23 – A close reading of the discourse with Dhotaka (verses 1061–1068) shows that it is very close to the one with Mettagū. Verse 1066 repeats 1053 almost word by word, changing only the word *dhammaṃ* in the first *pāda* to *santiṃ*. Verse 1067 then repeats 1054, making the same change in the second *pāda*. Then the concluding verse, 1068, takes its first line from 1055, and its second line relies on elements from the concluding line of the Mettagū poem (1060).
- 24 – The poem with Hemaka repeats the statement regarding “crossing beyond grasping at the world” (in 1087). That with Todeyya is perhaps more open to interpretation, when it ends by saying in 1091 that “This is how you should understand the sage, Todeyya—he has nothing and does not stick to desires and states of existence” (*evaṃpi todeyya munīṃ vijāna akiñcanaṃ kāmabhava asattaṃti*).
- 25 – The heart of Wynne’s contribution appears in chapter 5 of his book. Mention should also be made of the short discussion in Vetter 1990, pp. 38–42, which does not penetrate the *PV* deeply, given that he sees it as “a ‘text’ that was composed by a person who wanted to mention as many tenets or methods as he knew and as many as were necessary to complete the solemn number of sixteen questions” (p. 42). Greater attention to Vetter’s more interesting analysis of *AV* is given in Shulman 2012 [2013].
- 26 – The dialogue with Udaya is not concerned directly with *ākiñcañña*, but Wynne sees it as part of the same meditative teaching as the other two dialogues.
- 27 – Wynne performs a strong historicist reading of the *PV*, which he believes “preserved the Buddha’s dialogue with non-Buddhists” (2007, p. 73). Regarding the dialogues with Upasīva and Posāla he says: “both texts have recorded dialogues with non-Buddhists from the earliest period, when the Buddha was still alive” (p. 74). The dialogues of the *PV* may grant interesting insights into the reality of early Buddhism, but specific terms should not be taken as the historical speech of the Buddha. The motivations behind these poems are no less aesthetic and inspirational than doctrinal; the Buddha and his disciples did not converse in verse.
- 28 – See also Norman 2001 [1992], p. 411.
- 29 – E.g., *Majjhima Nikāya* III.44.
- 30 – E.g., see the instruction to Kappa in verse 1094 above, as well as 1059, 1082, 1091.
- 31 – See, e.g., verses 1068, 1055, 1086–1087.
- 32 – E.g., Norman 2001 [1992], p. 136.
- 33 – Norman (2001 [1992], p. 412) cites the *Critical Pāli Dictionary* that takes this reading from the *Cūḷa-Niddesa* commentary as mistaken. Wynne argues in its favor, since he hopes to demonstrate that the Buddha is not discussing liberation at this stage of the poem.

- 34 – Wynne 2007, pp. 79–80; my emphasis.
- 35 – This idea is advanced in the *Poṭṭhapāda-sutta* of the *Dīgha Nikāya*. See also Schmithausen 1981, J, K.
- 36 – *Anānuyāyī*, rather than *ananuyāyi*, due to metrical lengthening (see Cone 2001, p. 131). Notice that the idea of “proceeding” does not necessarily imply the full-fledged picture of *samsāra*, in the sense of the round of rebirths, which is introduced in Norman’s (2001 [1992], p. 136) translation. The commentary takes *anānuyāyi* to refer to not falling from the state of nothingness and not being perturbed there.
- 37 – In the final *pāda*, *tiṭṭhe nu* is replaced with *tiṭṭheyya*, so that the response becomes affirmative.
- 38 – I read *cavetha* with Norman (2001 [1992], pp. 412–413), over *bhavetha* in Pali Text Society and Bapat, which would then ask “would there be/become consciousness for one in such a state?” *Cavati* can also mean “to move, to pass from one state of existence into another,” so we may also translate “and his consciousness would move on.” Perhaps there is a play of meanings with this term.
- 39 – The *Cūḷa-Niddesa* glosses *pūgampi vassānam* as: *pūgampi vassāni bahūni vassasatāni bahūni vassasahassāni bahūni vassasatasahassāni bahūni kappāni bahūni kappasatāni bahūni kappasahassāni bahūni kappasatasahassāni*. In relation to *tiṭṭheyya* in the previous verse, the commentator is more specific, as he speaks of remaining “for sixty thousand aeons” (*saṭṭhikappasahassāni*).
- 40 – I employ a good degree of poetical license in translating *atthaṃ paleti*, which corresponds with *atthaṃ gato* in the next verse, as “returns to its source.” A more careful examination of this term is called for. Normally it is taken to mean “gone home” or “goes out,” while “attaining his purpose” or “reaching the heart of things” would also be acceptable.
- 41 – Wynne’s interest in the limits of language is explicit in his 2010 paper on the *Anatta* doctrine.
- 42 – This idiosyncratic interpretation relies on a passage from the *Mokṣadharmā* section of the *Mahābhārata*, which implies that liberation occurs at death. Since *Upasīva* is supposedly not a Buddhist, Wynne believes that this passage represents his views. The Buddha, according to Wynne, misinterprets the question, since in Buddhist texts “becoming cool” refers to liberation in life. Wynne’s reading is fascinating, but his approach relies on a hermeneutical essentialism that is difficult to accept. First, we cannot take the dialogue with *Upasīva* as a verbatim recording of a historical discussion. Second, even if we accept Wynne’s assertion that in Buddhist texts the term *sīti-bhū* expresses liberation in this life, it would be surprising if the author of this dialogue attributed this particular understanding to the Buddha, but a thoroughly different one to *Upasīva*. Wynne’s discussion of the terms *atthaṃ paleti* and *nāmakāyā vimutto* is less elaborate than his treatment of *sītisiyā*, and ultimately hinges on the latter.

- 43 – *Evam vimuttacitto pana, bho gotama, bhikkhu kuhiṃ upapajjātī.*
- 44 – For a more elaborate treatment of this discourse, see Shulman 2014, 2.1.
- 45 – Or, reading *rūpasaṅkhayavimutto*, “liberated from the destruction of form.”
- 46 – *Evameva kho, vaccha, yena rūpena tathāgataṃ paññāpayamāno paññāpeyya taṃ rūpaṃ tathāgatassa pahīnaṃ ucchinnamūlaṃ tālāvatthukataṃ anabhāvakataṃ āyatīṃ anuppādadhammaṃ. Rūpasaṅkhāvimutto kho, vaccha, tathāgato gambhīro appameyyo duppariyogāho—seyyathāpi mahāsamuddo upapajjātī na upeti, na upapajjātī na upeti, upapajjati ca na ca upapajjātī na upeti, neva upapajjati na na upapajjātī na upeti.* The emphasis is mine. The same statement is then repeated regarding the other four aggregates.
- 47 – Notice that a negative definition of his existence is also said not to apply. This is a difficult intuition to penetrate: not only that non-existence is not a suitable concept for capturing the lack of existence, but that when one says non-existence one does not affirm a negative position. For similar, exceedingly elusive, patterns of thought, see Nāgārjuna in the first chapter of the *Ratnāvalī*, verses 42, 55–56, and 60.

References

- Andersen, D., and Smith, H. 1913. *The Sutta-Nipāta*. London: Published by Geoffrey Cumberlege, Oxford University Press, for the Pali Text Society.
- Bapat, P. V. 1990 [1924]. *The Sutta-Nipāta: One of the Oldest Canonical Books of the Buddhism for the First Time, Edited in Devanagiri Characters*. Delhi: Sri Satguru Publications.
- Bucknell, Roderick S. 1999. “Conditioned Arising Evolves: Variation and Change in Textual Accounts of the *Paṭicca-samuppāda* Doctrine.” *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 22, no. 2: 311–342.
- Burford, Grace G. 1991. *Desire, Death, and Goodness: The Conflict of Ultimate Values in Theravāda Buddhism*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Cone, Margaret. 2001. *A Dictionary of Pāli*, part I, a–kh. Oxford: Pali Text Society.
- Gombrich, Richard. 2009. *What the Buddha Thought*. London and Oakville: Equinox.
- Gomez, Luis O. 1976. “Proto-Mādhyamika in the Pāli Canon.” *Philosophy East and West* 26, no. 2: 137–165.
- Harvey, Peter. 1995. *The Selfless Mind: Personality, Consciousness and Nirvana in Early Buddhism*. Richmond, Surrey: Curzon.
- Hinüber, Oskar von. 1996. *A Handbook of Pāli Literature*. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter.

- Hwang, Soonil. 2006. *Metaphor and Literature in Buddhism: The Doctrinal History of Nirvana*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Johansson, Rune E. A. 1979. *The Dynamic Psychology of Early Buddhism*. Oxford: Curzon.
- Nakamura, Hajime. 1989 [1980]. *Indian Buddhism: A Survey with Bibliographical Notes*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.
- Norman, K. R. 1983. *Pali Literature: Including the Canonical Literature in Prakrit and Sanskrit of all the Hīnayāna Schools of Buddhism*. Wiesbaden: O. Harrassowitz.
- . 1992. "The Aṭṭhakavagga and Early Buddhism." In Olle Qvarnström, ed., *Jainism and Early Buddhism: Essays in Honor of the Padmanabh Jaini*, pp. 511–522. Fremont, CA: Asian Humanities Press.
- . 1997. *A Philological Approach to Buddhism: The Bukkyō Dendō Kyōkai Lectures 1994*. London: School of Oriental and African Studies.
- , trans. 2001 [1992]. *The Group of Discourses (Sutta Nipāta)*. Oxford: Pali Text Society.
- Premasiri, P. D. 1972. *The Philosophy of the Aṭṭhakavagga*. Wheel Publication no. 182. Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society.
- Salomon, Richard. 2000. *A Gāndhārī Version of the Rhinoceros Sūtra: British Library Kharoṣṭhī Fragment 5B*. With a contribution by Andrew Glass. Seattle: University of Washington Press.
- Schmithausen, Lambert. 1981. "On some Aspects or Theories of 'Liberating Insight' and 'Enlightenment' in Early Buddhism." In Bruhn, K., and Wezler, A., (eds.). *Studien zum Jainismus und Buddhismus: Gedenkschrift für Ludwig Alsdorg*. Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag GmbH.
- . 1992. "An Attempt to Estimate the Distance in Time between Aśoka and the Buddha in Terms of Doctrinal History." In Heinz Bechert, ed., *The Dating of the Historical Buddha / Die Datierung des historischen Buddha*, part 2, pp. 110–147. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht.
- . 2000. "Zur Zwölfgliedrigen Formel des Entsehens in Abhängigkeit." *Hōrin: Vergleichende Studien zur Japanischen Kultur* 7: 41–76.
- Shulman, Eviatar. 2010. "Mindful Wisdom: The *Sati-paṭṭhāna-sutta* on Mindfulness, Memory, and Liberation." *History of Religions* 49, no. 4: 393–420.
- . 2014a. "Early Buddhist Imagination: The *Aṭṭhakavagga* as Buddhist Poetry." *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 35: 363–411.
- . 2014b. *Rethinking the Buddha: Early Buddhist Philosophy as Meditative Perception*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Vetter, Tilmann. 1988. *The Ideas and Meditative Practices of Early Buddhism*. Leiden: E. J. Brill.

- . 1990. "Some Remarks on Older Parts of the Suttanipāta." In David Seyfort Ruegg and Lambert Schmithausen, eds., *Panels of the VIIth World Sanskrit Conference*, vol. 2, *Earliest Buddhism and Madhyamaka*. Leiden: E. J. Brill.
- Warder, A. K. 1967. *Pāli Metre: A Contribution to the Study of Indian Literature*. London: Pāli Text Society.
- Wynne, Alexander. 2007. *The Origin of Buddhist Meditation*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Wynne, Alexander. 2010 [2011]. "The Ātman and its Negation: A Conceptual and Chronological Analysis of Early Buddhist Thought." *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 33 : 103–171.