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Suttas as History: Four Approaches to the "Sermon on the Noble Quest" (Ariyapariyesanasutta)

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Jonathan S. Walters

SUTTAS AS HISTORY:  
FOUR APPROACHES  
TO THE *Sermon on  
the Noble Quest*  
(ARIYAPARIYESANA-  
SUTTA)

The study of Theravāda Buddhist history was born of a nineteenth-century enthusiasm about the ancient suttas, or sermons, attributed to the Buddha, which Theravāda Buddhists have preserved in the major “Divisions” (Nikāyas) of the “Sutta Basket” (Suttapiṭaka) of their “Pāli Canon” (Tipiṭaka). As early as the 1830s George Turnour had argued for the “historical accuracy” of traditional Theravādan claims about the great antiquity and unique authenticity of the Pāli version of early Buddhist history.<sup>1</sup> Following from that argument, the suttas (and partly overlapping texts of the Vinaya, or monastic discipline) were once thought to be veritable windows into the original Buddhist community. From them historians of earlier generations spun out a biography of the “historical Buddha,” a social history of India in the time of the Buddha, and an impressive array of contradictory opinions about a supposed “original” Buddhist teaching.

But during the present century, and especially during the past several decades, Buddhologists, anthropologists, and historians of religions have raised serious doubts about this naive use of the suttas as sources for reconstructing Theravāda Buddhist history. Thus, it is now widely recognized that the form in which the suttas survive today, like Pāli itself, is the result of grammatical and editorial decisions made in Sri Lanka centuries after the lifetime of the Buddha. An extreme version of this view would argue on that basis that it is impossible to fix the texts of the

<sup>1</sup> On Turnour’s contribution to the historiography of the Pāli texts, see the appendix to my “Buddhist History: The Pāli Vāṃsas of Sri Lanka,” in *Querying the Medieval*, by Ronald Inden, Daud Ali, and Jonathan S. Walters (Oxford: Oxford University Press, in press).

suttas before the time of Buddhaghosa's commentaries on them, a full millennium after the Buddha. Comparison with parallel material in non-Pāli canons makes certain that parts of the suttas are indeed translations of texts considerably more ancient than that, probably as ancient as we will ever possess, but this move simultaneously guarantees the lateness and nonrepresentativeness of those parts of the suttas without such parallels, especially the contextual stories within which the Buddha's teachings are framed. As these stories have supplied the bulk of detail for social historians and biographers of the Buddha, the problem becomes immediately apparent. Moreover, the historical claims made by Theravāda Buddhists (in the *vaṃsas*, or chronicles, and in the commentaries) now appear to tell us more about the time in which they were made (ca. fifth century A.D.) than they do about the ancient periods of history they narrate.<sup>2</sup> More important still, historians and anthropologists have pointed to a rift between the Buddhism constructed as "canonical" on the basis of the teachings in the suttas and the actual practices and ideas of contemporary Theravāda Buddhists.<sup>3</sup> As similar divergences from this "canonical Buddhism" are evidenced as early in Buddhist history as our evidence itself, namely the time of Aśoka Maurya (third century B.C.), the question emerges whether the reconstructed "early Buddhism" ever existed at all.

As a result, though the suttas remain immensely important to comparative philosophers and philologists, for whom these concerns may seem at best tangential, I think it fair to say that among contemporary historians of the Theravāda there has been a marked shift away from attempting to say much of anything at all about "early Buddhism." Whereas earlier scholars tended to ignore post-Aśokan Buddhist history as corrupt, more recent scholars have tended to regard early Buddhist history as unknowable. In recent decades we have become increasingly concerned with recovering the later premodern and modern Theravāda histories for which more reliable evidence does exist. Though a handful of suttas have remained central in more recent understandings of the historical development of Theravāda

<sup>2</sup> See my "Mahāyāna Theravāda and the Origins of the Mahāvihāra," *Sri Lanka Journal of the Humanities* 23, nos. 1 and 2 (1997): 100–119, "Mahāseṇa at the Mahāvihāra: The Politics and Interpretation of History in Medieval Sri Lanka," in *Invoking the Past: The Uses of History in South Asia*, ed. Avril Powell and Daud Ali (Oxford: Oxford University Press, in press), "Buddhist History: The Pāli *Vaṃsas* of Sri Lanka" (n. 1 above).

<sup>3</sup> Now classic studies include Melford Spiro, *Buddhism and Society: A Great Tradition and Its Burmese Vicissitudes* (New York, 1970); and Richard Gombrich, *Precept and Practice: Traditional Buddhism in the Rural Highlands of Ceylon* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1971). For important counterreadings, which insist that the rift tells us we are wrong in constructing a "canonical Buddhism" rather than that actual Buddhists are somehow corruptions of themselves, see Martin Southwold, *Buddhism in Life: The Anthropological Study of Religion and the Sinhalese Practice of Buddhism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1983); and David Scott, *Formations of Ritual: Colonial and Anthropological Discourses on the Sinhala Yaktovil* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994).

tradition, the bulk of the seventeen thousand-odd suttas in the Tipiṭaka have become increasingly irrelevant to historians working in the field.

As one of those historians, and despite my wholehearted support for attempts at recovering a postcanonical Theravāda Buddhist history, I find this fact unsettling. Of course, in thinking of the suttas as foundational while simultaneously all but ignoring them (except in the classroom), I curiously parallel the practices of the “medieval” Buddhists whom I study. But like those of them who continued to draw on suttas in liturgical contexts or commentarial traditions, I feel that there *should* be something more to the Tipiṭaka than, to borrow Steve Collins’s lovely phrase, “the very idea” of it.<sup>4</sup> Has all the scholarly labor devoted to editing and translating the suttas been for naught? Must historians relinquish these ancient documents to the nonhistorical analyses of comparative philosophers and philologists? Is there nothing more for historians to learn from the suttas? If we are to answer these questions in the negative, we must define historical approaches to the suttas which can still be viable today. And I suspect that historians of religions working in other areas of Buddhist and even non-Buddhist history face similar challenges in rethinking parallel “canonical” texts in the traditions they study.

This article attempts to define such approaches for the Theravāda case. An American Academy of Religion–sponsored collaboration on “Pāli Texts in New Contexts” (a conference held in Chicago, May 1998) forced me to confront the problem of reading suttas as history in light of one specific sutta that has captured my imagination over the years, namely the Ariyapariyesanasutta, or Sermon on the Noble Quest (henceforth NQ). After a brief introduction to the basic themes of NQ and its position in the Tipiṭaka, I use it as a basis for exploring four different, but certainly not unrelated, “modes” of historical study of the suttas. I refer to these with the inelegant but descriptive titles, “historical source mode,” “text of its day mode,” “textual whole mode,” and “later reading mode.” My identification of these modes is not original; I merely attempt to describe generally the range of options that I find in the existing scholarship and in the process to articulate some of the potential opportunities as well as the difficulties entailed by each. The original contribution is in my new readings of NQ according to each mode, focusing in particular on that portion of NQ which is concerned with the Bodhisatta’s pre-Enlightenment training. After showing that each of these programs for studying suttas historically does in fact allow us new insight into NQ, I return in the conclusion to more general questions surrounding the historicity of the suttas and, by implication, the study of all such “canonical” texts.

<sup>4</sup> Steve Collins, “On the Very Idea of the Pāli Canon,” *Journal of the Pali Text Society* 15 (1990): 89–126.

Ariyapariyesanasutta (NQ) is contained as the twenty-sixth sutta in the “Middle Length Division” (Majjhimanikāya) of the “Sutta Basket” of the Tipiṭaka. Running sixteen pages in the Romanized Pāli edition,<sup>5</sup> the sermon is remembered, like most of the suttas, to have been preached while the Buddha was dwelling in the Jetavana Monastery at Sāvātthi (Śrāvastī, modern Saheth Maheth, Uttar Pradesh, India). A group of monks approaches the Buddha’s chief attendant, Ānanda, in order to express their desire to hear a sermon “face to face with the Blessed one.” Ānanda instructs them to wait at the hermitage of a Brahmin named Rammaka, to which he leads the Buddha after the latter’s afternoon bath. When he arrives, the Buddha praises the assembled monks for their diligence in studying the teachings (Dhamma), then proceeds to distinguish between ignoble (*anariya*) and noble (*ariya*) forms of questing (*pariyesanā*). In the former case, a person who is attached to things of the world nevertheless clings to things of the world, thereby failing to escape his or her destiny to be born, to grow old, to die, to grieve, and to be defiled in the perpetual cycle of *samsāra*. In the latter case, a person who is destined to those eventualities realizes the danger (*ādinavaṃ*) in the things of the world that are likewise so destined and renounces them in search of “the unborn [unaging, undying, ungrieving, undefiled] unexcelled Nirvana, which is bound up with peacefulness.”<sup>6</sup>

The Buddha proceeds to tell the monks an abbreviated autobiography, using his own spiritual journey as an illustration of the progression from the ignoble to the Noble Quest. He details his movements from his initial rejection of the world through his encounters and ultimate dissatisfaction with two teachers (named Ājāra Kālāma and Uddaka Rāmaputta), his attainment of Enlightenment (*bodhi*), his initial aversion to preaching, his honoring of God’s request that he preach anyway, his search for an audience, an odd and unproductive meeting with an Ājīvika named Upaka, and finally his preaching of the First Sermon to the “Group of Five” monks (*pañcavaggiyabhikkū*) with whom he had practiced austerities and to whom he had decided to preach after learning (from certain deities as well as a survey by his Buddha-eye) that his first choices (the two former teachers) were already dead. He then delivers to the monks assembled at Rammaka’s hermitage what I take to be the sermon proper, namely an extended explanation that the Buddhist saint (*arahant*), being free from the snares of Māra (Death), is comparable to a free-roaming beast of prey, whereas a person ensnared in worldly passions is as much subject to Death as a trapped beast is subject to the hunter. The text concludes with a typ-

<sup>5</sup> The Sermon on the Noble Quest is found in V. Trenckner, ed., *The Majjhima-Nikāya* (London: Pali Text Society, 1888), pp. 160–75.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 163. All translations from the Pāli are my own.

ical statement that, on hearing this sermon, those monks rejoiced at the Buddha's words.

#### I. HISTORICAL SOURCE MODE

In his 1894–95 American Lectures in the History of Religions, Pali Text Society founder T. W. Rhys Davids, discussing the topic of the Bodhisatta's teachers, refers to the good fortune that “we have an account in the *Ariya Pariyesana Sutta*, given by Gotama himself, of the essence of the teaching of . . . Ālāra Kālāma, and of the reasons which led Gotama to be dissatisfied with the result.”<sup>7</sup> Implicit in such statements is the assumption of scholars in Rhys Davids's generation that the suttas provide us a transparent window into the events and ideas of the early Buddhist community and, by extension, the events and ideas of the Buddha's own life. Like NQ, virtually all the suttas are framed as particular moments in the Buddha biography and, of course, as expressions of the Buddha's own teachings; some of them also narrate parts of the Buddha biography itself. As NQ is one of those suttas promising access to the Buddha biography on both levels, it is little wonder that Rhys Davids highlighted it in his narration of that biography.<sup>8</sup>

One hundred years later, however much we still rely on the testimony of the suttas in reconstructing “the historical Buddha” and “what the Buddha taught,” we all feel a certain need to qualify Rhys Davids's statements. As mentioned, according to a strict standard for historical evidence we should be treating the suttas as products of the tenth rather than the first century of the Buddha Era (fifth century A.D. rather than fifth century B.C.). Yet I think there is also general agreement that that standard is *too* strict. Texts of the fifth century A.D. (e.g., Buddhaghosa's *Samantappasādikā*), and even a little earlier (the earliest is *Dīpavaṃsa*, ca. A.D. 302), claim that the suttas were by then already very ancient indeed. And even if we ignore these claims and fix the texts nearer the time of the commentaries, we still must admit that at least by that time they were already being read as windows into the time of the Buddha himself. There is moreover plenty of evidence—namely parallel transmissions of suttas and parts of suttas in non-Pāli traditions, for example, in the famous manuscript finds of North India and Central Asia, the early translations of the sūtras preserved in the Chinese Tripiṭaka, and in Buddhist Sanskrit works like *Lalitavistara* and *Mahāvastvavadāna*—that at least portions of

<sup>7</sup> T. W. Rhys Davids, *Buddhism: Its History and Literature* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1896), p. 102.

<sup>8</sup> In fact, as I shall explicate in greater detail below, NQ and related suttas of the *Majjhimanikāya* are the *only* canonical narratives of many crucial moments in the Buddha biography; NQ is relied on implicitly and explicitly in *all* reconstructions of the Buddha biography from later canonical times to the present, both by Buddhists and by scholars.

the suttas are considerably earlier than the fifth century A.D. According to this line of inquiry, it is possible to place one portion of NQ in the earliest layer of the tradition; at least this portion of NQ can still be treated as a document of, and therefore as evidence for, the early Buddhist period.

This portion of NQ is what I will designate (in Sec. 2 below) the “inner frame” or “frame III.” It is that same autobiographical fragment which commences with Gotama’s renunciation as “a Bodhisatta who had not yet become the Sambuddha, who . . . being a young man with very black hair, auspicious with youth, at the prime age, while [his] parents who did not approve were weeping and wailing, did cut off [his] hair, put on yellow robes and go forth from home to homelessness,” and which continues through his encounters with two teachers, his (unstipulated) period of asceticism, attainment of *bodhi*, journey to Benares, and preaching of the First Sermon.<sup>9</sup> There are several lines along which this autobiographical narrative’s comparative antiquity can be argued.

First, the language of the text itself belies its age. On one hand, it includes much weird, obscure, and troubling material that might better have been excluded had editorial discretion in fact enjoyed the upper hand. Among the points that I can explain only as a faithfulness to exact transmission are the inclusion of the Buddha’s “un-marvelous verses” (*anacchariyā gāthā*) uttered after enlightenment;<sup>10</sup> the problematic initial hesitance of the Buddha to preach his message<sup>11</sup> and the apparent need of anonymous deities to inform the newly awakened Buddha that his former teachers were already dead;<sup>12</sup> the failure of Upaka, followed at first by the Group of Five, to recognize the extraordinary state of his being; the rather un-Buddhalike, half-boastful, half-defensive tone in which he declares himself Buddha to Upaka and the Group of Five; and seeming inconsistencies with accepted biographical tradition, such as the

<sup>9</sup> M (= Majjhima-nikāya) I:163–73.

<sup>10</sup> In his commentary, Buddhaghosa is obviously troubled by this designation; ignoring the obvious meaning, *an* (not) + *acchariyā* (marvelous), he reads the term as *anu* (exceedingly) + *acchariyā* (wonderful), which may be grammatically questionable yet seems rather more appropriate for the first words uttered after the Enlightenment. See J. H. Woods and D. Kosambi, eds., *Papañcasūdanī nāma Majjhimanikāyaṭṭhakathā of Buddhaghosācāriya* (London: Pali Text Society, 1928), 2:175.

<sup>11</sup> Many later Buddha biographies wrestle with this incident, which suggests that it did not sit comfortably with the Buddhists who inherited it. Thus Buddhavaṃsa omits it in the biography of Gotama proper (and does not make it a stock category in the many Buddha biographies it narrates), choosing instead to make it the occasion for the declaration of Buddhavaṃsa itself (again without a hint that the Buddha actually hesitated). Aśvaghōṣa’s *Buddhacarita* has God come in an exalted company, more as a social call than an actual plea; the Buddha already knows he is going to preach his message before God arrives. A similar move is also made in later texts such as the *Nidānakathā* of the *Jātakatṭhakathā*. In the Lotus Sūtra the Buddha not only knows that he will preach before God arrives but knows it from the veritable beginning of time.

<sup>12</sup> In NQ itself this uneasiness is apparent: the gods tell the Buddha that the two teachers are dead, but his knowledge and insight in this regard then seem to arise on their own. Aśvaghōṣa (*Buddhacarita* xiv.106) simply omits the deities altogether.

statement that he was in “the prime of his youth” (no indication of being a twenty-nine-year-old married father) and that his parents (in the plural) were weeping and wailing when he renounced the world (whereas later Buddha biographies insist that his mother was long-since dead). On the other hand, there is something very human about all this: doubt, arrogance, lag times in reaching Enlightenment or convincing others, a remembered youth when the Buddha was not yet Buddha, the physiological reference to his “very black hair” (*susukālakeso*), and so forth. This seems to reflect a certain genuineness. Little wonder that Rhys Davids could treat it as true autobiography (despite the fact that this same early fragment details such “mythological” realities as chats with God and gods and all-seeing Buddha-eyes).

Perhaps more persuasively, second, this portion of the narrative is repeated almost verbatim at other points in the *Tiṭṭaka*. The whole narrative is repeated in three other suttas of the *Majjhimanikāya*<sup>13</sup> while other parallels are found elsewhere in the *Tiṭṭaka* (some of the narrative has been joined with an early *Mārakathā* to create the opening of the *Mahāvagga* of the *Pāli Vinaya*,<sup>14</sup> while the words uttered to Upaka the *Ājīvika* reappear often in the form of quotation).<sup>15</sup> These are large narrative segments, suggesting that they belong to a different class from the repeated stock phrases, clichés, lists, and so on, that are well known in the sutta texts. Whereas the latter could all have been editorial innovations, I agree with E. J. Thomas that in the present case the editors likely had an extant narrative that they reworked as these suttas, *Mahāvagga*, or *Kathāvatthu*; this narrative fragment would therefore predate the initial compiling and editing of the *Tiṭṭaka* in the form we have it today.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Etienne Lamotte, *History of Indian Buddhism*, trans. Sara Webb-Boin (Louvain, 1988), pp. 648–49: “1. *Biographical fragments incorporated in the Sūtras*—In the *Majjhimanikāya*, four suttas which repeat and complement one another all tell us of an important phase in Śākyamuni’s life, namely, the period which extends from the flight from Kapilavastu until the Enlightenment: these are the *Ariyapariyesana* (M I, pp. 163–73; T 26, No. 204, ch. 56, pp. 776b–778c), the *Dvedhāvitakka* (M I, p. 117), the *Bhayabherava* (M I, pp. 17–23; T 125, ch. 23, pp. 665b–666c) and the *Mahāsaccakasutta* (M I, pp. 240–49). Against the will of his parents, he left home and donned the yellow robe of the religious; he studied successively under Ālāra Kālāma and Udraka Rāmaputra; the former taught him the way of nihilism, the latter that of neither-perception-nor-nonperception; however Śākyamuni considering their doctrines to be imperfect, abandoned them, passed through Magadha and withdraw [*sic*] into solitude, in the neighbourhood of Uruvilvā (M I, pp. 163–67; T 26, ch. 56, 776b–777a).”

<sup>14</sup> I have tried to work some of this out in “Rethinking Buddhist Missions” (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 1992), pp. 228–30. Parallel passages are: M I:167–73 = *Mahāvagga* I:5–I:6 (with the addition of *Dhammacakkappavattanasutta* at the point where it belongs in the narrative).

<sup>15</sup> As at *Kathāvatthu* 289; see G. P. Malalasekera, *Dictionary of Pāli Proper Names* (London: Pali Text Society, 1937), 1:386.

<sup>16</sup> Edward J. Thomas, *The Life of Buddha as Legend and History* (1927; reprint, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975), p. 62, n. 1: “See *Majjh.* i, 23, 117, 167, 247–49; ii 93–94; these are repetitions, and this means that the redactor or redactors of this collection incorporated an older document.”



Third, in addition to being present in sutta form in Chinese and Japanese canons, this narrative fragment has also been used by the compilers of the Lalitavistara and Mahāvastvavadāna. In Thomas's estimation, this too would mean that the narrative is very old.<sup>17</sup> I have compared in detail only the passages that relate to the Bodhisatta's teachers, so I hesitate to generalize about the incorporation of the entire narrative fragment, but at least with regard to the teachers I think it quite clear that the Buddhist Sanskrit authors have worked from a Pāli or more likely related Prakrit version rather than the other way around (which in many cases, such as the parallels between Lalitavistara or Mahāvastu and supplements in the commentaries, is more likely the direction of the borrowing). Thus, in the Mahāvastu we find a number of grammatical errors that are best explained as bad translation from the Prakrit.<sup>18</sup> Although these slips do not appear in the Lalitavistara version, others give away its origin, too, in a Pāli-like prototype.<sup>19</sup> Mahāvastvavadāna contains virtually nothing that is not in the Pāli; Lalitavistara supplements the terse statements about Uddaka Rāmaputta (here Sanskritized as Rudraka Rāmaputra) by making the Buddha already have a philosophical rebuttal before meeting him and meeting Rudraka only in the interest of showing him up. Both Sanskrit versions omit the "conjoining frame" of NQ (about destiny to rebirth, etc.), which further suggests the greater antiquity of the embedded portion, the Buddha autobiography.

Fourth, the great antiquity of this narrative fragment can be argued from its apparent use, as a basis for supplementation, in later Buddha biographies. Though I will deal with the question of supplementation

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 64.

<sup>18</sup> E. Senart, *Le Mahāvastu: texte Sanscrit publié pour la première fois et accompagné d'introductions et d'un commentaire* (Paris, 1897), 2:117–20. We find the Pāli *akāma-kānaṃ mātapitunnaṃ assamukhānaṃ rudantānaṃ* (genitive absolute construction, "while [my] parents who did not approve were weeping and wailing") badly rendered as *akāma-kānaṃ mātapitṛnām aśrukaṅthānām rudanmukhānām*, which in addition to being garbled in a way that can only be explained as bad translation ("weep-necked" instead of "weeping" [literally, "faces of tears"]; "wail-faced" instead of "wailing") betrays its Pāli-like origin in the use of the real plural rather than the dual, which an original composition in Sanskrit would surely have employed for "mother and father." The dual, of course, is lacking in Pāli and some related Prakrits. Likewise, mistakes in *sandhi* throughout suggest direct copying from a Pāli-like manuscript or oral tradition, in either of which *sandhi* rules are loose, informal, or nonexistent. There are lines omitted such that the Sanskrit text is almost gibberish without the Pāli (*sa khalvahaṃ bhikṣavaḥ yena Udrako Rāmaputra etadavocat*; cf. the Pāli *Atha khvāhaṃ bhikkhave yena Uddako Rāmaputto ten' upasaṃkamim, upasaṃkamtivā Uddakaṃ Rāmaputtaṃ etad avocam*). Most telling, the pseudo-Sanskritization of "Uddaka" as "Udraka" is belied in the onetime slip, in all the manuscripts, into the Pāli spelling "Uddaka."

<sup>19</sup> Thus, in addition to similar *sandhi* gaffes, Lalitavistara employs the common Pāli term *ātāpi*, zealous, which is not ordinarily found in Sanskrit, in rendering the common Pāli description of an *arahant* (*eko vupakaṅṅho appamatto ātāpi pahittatto*) as *eko 'pramatta ātāpi vyapakṛṣṭo*.

more fully below, here it is important merely to note that subsequent Buddha biographies all supplement this text to the extent that they take up the pre-Enlightenment/Bodhisattva stage of the biography at all, given that this is our *only* early version of those events.<sup>20</sup> But this is not merely a matter of supposition; the use of actual phrases or scenes from NQ and parallel Majjhimanikāya suttas betrays the reliance of later Buddha biographies on the Pāli or Pāli-original. I have already shown this for Mahāvastu and Lalitavistara, but in this context I should also point to some obvious parallels in Buddhavaṃsa (ca. second century B.C.),<sup>21</sup> Aśvaghōṣa's Buddhacarita (ca. first century A.D.),<sup>22</sup> the Chinese Abhiniṣkramaṇasūtra (translated sixth century A.D.; the Sanskrit original was doubtless earlier),<sup>23</sup> and the travels of the Chinese pilgrim Xuanzang (seventh century A.D.),<sup>24</sup> as well as numerous later Theravāda biographies in Pāli and the vernacular languages. The consistent incorporation

<sup>20</sup> Thomas, pp. 229–30: “Of his six years’ striving we know from the Canon only what the *Majjhima* tells us (above, pp. 62ff.)”

<sup>21</sup> The Buddhavaṃsa (BV; Richard Morris, ed., *The Buddhavaṃsa and the Cariyā-Piṭaka* [London: Pali Text Society, 1882; citations are to chapter and verse]) opens with a scene of Brahmā begging, located in the canon only in NQ and related texts (BV 1:6), and this becomes standard in the account of other Buddhas too (e.g., 2:211); the period of striving also becomes standard of the *type* “Buddha,” though note that Ālāra and Uddaka do not appear in this account; another parallel is the recognition (by Sumedha, however) of liability to birth (*jātidhamma*), etc., and the language of “why then don’t I . . .” (BV 2:7–9; cf. I. B. Horner and B. C. Law, trans., *Buddhavaṃsa, Chronicle of the Buddhas and Cariyāpitaka, Basket of Conduct*, Minor Anthologies of the Pāli Canon, vol. 3 [London: Pali Text Society, 1975], p. 10, n. 4).

<sup>22</sup> The Buddhacarita (E. H. Johnston, ed. and trans., *The Buddhacarita or Acts of the Buddha* [1936; reprint, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1992; citations are to chapter and verse]) contains the self-recognition of destiny to birth, etc. (iv.89; v.12–13; also the language of seeing the danger in this, e.g., iv.97 and xi.7; also xii.48); black hair/supreme youth of the bodhisatta (viii.52; cf. x.23: “prime of youth”; xii.8: flush of youth”), weeping in the palace (viii.81; cf. ix.13), visit to Ālāra (Ārāḍa) Kālāma (ix.6; xi.69; ch. xii, esp. xii.83: “Thus he was not satisfied on learning the doctrine of Arāḍa, and, discerning that it was incomplete, he turned away from there”); visit to Udraka Rāmaputra (xii.84–88; same language of attainments in both teachers’ cases); pure bank of Nerañjara River (xii.90); description of Nibbāna being sought (xi.59: “the stage in which there is neither old age, nor fear, nor disease, nor birth, nor death”); description of the ultimate as *paramaṃ sivaṃ* (xii.69 = Pāli *paramaṃ sivaṃ*); description of the eight *jhanas* (xii.49 ff.); surveying the world with purified eye, people of little or great dust, etc. (xiv.8 ff.); sees Arāḍa and Udraka are dead so decides to preach to the Group of Five (xiv.106—but now out of the surviving Sanskrit text); the whole thing is predicated on a rejection of the passions, precisely what NQ’s sermon proper (see frame IV, below) is actually about; see esp. chap. xi.

<sup>23</sup> The Abhiniṣkramaṇasūtra (Samuel Beal, trans., *The Romantic Legend of Śākya Buddha: A Translation of the Chinese Version of the Abhiniṣkramaṇasūtra* [1875; reprint, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1985]) is obviously drawing on NQ either directly or indirectly (perhaps via the Buddhacarita) in its descriptions of the visit to the teachers (pp. 169–77) and of the events after the Enlightenment (pp. 242–50).

<sup>24</sup> Samuel Beal, trans., *Si Yu Ki: Buddhist Records of the Western World* (1884; reprint, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1981): NQ (probably through Buddhacarita transmission?) is clearly presupposed by ii.54–55 (stupa of reluctance of the Group of Five, also mention of Ālāra and Uddaka); ii.139–42 (weird story of Uddaka).

of bits of our text, whether verbatim or paraphrased, in these later supplements supports the view that the fragment is an early one and also that it is a narrative that in later centuries continued to be of “practical” or actual importance to Buddhists.

If one or more of these arguments for the antiquity of this portion, at least, of NQ is persuasive, then we can place *this* sutta in a period anterior to the time of Buddhaghosa (which anyway seems quite clear in the radical distance between Buddhaghosa’s readings and those of the original, as I suggest below in Sec. IV). It can at least be antedated to the time of the Buddhist Sanskrit literature, the first or second century A.D. (which in any event is as early as any known Buddhist manuscripts). And given that this narrative appears to have existed as a unit prior to the editing of the suttas and Vinaya in the form we have them today, it presumably can be located as early into Buddhist history as we ever are likely to get.

Yet fixing the text at an early period does not in itself yield any significant historical information. If in fact in this instance we can circumvent the doubts raised about the antiquity of the suttas en bloc, we are still left with the question of how the autobiographical fragment ought to be interpreted. Within “historical source mode,” the next move would be to ask whether the narrative as such can be taken as “accurate,” a designation requiring that the reported information be the result of eyewitness observation and “objective” recording. Here the problems inherent in “historical source mode” are not so easily overcome.

On one hand, the evidence does not prove (though it also does not disprove) that even this autobiographical fragment is old enough to be counted as an eyewitness report by the Buddha or of the Buddha’s words. As studies of the historical Jesus have made only too clear, what adepts thought about the founder a century or two after his death can be at great remove from the historical biography of the founder himself. The best our evidence allows us to say is that this autobiographical fragment accurately records the thoughts that somewhat later Buddhists had about the Buddha, or their beliefs about the words he spoke.

On the other hand, even if we allow the fragment to survive from the mouth of the Buddha himself, via the memories of the selfsame monks who heard the sermon at Rammaka’s hermitage, there are still reasons to doubt the “historical accuracy” of the passage in question. Three different sorts of objections have been articulated.

1. The first is a pseudoscientific skepticism about the authenticity of the “mythic portions” of this ancient fragment, namely the chats with God and the gods and the Buddha-eye that surveys the whole world. These elements are integral to the narrative in all its appearances and in most of its supplements, meaning that there is no basis for trying to portray them as later accretions from which an even more original core can be separated

out. Their presence casts doubt on an historicist reading of the fragment, for it suggests that something more than a commonsense nineteenth-century “objectivity” was at work in the original composition.<sup>25</sup>

2. A second (and less easily dismissed) argument is raised by Thomas, namely that the Bodhisatta’s encounters with Ājāra Kālāma and Uddaka Rāmaputta are reported in formulaic fashion, nearly word for word the same in both instances. Moreover, he points out, the two teachers are made to claim specific meditative achievements that Thomas maintains were inventions of later Buddhist tradition. Thus Thomas concludes that the narrative of the Bodhisatta’s training bears no historical relevance.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Some scholars have actively pooh-poohed this criticism (e.g., C. A. F. Rhys Davids’s defensive argument that “who is to say [God’s appearance before the Buddha] is any less true than the baptism in the Jordan?”) but most scholars (e.g., T. W. Rhys Davids, Etienne Lamotte, E. J. Thomas, A. Foucher) have seemingly confirmed it in their utter silence about these matters (which nevertheless does not prevent them from narrating other aspects of this Buddha autobiography as “historical fact”).

<sup>26</sup> “We are told in the legends that Buddha studied under Ājāra Kālāma and Uddaka the son of Rāma, but all we learn is that the former made the goal consist in the attainment of the stage of nothingness, and the latter in the attainment of the stage of neither consciousness nor non-consciousness. These are Buddhist terms for two of the attainments, and there is no reason to suppose that the legend is recording exact details of fact about two teachers who were dead before Buddha began to preach. The compiler is using the only terms he knew to express the imperfect efforts of Buddha’s predecessors” (Thomas, p. 184). Explaining himself, Thomas adds (n. 2): “There is one other reference to Ājāra in the Canon, which shows that he was looked upon as a practiser of concentration. See p. 150. When we come down to the second century, A.D., we find much more detailed accounts of his philosophy in Aśvaghosha’s *Buddhacarita*, ch. 12, and they have even been treated as evidence for the sixth century B.C. Their historical value is discussed in ch. xvi.” Following that reference, cf. pp. 229–30: “Of his six years’ striving we know from the Canon only what the *Majjhima* tells us (above, pp. 62ff.). His two teachers are described as practising concentration, and what they inculcated were two of the so-called Attainments, which are also a part of the Buddhist system, but probably not a primitive part of it. *It seems very unlikely that the compiler of the sutta a century or two later had any real knowledge of the facts of their teaching.* He had to describe their imperfect methods, and he gives them in what are exact descriptions of two Buddhist practices. Nothing about the philosophical systems of these teachers is said either in the Canon or out of it until we come to Aśvaghosha’s poem of the first or second century A.D. [BC xii.17 ff.]. There we are told that Ārāḍa or Ājāra first described his philosophy concisely to Gotama. It has a resemblance to the Sāṅkhya philosophy, but is without some of its most characteristic doctrines. R. Schmidt calls it an older form of Sāṅkhya. Windisch supposes that Aśvaghosha introduced only what he needed for this purpose. The point is important only with regard to the question of the origin of Buddhistic principles, and even then only on the supposition that Aśvaghosha is faithfully describing a system in the form in which it existed before Buddha began to preach. This is entirely improbable. *The terminology used is neither that of early Sāṅkhya nor of early Buddhism.* More important is Aśvaghosha’s account of the replies of the two teachers to Gotama’s questions about the religious life and the obtaining of final release. Ājāra’s reply consists of a description identical with the methods of the Buddhist monk up to the last Attainment but one. The monk reaches the four trances, and then successively attains *space*, the *infinite*, and *nothingness*. These last three stages are concise statements of the first three of the four Attainments. This account corresponds to the statement in the Pāli that Ājāra taught the Attainment of the state of Nothingness. The description of Uddaka’s doctrine also corresponds with the Pāli in making his teaching the fourth Attainment. Aśvaghosha has thus added nothing essential to the canonical statement beyond giving an

In virtually ignoring the teachers of the Bodhisatta altogether, Etienne Lamotte seems to concur.<sup>27</sup>

3. A third argument against the historicity of the text has been raised by A. Foucher, who in good Orientalist fashion imputes bad motives to the compilers of that portion of the fragment which details the meetings with the teachers. These compilers, says Foucher—inexplicably unaware of their own cultural mores—maligned the bodhisattva:

Another fault of our biographers was their incapacity to imagine the future Buddha in any way but as invested with shining glory. . . . Our authors have tried to reduce to a minimum the Bodhisattva's period of study as well as the need of it. If we are to believe them, he guessed all the answers before they were given to him, and was quick to make his teachers feel their incapacity to teach him. He soon decided to leave Arāda Kālāpa [a Sanskrit spelling of Āḷāra Kālāma], even though the latter offered to share with him the direction of the community of scholars. Thus our authors, blinded by fanaticism, failed to see that, according to Indian ethics, they were portraying the most unfaithful and insolent of pupils. The *Lalitavistara* even attempted to put this unworthy version in the mouth of the Buddha, but sometimes forgot to change the verbs from the third to the first person.<sup>28</sup> Having left Arāda's community in Vaiśālī, the Bodhisattva came to Rajāgrha [*sic*] where, as we have seen, he at once met King Bimbisāra. . . . The story goes on much as the above, attributing the same kindness to the master [Rudraka Rāmaputra] and the same presumption to the so-called disciple. This time we are even told that the Bodhisattva only became Rudraka's [*sic*] pupil in order to reveal the faults of his teacher's doctrine both to himself and to others. Because we feel that the foolish biographers, not the Bodhisattva, were responsible for these unfortunate statements, we need not spend more time on these particular readings.<sup>29</sup>

Of course by historicist standards, this argument that the reporting was “biased” is as damning as the second argument, above, that the reporting was not done by eyewitnesses; both of these would explain/bolster the first argument that the thing reported is unhistorical/mythic.

Nevertheless, the agreed-on solution seems to be the uneasy compromise of treating the narrative as true in substance—*everyone* has the

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independent account of a philosophical system which *has no appearance of being historical!*” (my emphasis throughout, except the emphasis on space, the infinite, and nothingness, which is in the text).

<sup>27</sup> Lamotte's only mention of the teachers is his brief notice of NQ and related Majjhima suttas in an appendix, cited in full in n. 13 above.

<sup>28</sup> Here Foucher inserts a footnote (n. 9) to Henry Clarke Warren, *Buddhism in Translations* (1886; reprint, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1992), p. 334, which contains his translation of the relevant portion of NQ, not *Lalitavistara*! And there is no inconsistency I see in the use of pronouns; the first person is employed consistently throughout.

<sup>29</sup> A. Foucher, *The Life of the Buddha according to the Ancient Texts and Monuments of India*, trans. Simone Brangier Boas (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1963). The original French edition is *La vie du Bouddha* (Editions Payot, 1949), pp. 96–97.

Buddha meet teachers prior to Enlightenment, and almost everyone stipulates them as these two (and/or others who have been named elsewhere) and as teachers of yogic trances and Hindu philosophy—while basically ignoring, in addition to all that “mythic” material, also the full detail of the stories of the encounters with Āḷāra Kālāma and Uddaka Rāmaputta (or, as with K. D. P. Wickremesinghe, reverting to the old naiveté of simply treating it all at face value as historical reporting).<sup>30</sup> Of course in “historical source mode” there is no way to do anything else, these being the only sources we have.

“Historical source mode” is based on what I believe to be an erroneous assumption that the compilers of the suttas were somehow *trying* to objectively report historical facts in a would-be nineteenth-century European way. So long as this assumption remains operative, there is nothing to do except judge the suttas as though they had been compiled by Edward Gibbon; and given that they were not, the impasse reached by scholarship in this mode seems inevitable. But rather than abandon the baby with the bathwater, we can disagree with Thomas’s assertion that this is the only point of importance in the study of this portion of NQ.<sup>31</sup> Rather, we can turn to alternative interpretive strategies that make the motive of the compilers a question rather than a given. In Sections II and III I examine two such alternative interpretive strategies that take as their starting point the conclusions about the antiquity of NQ, made possible by “historical source mode,” but that lead, I think, to much more productive questions and answers about the text under consideration. In Section IV, I examine an additional interpretive strategy to which this first mode of study is altogether irrelevant. Thus, even if we finally retire “historical source mode” as outdated, unproductive, and—let us be frank—boring, still there remain exciting ways in which a historian can make use of NQ.

## II. TEXT OF ITS DAY MODE

In “historical source mode” the reader of the text is the scholar himself or herself, interpreting directly on the basis of standards for historicity characteristic, not of the period in which the suttas were composed, nor even of the later Buddhist history in which they were preserved, but rather of the period in which the scholar herself or himself lives and thinks. In the past I have assumed this flaw to be virtually fatal to the attempt at finding history in suttas like *The Sermon on the Noble Quest*. It should come as little surprise that the final results of an enterprise devoted entirely to judging suttas on the basis of standards that do not belong to them turns out to be hand-wringing, uneasy compromise, and

<sup>30</sup> K. D. P. Wickremesinghe, *The Biography of the Buddha* (Colombo, 1972), pp. 53–56.

<sup>31</sup> See Thomas (n. 16 above), p. 229.

ennui. But I now admit that this does not mean that the historian's only option is to give up the attempt altogether. Rather, in the past decade I think it has been sufficiently well shown that different sorts of historical analysis, far more promising, solid, and interesting, become possible once we remove ourselves from the position of reader and ask instead how people in the tradition itself would have read such-and-such a text.

While in greater or lesser degree I think this shift has been made by many different scholars, maybe even most of us, in many different keys, if not by members of the contemporary Theravāda establishment, I shall nevertheless try to focus my comments on three scholars whose work strikes me as emblematic of three (no doubt related) directions in which this shift from interpreting reader to interpreter of readership allows us to move. In the present and subsequent parts I examine two approaches to the study of the readership of the suttas in the time of their own production/composition, one of them focusing on an external readership or a context of recitation to and about outsiders, represented by the socio-historical reconstructions of Greg Bailey. The other of them (in Sec. III) focuses on an internal readership or a context of composition and/or interpretation by and for fellow Buddhists, represented by the literary analyses of Steve Collins. In the fourth part I discuss another approach to the study of the suttas, which shifts attention to readers within the tradition in times posterior to the time in which the suttas themselves were produced. While Collins's literary analyses presumably carry over to later members of the tradition as well—indeed, if I read him correctly, the point is precisely the degree to which the ideologies of the producers of the suttas shaped later readings and ideological and sociopolitical realities—the fourth mode is more pointedly represented by Anne Blackburn's exciting work with the culture of manuscript production and education in a late premodern setting (eighteenth-century Kandy) admittedly far removed from the early Buddhist community and, for that matter, from any original meaning of the suttas.

Bailey's work begins from a frank admission that we are on thin ice trying to use the suttas for the social history of Brahminism in the time of the Buddha, given that Buddhist representations of Brahmins of the day are virtual "caricatures."<sup>32</sup> Yet in the end I think he shows persuasively that with a great deal of care this can be accomplished, and I agree with him that in the absence of other sources it must be accomplished. Bailey certainly does not engage, however, in the sort of face-value read-

<sup>32</sup> In addition to some detailed correspondence with Greg Bailey in 1995, I base what I say here on his "Problems of the Interpretation of the Data Pertaining to Religious Interaction in Ancient India: The Conversion Stories in the *Sutta Nipāta*," *Indo-British Review* 19, no. 1:1–20.

ing that characterizes “historical source mode,” from which perspective, in terms of his question, Buddhist caricatures of Brahmins would be treated as true representations of what Brahmins then were actually like (or else, and more likely, they would be denounced for failing to be such representations). Rather, he delicately fleshes out his social history from between the lines of the earliest and most difficult suttas, in *Sutta-nipāta*, engaging in a sort of hermeneutical suspicion of both the presences and absences in them. I find compelling his argument that the stories of conversions of Brahmins in *Sutta-nipāta* “illuminat[e] aspects of the Buddhists’ self-consciousness of their own fragility and apprehension in the face of the overwhelming cultural opponent they faced in the form of brahmanical culture, the chief symbol and advocate of which was the brahmin himself.”<sup>33</sup> From this perspective, the texts give proof, not of their caricatures, but of the fact that early Buddhists felt a need to caricature in the first place. The fact that such a need was apparently not felt by Brahmin writers of the early Buddhist period, who recorded no mention of the Buddhists at all, reinforces Bailey’s sociohistorical conclusion that Brahmanical culture really did have an overwhelming advantage over the incipient Buddhist community, which appeared to be just one more, no doubt extreme, Upaniṣadic group.

Quite apart from the interesting perspective this gives us on the relationship of Buddhists to theists during the early Buddhist Period—and from the light, I might add, which it sheds on the eventual virulence with which theist writers, beginning with the authors of the *Bhagavad-gītā*, felt compelled to sling insults at Buddhists—I find Bailey’s work promising because it suggests the possibility of reading the suttas as artefacts of the times and places that produced them. Rather than view them as passive purveyors of historical truth qua nineteenth-century encyclopedias, it becomes possible to view them as actions within a particular set of sociohistorical circumstances. Of course, there are all sorts of problems in trying to determine just what those circumstances were, especially because there is already a certain unsteadiness in a method based on second-guessing ancient texts, and here the question of the relative antiquity of the suttas becomes absolutely critical. But we do have an enormous amount of textual material on hand both Buddhist and Brahminical—and, it is crucial to add, Jain, for they too were actively attacked by and attackers of the Buddhists from an early date<sup>34</sup>—such that, even in the

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

<sup>34</sup> The Jain case is especially interesting for the obviously intertextual relationship between the biographies of the respective founders, who are interchangeably referred to with the same epithets (Buddha, Jina, Mahāvira, Arahant) and whose biographies exhibit differences as minor—yet definitive, distinctive, across an unthinkable line—as the iconographic difference of whether or not the genitals show.



absence of any hard evidence predating the time of Aśoka Maurya, so long as our historical linguistics is accurate we should be able to capture the dialogical moments or intertextual relationships on which historical reconstruction becomes possible.<sup>35</sup> For an obvious example, the *Tevijja Sutta* names several Upaniṣads known from our extant collections, including Chandoka for Chāṇḍogya, Addhariya for Aitareya, Tittiriya for Taittirīya, and so on,<sup>36</sup> an extremely important link which helps date both bodies of literature by placing them in the same general milieu.

The importance of the external, the non-Buddhist—whether these “others” were assumed to have been among the readers/hearers or merely the object of representation by Buddhist readers/hearers—is evident in NQ. When we consider the sequence of events that is actually narrated in the autobiographical fragment under consideration, it is possible to view the entire Buddha biography, in this possibly earliest, original formulation, as little more than a series of encounters with representatives or symbols of the non-Buddhist communities among whom the early Buddhists coexisted: indeed, precisely the groups that are singled out by the Aśokan inscriptions. The fragment begins with Brahmins: Āḷāra Kālāma and Uddaka Rāmaputta, followed by none less than Brahmā the Lord of Creation (Brahmā Sahampati). This encounter with God is followed by a wonderful series of punning references to Jains, as I will discuss in a moment, which are made in a discussion with an Ājivika named Upaka, after which the now-Buddha returns to Brahmins (the Group of Five) and transforms them with the superiority of his attainments (despite their initial agreement not even to rise to greet him). Indeed, the whole narrative is one of triumph over these non-Buddhists, who are however treated reverentially, with a healthy dose of pity for their less exalted state (except perhaps the Jains, who would have been the early Buddhists’ closest competitors, whose texts are most directly intertextual with Buddhist texts, and who appear to be attacked directly as a result).

Thus as soon as the Bodhisatta is questing after the good, he is quickly mastering the teachings of first Āḷāra Kālāma and then, almost as an afterthought, Uddaka Rāmaputta, both of whom acknowledge his supreme ability and offer either to make him partner in leading the community (Āḷāra) or leader of the community outright (Uddaka). Yet as Foucher found so upsetting and unlikely, the Bodhisatta is made to abandon both teachers/communities because their attainments, however exalted and close to the goal, are not quite there yet. Without any teacher whatsoever, a point reiterated several times just after the Enlightenment, he becomes

<sup>35</sup> On dialogical as opposed to monological readings of South Asian texts, generally, see Ron Inden’s introduction in Inden, Ali, and Walters (n. 1 above). My “Buddhist History” in that same volume applies Inden’s insights to Buddhist texts.

<sup>36</sup> T. W. Rhys Davids, trans., *Buddhist Suttas* (reprint, New York: Dover, 1969), p. 171.

Buddha and agrees to preach only after the Brahmins' God himself comes to beg him to do so, for the sake of the whole world (including God!). Some anonymous deities—also symbolic of the theist world in which the early Buddhists existed—then confirm what he sees with his Buddha-eye, namely that poor Aḷāra and Uddaka have just died, so he sets out to meet the Group of Five who are staying in the Deer Park near Benares.

Along the way he meets Upaka the Ājīvika, who instantly recognizes that the Buddha is something special but who pathetically fails to believe the Buddha's rather exuberant first self-declaration, shrugs his shoulders, and walks away. In the process of that exchange Upaka somewhat sarcastically responds that in his self-declaration the Buddha makes himself appear to be the unrivalled (*ananta*) victor (*jina*), something along the lines of, "Well aren't you just Jesus Christ?"—to which the Buddha answers with an unabashed "Yes, I am"! Coupled with the odd references, by God himself, to the "stained doctrine, devised by impure minds" which "formerly, among the Magadhans appeared"—no doubt referring to Jainism—there is obviously a polemical stance toward Jains, as well as Ājīvikas, at work here. As mentioned, the final act in this Buddha autobiography is the submission of the Group of Five Brahmin mendicant ascetics to the Buddha. Before hearing the first and subsequent suttas, they are forced to submit to the Buddha's own unique title (Tathāgatha, paralleling in its distinctiveness the epithet Tirthaṃkara in the Jain world), thereby admitting a level of unique superiority to him, and to submit to his communal rule (begging, studying, meditating, attaining *arahant*-ship). Here, then, there is much material for imagining the sociohistorical position of the early Buddhist community, surrounded as it was by other and likely bigger disciplinary orders of *samaṇas* and *brāhmaṇas*.

The potential of this sort of thinking for moving beyond the impasse of "historical source mode" becomes especially clear in applying it to the question of the Bodhisatta's teachers. Thomas's complaint that NQ's descriptions are little more than caricatures is answered with Bailey's view that caricatures are also part of the history we are trying to reconstruct. Foucher's complaint about the unlikely portrayal of Gotama as an uppity student just a little too smart to be believed is answered with Bailey's suggestion that the early Buddhists were apprehensive and self-conscious about their position vis-à-vis non-Buddhist disciplinary orders. That is, the points raised by Thomas and Foucher become, rather than "faults of our biographers," rather clever strategies in early Buddhist attempts at self-definition and promotion vis-à-vis their own rivals. What if we were to take the caricatures and overkill as evidence that the Buddha's relationship with Aḷāra Kālāma and Uddaka Rāmaputta actually mattered to the early Buddhists (if not the Buddha himself) who composed this autobiographical fragment? Perhaps they were significant teachers of the

day, despite the fact that they are otherwise forgotten to history. Perhaps they really did enjoy especially close correspondence to the early Buddhists, such that questions of the Buddha's right to take over both communities could counter an implication that the Buddha is merely a pupil of well-known Yoga masters.

The suggestion that we need to pursue such lines of thought is not as far-fetched as might appear from the fact that the historicity of these teachers has never seriously been engaged in the scholarship. These two teachers are, after all, singled out in the narrative fragment: they are named; their teachings are described; they engage in conversations with the future Buddha; they are clearly achievers of very high states of consciousness; they warrant at least as much attention as the others over whom, I have suggested, the early Buddhist authors of this fragment claimed the Buddha's superiority (Brahmā, Upaka, the Group of Five); the Bodhisatta seeks them out when he first endeavors to learn the truth and seeks to return to them when he first decides to teach it. In terms of sheer quantity in the text, in fact, Āḷāra Kālāma and Uddaka Rāmaputta turn out to be the most important figures in the Buddha autobiography other than the Buddha himself: they deserve more attention than the Group of Five, than the Ājīvika/Jains, and even than God himself (not to mention those weeping parents and unnamed wife and son). It is ironic, then, that "historical source mode" has somehow made their very names irrelevant to the discussion.

If we take seriously Bailey's claim that these texts addressed an external socioreligious reality, the logical assumption to make on the basis of these considerations is that this narrative fragment was composed when Āḷāra Kālāma and Uddaka Rāmaputta were not yet the faceless "Yogic masters" whom later tradition, and Western scholarship, would leave them; it was composed when these teachers were still known, when it still mattered to demonstrate that the Buddhist program is more complete than theirs, when it still mattered that they acknowledged the Bodhisatta's superiority even before he became Buddha, before they died; when it still mattered that he was his *own* teacher. Indeed, the culmination of each encounter with the teachers he is nevertheless admitted to have followed is the expression of each one's desire to have the Buddha take over leadership of his community (which in later sources would appear to have included hundreds of members each).<sup>37</sup> And the Buddha's first thought on Enlightenment is apparently to comply after all; to return to these teachers—and their communities—and teach them the higher Dhamma because "for a long time they had little dust in their eyes." When he discovers that each has died, the Buddha pities them, for each one suffered "a great loss;

<sup>37</sup> According to Mahāvastu and Lalitavistara, Āḷāra's community contained three hundred students, while Uddaka's community contained seven hundred students.

if he had heard this Dhamma he would quickly have understood.” There is an almost eschatological promise here: the Buddha could transform these Brahmanical teachers and, by extension, their followings.

These claims would have had real weight only in a situation in which members of those communities, in the absence of their now-dead founders, were active rivals and/or were being persuaded that they made the right choice in joining the Buddhist order (or perhaps were being persuaded to join the Buddhist order in the first place). To others who, like the Buddha, were closely connected with Ālāra Kālāma and Uddaka Rāmaputta, it would indeed matter to know in such absolutely (even painfully) explicit terms whether or not the Buddha taught everything they taught (with those teachers’ stamp of approval/offer of succession, after all) but also went beyond them by teaching much, much more.

In this light it seems to me most remarkable to notice, as has not previously been done in this context, that the Pāli texts contain a number of references to the Buddha’s interaction with members or former members of both of these communities. Thus, at least one strand of the tradition maintained that the Group of Five monks were in fact followers of Uddaka Rāmaputta; our text, which mentions them as having been there during the period of striving, almost as an afterthought, might similarly be seen to support such a reading.<sup>38</sup> Mahāparinibbānasutta (D.ii.130) mentions a Mallian, Pukkusa, who, paralleling the Group of Five in this reading, had been a follower of Ālāra Kālāma’s but later was convinced by the Buddha’s superiority to defect to the Buddhists. The Buddha confronts a belligerent group of Uddaka Rāmaputtists, King Eleyya and his bodyguard, in the Vassakāra Sutta of the Anguttaranikāya (A.ii.180) and actively attacks Uddaka in suttas in the Saṃyuttanikāya (S.iv.83–84, where Uddaka’s claim to have rooted out the source of *dukkha* is refuted) and in the Pāsādika Sutta of the Dīghanikāya (D.iii.126–27, where Uddaka is accused of base thinking). Just as Bailey’s work would lead us to see something purposeful in the triumph the Bodhisatta achieves over Brahmins/Brahmā, Jains, and Ājīvikas, so too it would lead us to conclude that, given the great antiquity of this fragment, in the early days of Buddhist history the communities of Ālāra Kālāma and Uddaka Rāmaputta were serious rivals and probably great sources of aspirants to the new Path.

<sup>38</sup> According to Lalitavistara, the Buddha met them when he arrived at Uddaka’s ashram, from whom he spirited them away; Tibetan versions make them representatives of the three hundred (3) and two hundred (2) men sent by the Bodhisatta’s father and father-in-law, respectively, to attend on him when he went forth; the Pāli Jātakatṭhakathā makes Koṇḍañña the youngest of the eight Brahmins who prophesied at the Bodhisatta’s birth. The previous seven having died, he tried to rile their sons to follow him in serving the Bodhisatta, but only four complied; together with him they are the five. See Thomas, p. 80. Buddhaghosa’s commentary also treats the five as sons of the Brahmins who first predicted the future greatness of the Bodhisatta.

## III. TEXTUAL WHOLE MODE

As interesting as this line of thinking becomes—implying the (I believe) previously unrecognized possibility that our narrative fragment preserves memories of an actual sociohistorical situation in which Ālāra and Uddaka and their communities were of great concern to the early Buddhists—like “historical source mode” it depends upon fracturing the integrity of the sutta as received, focusing only on that embedded narrative fragment of apparently greatest antiquity. I consider it one of the major contributions of Collins to have shown us so clearly that such fractured interpretation is always incomplete. There is a layer of historicity in the suttas—a history of composition, of aesthetics, of reading—that can be grasped only by treating any particular sutta (or jātika story, etc.) as a textual whole. In several different contexts, Collins has demonstrated that an analysis of literary devices including frame stories, internal structures, ornamentation, and so forth, can usefully supplement such fragmented readings.<sup>39</sup> This of course belies as much a limitation of fragmented philosophical readings as it does of fragmented historical readings; both history and philosophy are enriched by considering the frames within which the fragments are, we assume purposefully, situated. Here, we access a layer of history that does not require historical linguistics to project narrative fragments into remote antiquity; Collins’s points are as relevant (or even more relevant) for the time of editing as for the time of earliest/original composition, if any real distinction between those two can or should be made, and are relevant to later readership as well, anticipating my discussion in the next part.

Although this is not a form of reading at which I can claim any special skill—certainly I lack the nuanced eye that has made Collins’s readings so rich—still when I think about Ariyapariyesanasutta in this mode I find real truth in the argument that much is missed in an exclusive focus on that one autobiographical fragment. Yet this is what *every* scholar who has discussed NQ, as far as I have been able to discern, has in fact done; for all the use of NQ in debating “the historical Buddha,” not one scholar has paid attention to the literary qualities of the text. On one hand, this causes us to lose sight of the profound teaching that the monks at Rammaka’s hermitage so crave, and of which the autobiography is merely an illustration (albeit a powerfully evocative one), consisting in an analysis of the human condition—attachment to things (“wives and sons, slaves and slavegirls, goats and sheep, cocks and pigs, elephants and cows and horses and mares, silver and gold”)<sup>40</sup> destined us in their own destiny to birth, old age, dis-

<sup>39</sup> See esp. Steve Collins, “On the Very Idea of the Pāli Canon” (n. 4 above), “The Discourse on What Is Primary (*Aggañña Sutta*),” *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 21, no. 4 (1993): 301–93, and *Nirvana and Other Buddhist Felicities* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

<sup>40</sup> M I:162.

ease, death, grief, and defilement—as well as an analysis of the bases of this condition (sense pleasures) and a lovely metaphorical illustration of escape from it. Buddhaghosa titles his commentary on this text “Explanation of the Sermon on the Heap of Snares (Pāsārāsisuttavaṇṇanā), which is named ‘Sermon on the Noble Quest,’” suggesting that what really matters about this sutta is the final teaching, the snares metaphor, rather than the autobiographical illustration of it. (Indeed, as I suggest below, Buddhaghosa is singularly uninterested in the autobiographical details as such; he is concerned instead to supplement them with other details and to articulate a Buddhology that strikes me as quite foreign to the original.)

This fractured reading also causes us to lose sight of the other way in which this is an important text for recovering the Buddha biography. It, like virtually all of the suttas, narrates a particular moment in the life of the Buddha qua Buddha, during the forty-five years he spent traveling and teaching and instituting the Sangha. The description of the setting—the Buddha’s bath, the meeting at Rammaka’s hermitage, the manner in which he addressed the monks—may be a comparatively later addition to the early fragment, but it is a key moment in the massive Buddha biography that all the suttas, together, constitute: a Buddha biography so important to Buddhists at the stage when the Tipiṭaka was being compiled that they chose it as the frame for the entire collected teachings of the Buddha. It is precisely as evidence for the daily habits of the Buddha that Buddhaghosa finds this text biographically interesting, as I explain below. Just as historians of the Theravāda have increasingly shifted their focus away from “early Buddhism,” in the interest of recovering the comparably understudied later premodern and modern periods of Theravāda history, so there has been a marked shift away from reconstructions of “the historical Buddha” in favor of studies of what Frank Reynolds calls “the biographical process” in later Buddhist history.<sup>41</sup> But as far as I know there has as yet been no attempt to describe and locate the massive Buddha biography that becomes apparent to us when we take the introductory (*nidāna*) portion of each sutta seriously.

Additionally, and here especially I draw inspiration from Collins’s work, these different bits of NQ—the teaching, the metaphors, the “one

<sup>41</sup> Frank E. Reynolds, “The Many Lives of Buddha: A Study of Sacred Biography and Theravāda Tradition,” in *The Biographical Process: Studies in the History and Psychology of Religion*, ed. Frank E. Reynolds and Donald Capps (Mouton: The Hague, 1976), pp. 37–61. For fruits of this approach, see the wide-ranging collection of articles in J. Schober, ed., *Sacred Biography in the Buddhist Traditions of South and Southeast Asia* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1997); John Strong, *The Legend of King Aśoka* (Princeton, N.J., 1983), and *The Legend and Cult of Upagupta: Sanskrit Buddhism in North India and Southeast Asia* (Princeton, N.J., 1992) are exemplary in this regard. For a non-Theravādin parallel, see Phyllis Granoff and Koichi Shinohara, *Monks and Magicians: Religious Biographies in Asia* (Oakville, Ontario: Mosaic Press, 1988).

time” at which the sutta takes place, and even that ancient autobiographical fragment—are carefully woven together into a textual whole that has its own integrity, its own beauty, and its own meanings. It will not do to reckon with all the seemingly separate bits and then declare victory; the sutta itself—number 26 in the Majjhimanikāya—is an unfragmented whole. So, too, for that matter, is the Majjhimnikāya itself a whole, and likewise the Tipiṭaka a whole—but an analysis of those wholes obviously lies beyond the scope of this article.

The structure that informs NQ becomes clear when we take up Buddhaghosa’s intimation that we should consider the extended metaphor about Māra’s snares/beasts of prey as the center or foundation of the text. Treating the actual sermon as a unit (I label it IV below) that is then framed by the rest of the text presents us with a neat structure indeed. The “heap of snares” metaphor (IV) is framed by/told as the culmination of the ancient autobiographical fragment, which I thus deem the “inner frame” (and label III). This was clearly a matter of choice on the part of compilers at some point in the compilation of the Tipiṭaka, for the fragment culminates in other sorts of stories and/or teachings in other versions of it, both in the Pāli and in the Buddhist Sanskrit collections. This inner frame in turn is told as part of a larger narrative about the nature of the Noble Quest more generally, which I call the “conjoining frame” (and label II). But all of these narratives are framed by the monks who are listening to the Buddha’s Dhamma-talk at Rammaka’s hermitage in Sāvatti, which I call the “outer frame” (and label I).<sup>42</sup>

The text opens with the monks desiring a Dhamma-talk face-to-face with the Buddha, and their retreat to Rammaka’s hermitage toward that end (frame I). The Buddha arrives and begins to discuss the Noble Quest and its opposite, the ignoble quest (frame II). This is the “conjoining” frame because the Buddha identifies the activity of the monks at Rammaka’s hermitage (frame I) with the Noble Quest as opposed to the ignoble quest (frame II),<sup>43</sup> then proceeds to narrate the autobiographical

<sup>42</sup> Reverting to text of its day mode for a moment, it is worth noting that this hermitage is mentioned only in NQ; this is our only source for thinking about just who Rammaka might have been: a former follower of Uddaka? Is his name a mishmash allusion to Uddaka Rāmaputta himself? Or is his very anonymity meant to represent any Brahmin? The fact that he is Rammaka *the Brahmin* is repeated seven times in the first paragraph of the text. In either event, the setting may have interesting things to say about the content of the autobiographical fragment in this regard, too.

<sup>43</sup> This is only implicit in NQ itself. The Buddha, on learning that the monks have been there at Rammaka’s discussing the Dhamma, praises them saying, “Excellent, monks! It is proper that you, sons of good family who through faith have gone forth from home to the homeless life, sit down together in a Dhamma-discussion. Monks, when you are sitting together there are two proper courses of action for you: either Dhamma-discussion or else the Noble Silence” (p. 161). That this Dhamma-discussion is in fact exemplary of the Noble Quest as such becomes explicit, twice, in Buddhaghosa’s commentary: “[The monks] sat down

fragment (frame III) as an illustration of that same transition from an ignoble to a Noble Quest (frame II). As the culmination of the autobiographical fragment, in which the Buddha and the Group of Five have all attained the perfectly peaceful (*paramaṃ sivaṃ*) goal of the Noble Quest, Nirvana, we then have the sermon proper (frame IV), which hearkens back to frame III (by repeating the elaborate narrative of the progression through and beyond the *jhānas* achieved first by the Buddha and then by the Group of Five), frame II (by analyzing the basis of the attachment that distinguishes the Noble Quest from the ignoble quest, likened to the distinction between the beast who just stands on the snares and the beast who is bound up in them) and frame I (in which the whole thing is, after all, preached, as we are reminded in the concluding statement, “Thus spoke the Blessed One, etc.”).

In attempting to chart this out, I find a structure something like this:

- I. outer frame, monks listening at Rammaka’s hermitage
- II. conjoining frame, the Noble Quest
  - III. inner frame, Buddha autobiography
  - IV. teaching, the heap of snares
  - III. teaching is part of and parallels the inner frame
  - II. teaching illustrates the conjoining frame
- I. teaching is preached to the monks at Rammaka’s

In this configuration, it will be clear that NQ as a whole projects the reader through a series of stages to the teaching of the Buddha contained in the final portion, the heap of snares metaphor, then shoots him or her back to the point of departure. This could be charted in a more elaborate fashion. Thus the forward movement to the teaching proper: the monks gathered together are the monks on the Noble Quest; they are following the Buddha’s own paradigmatic illustration of being a monk on the Noble Quest; the validity as well as the possibility of being a monk on the Noble Quest is grounded in the Buddha’s Enlightenment; the Buddha’s Enlightenment that grounds the Noble Quest is known because God begged him to preach; by preaching to the Group of Five the Buddha directed them on the Noble Quest; by listening to what he preached the Group of Five also realized Enlightenment: what he preached is the heap of snares metaphor. And then the movement reverses, bringing the teaching back to the outer frame: the heap of snares metaphor is the Truth the Group of Five

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there for a Dhamma-discussion; they were not seated [engaged] in gibberish. Then the Blessed One began this preaching to point out [to the monks,] ‘your quest is definitely the Noble Quest’ . . . [the statement in NQ that] ‘This, monks, is the Noble Quest’ should be understood [to imply,] ‘this, your own [Dhamma-discussion] for the sake of purity, because it is what ought to be quested after by noble people, is the Noble Quest’” (MA II:169–70 [n. 10 above]).



realized, which is what the Buddha preached to the Group of Five, which is what God begged for, which is an explication of what the Buddha realized, which is the distinction between the Noble Quest and ignoble quest, which is what monks ought to be doing, which is what the monks at Rammaka's hermitage are doing.

The symmetry here, I think, extends beyond the text into the community that compiled and preserved it. The monks joined together in Rammaka's hermitage are an unnamed gaggle, in a sense any monks, the monks who compiled and heard this sutta in the early days of the community or the monks who copied and preserved it down into the present; these monks could be any place (the hermitage is otherwise unknown), whether in the center of things (Sāvatti, where the Buddha spent the bulk of his forty-five years) or perhaps somewhere out east of it (this is left ambiguous in NQ). The Buddha's humble entrance, an ahem and a tap on the crossbar, is an entrance into any monastery, any time. He tells the monks, and us readers, that they are doing what monks on the Noble Quest ought to be doing, thinking about the Dhamma. He tells them about the Quest, about his own Quest, about its triumphs. They feel the fear of God that they will never get to hear the teaching; they feel the Buddha's pity for Āḷāra and Uddaka, cheated by death, and Upaka, distracted by sectarianism; they feel the awkwardness of the Group of Five, their ignorance of the real situation, the pull of the Buddha's charisma, their change of mind and subsequent quick attainment of the goal by learning . . . here it comes . . . "Five, monks, are these bases for passion." Recent scholars have suggested that post-*parinibbāna* Buddhists felt a profound longing, like the monks at Rammaka's hermitage, to be in the presence of the Buddha; to hear from him the sort of face-to-face Dhamma-talk which in sutta after sutta proves nothing less than salvific.<sup>44</sup> The Sermon on the Noble Quest is structured to satisfy this longing. The Buddha himself *is* face to face with the monks at Rammaka's, with all the later monks who confronted this sutta, and with us, the readers/hearers. And this salvific teaching comes hurtling back through frame after frame to us, sitting here, in anybody's ashram.

A similarly marvelous symmetry can be discerned in the text of that ancient narrative fragment itself. If we consider the various stages of the Buddha biography outlined in this critically important biographical text, we find an easily defined sequence, which could be charted as (1) unenlightened state, (2) encounters with Āḷāra and Uddaka, (3) fulfillment of

<sup>44</sup> I believe that this sense of longing for the Buddha's presence was first noticed by Paul Mus (*Barabudur: Esquisse d'une histoire du Bouddhisme fondée sur la critique archéologique des textes* [Hanoi, 1935], preface). Manifestations of it have been described, in strikingly different keys, by Gregory Schopen (*Bones, Stones and Buddhist Monks* [Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1997]), John Strong (*The Legend of King Asoka* [Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1983]), and M. David Eckel (*To See the Buddha: A Philosopher's Quest for the Meaning of Emptiness* [Princeton, N.J., 1994]).

the Noble Quest, (4) the decision to preach/God's plea and subsequent boast, (5) encounter with Upaka, and (6) meeting with the Group of Five. But on seeing, in "text of its day mode," that there is something significant about Āḷāra and Uddaka, I was able to realize that they play a considerably more central role in this narrative fragment than this simple listing might suggest.

In this fragment, the two teachers are identified primarily, indeed exclusively, as the teachers of two of the four formless (*arupa*) *jhānas* recognized in classical Vipassanā meditation. Āḷāra Kālāma is said to have taught the sphere of boundless space (fifth *jhāna*), while Uddaka Rāmaputta is said to have taught the sphere of neither perception nor nonperception (eighth *jhāna*). Taking these narrative elements—"teacher" and "*jhānas*"—as well as explicit references to the pair as textual markers of their role in the autobiography, we find that they keep reappearing like a chorus after each discrete moment in the unfolding of the narrative. Thus the ancient fragment is structured as follows, with discrete events indicated by letters and the "chorus" of references to the teachers of the *jhānas* indicated by asterisks:

- (a) the bodhisatta is in his unenlightened state ("Even I, O monks . . .")
  - \* encounters with Āḷāra and Uddaka/mastery of the *jhānas*
- (b) fulfillment of the Noble Quest/Enlightenment
  - \* Enlightenment involves a progression through and outside of the *jhānas*
- (c) decision to preach/God's plea and subsequent boast
  - \* Buddha wants to teach Āḷāra and Uddaka; discovering them dead, he goes to Benares
- (d) encounter with Upaka the Ājivika
  - \* Buddha's self-declaration as Teacherless Teacher
- (e) meeting with the Group of Five
  - \* Buddha becomes teacher of *jhānas* (and beyond) to the Group of Five (who happen to be former followers of Uddaka?)

Thus the text itself highlights a certain centrality to the teachers; the story of the Buddha's paradigmatic Noble Quest is intimately bound up with Āḷāra and Uddaka at literally every stage. Without repeating myself, if "text of its day mode" is on track, here we have a very nice overlap of the two modes, in which an appreciation of the text's internal logic and structure speaks to what appears to have been its external audience.

But if that is the case, what is it saying? On one hand it is saying—*pace* Lamotte, Thomas, Foucher, T. W. Rhys Davids, and others who would downplay their significance—that Āḷāra Kālāma and Uddaka Rāmaputta, whoever they were, played a critical role in helping to define the Buddha's distinctively Buddhist teaching and community. On the other hand, these

recurring choruses, allusions to the Bodhisatta's teachers, are always allusions to their ultimate inadequacy: these Upaniṣadic gurus have been usurped, they are now dead, their former pupils have come into the Buddhist fold, the Buddhist Path goes beyond their refined versions of mystical wallowing to a self-declared "undefiled, unsurpassed, perfectly peaceful Nirvana," which blinds Māra by leaving him no tracks at all. This is a message intended for all of us—the Group of Five, God, the monks at Rammaka's hermitage, former followers of Ājāra and Uddaka, monastic compilers, monks seated together in monasteries discussing Dhamma, whomever reads or hears this sutta—which has become obscure only because memory of the teachers thus usurped, and of the independent identity of their communities, has long since disappeared.

#### IV. LATER READING MODE

It will be clear that I consider the second and third modes described above to be more interesting, and potentially more productive, than I consider the now-outdated "historical source mode" to be. But in one important sense the modes presented in Sections II and III never escape from a problem inherent in "historical source mode." Though these modes shift attention from reading to readership, the scholar still must interpret the original text directly, and any thinking about readership, context, and so forth, must be spun out of that direct interpretation. As a historian, this troubles me: How do we know people read the text in such and such a fashion? In terms at least of evidence, is this not still the same sort of interpretation found in "historical source mode," just knocked back a few notches? I feel myself on much firmer ground when I have evidence of later readership of whatever sutta I may want to study. This is not to deny that history is *always* interpretative, imaginary, and mutable; rather it is to assume that the presence of evidence makes for better interpretation, imagination, and openness to seeing things anew. Thus I am personally most interested in pursuing a fourth mode of interpretation, which asks about how the text was read, on the basis of whatever evidence might actually exist as the remnant of such readings. In my experience, this evidence takes one of three (sometimes overlapping) forms.

First, there is what we might call the manuscript record. In addition to the sheer quantification that a catalog of existing manuscripts of some particular sutta can provide, giving us some rough idea of its popularity, regional distribution, and so on, when we work closely with manuscripts there is always much the object itself can, even wants, to tell us. It speaks, whether in its physical condition (wear and tear, quality of production, materials, script, etc.) or in its contents (colophons, titles, name inscriptions, etc.), or in both, a great deal about where it came from, how

it was treated, and how it was understood. Anne Blackburn's project of reconstructing eighteenth-century monastic education through an examination of the holdings in period temple libraries is unprecedented in the field and promises to tell us more than we have ever known about actual textual practices in any period of Theravāda Buddhist history.<sup>45</sup>

However, in terms of the suttas there is a major problem here. Except for certain suttas prized for particular reasons (Mahāsatipaṭṭhānasutta for meditation training, Dhammacakkappavattanasutta for foundational doctrine and historical uniqueness, Ratanasutta and the other *paritta/pirit* texts for supernatural efficacy, etc.), most of the suttas do not have a manuscript record as such. Thus, even as important a sutta as NQ does not appear as a separate piece in any of the fifty-odd Kandyan temple preaching manuscripts (*bana pot*) that I have collected, nor have I been able to locate a single manuscript in any of the available catalogs of palm leaf manuscripts holdings anywhere in the world. Of course, there are manuscripts of the Majjhimanikāya in which NQ obviously appears—and in which that ancient fragment appears four times—but this is not the same thing as, say, the independent record of the growth of the *pirit* liturgy which manuscripts provide.

The fact is that most suttas, like NQ, do *not* have their own manuscript records. Thus NQ is in some ways more typical of the suttas in general; we would like to study the material culture of their reading and use, but we have no evidence that such a culture even existed. This would seem a terrible impasse indeed, that this most exciting avenue for future work on suttas is closed to the vast majority of them. But in fact I think there are two ways out of this bind. On one hand, the very absence of a separate manuscript culture tells us something important about the use (or, more precisely, nonuse) of this sutta, and probably of most suttas, in the late premodern period that produced the great bulk of our extant manuscripts. We can agree with both Collins and Blackburn that there was more an *idea* of canon than a consistent interest in reading the suttas themselves. We could even conceive a social history of not reading and studying most suttas, against which we could interpret in new ways the desire of major temples and royal patrons to see them preserved in sometimes rather ostentatious fashion.

But these sorts of reflections are not the only way out of the problem because, as mentioned, material remains constitute only one of at least

<sup>45</sup> Anne M. Blackburn, "The Play of the Teaching in the Life of the Sāsana" (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 1996), "Sūtra Sannayas and Saraṇaṅkara," *Sri Lanka Journal of the Humanities* 23, nos. 1 and 2 (1997): 76–99, "Looking for the Vinaya: Monastic Discipline in the Practical Canons of the Theravāda," *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* (1999, in press), and "Magic in the Monastery: Textual Practice and Monastic Identity in Sri Lanka," *History of Religions* 38 (May 1999), in press.

three different (but overlapping) forms of evidence on which a historically grounded interpretation of the later readership of particular suttas could be based. The second and third forms, by which I mean “supplements” and “commentaries,” respectively, do not require a manuscript record as such. As long as one copy of a text that supplements or comments on a particular sutta exists, we can pursue “later reading mode” with reference to the authors (and/or compilers, transmitters) of the supplements or commentaries in question.

In terms of supplementation, I showed in Section I that many later Buddha biographies—even all later Buddha biographies, including scholarly reconstructions—implicitly and often explicitly draw on NQ as their source. In this sense, “historical source mode”—namely, extracting chosen bits of the biographical fragment and supplementing them with other sorts of evidence, pertinent or not—is merely the most recent contribution to a long-standing literary tradition.<sup>46</sup> Because this text has been supplemented so regularly, it occupies its own sort of special place among the suttas and is therefore not entirely typical of them. Indeed, if we question *why* this sutta does not have its own manuscript tradition, we can go beyond the generic answer that like most suttas it simply was not very relevant to the concerns of the people who produced our extant manuscripts. In this instance it seems likely that the need for a special manuscript tradition was obviated by the ever-greater finesse with which NQ was supplemented. If we ask about the manuscript record of the biography conveyed in the sutta, rather than of the sutta itself, then we find it in ever-proliferating abundance. Yet to the extent that much of the sutta material was at least transmitted in other canonical traditions and some post-Tripitāka texts, a wider application of this sort of interpretation remains open.

In terms at least of NQ, supplementation is clearly an important avenue for investigation. As shown in Section I, portions of the text’s actual language have been embedded in a variety of later supplements, or frames. Whereas in “historical source mode” this was important only by way of demonstrating that the autobiographical fragment is indeed very ancient, in “later reading mode” each and every supplement is a site for further

<sup>46</sup> A recent example of this sort is Michael Carrithers (*The Buddha* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1983]), who explicitly and implicitly embeds most of the NQ narrative (see esp. pp. 20–52) but adds to it an incredible array of material that even my students recognize to be a haphazard collection of tidbits from later Buddha biographies as well as from his own general knowledge (e.g., his digression into the psychoanalysis of altered states as an explanation of the Bodhisatta’s encounters with Ājāra and Uddaka). On the role of “the historical Buddha” more generally, especially in terms of the scholarly construct of pan-Buddhist history, see my *Finding Buddhists in Global History*, American Historical Association Essays on Global and Comparative History Series, ed. Michael Adas (Washington, D.C., 1998).

questions that, when we pursue them, turn out to be some combination of “text of its day mode” and “textual whole mode.” That is, each supplement is the relic of a process of reading this autobiographical fragment, whether directly or on the basis of an already-supplemented intermediate form, and thinking about what it means: framing its relevance according to the concerns, agendas, styles, tropes, and hopes of the day.

Thus, for example, in earlier work I have shown that the Buddha biography was supplemented with details about the Bodhisatta’s previous lives and the existence of previous Buddhas in a historical context of Buddhist expansion (Buddhist empires of the second and first centuries B.C.) for which these details had profoundly important political, economic, and religious implications.<sup>47</sup> Recognizing *that* some particular detail is added to the original at some particular moment in time-space allows us to ask in meaningful ways *why* such supplementation occurred.

To raise another example of the value of identifying stages in the process of supplementing the original NQ Buddha biography, it has not sufficiently been recognized that the suttas do not provide us good evidence for the Buddha’s claimed royal status. Though the name of his father, Suddhodana, does appear in a text of the Vinaya (establishing the rule that one must have parental permission to go forth) and in a sutta of Sutta-nipāta (about his birth), there is otherwise no canonical indication that he was even worthy of note, let alone a powerful (or even world-conquering!) monarch. While there is canonical evidence that the Buddha was believed to be Śākyan (though even this is lacking in NQ), there is no indication that he was intended to rule that kingdom. In Pāli tradition, details about the Buddha’s royal birth and the exalted status of Suddhodana, not to mention the narrative of the princely prison in which the latter tried to constrain the former, are startlingly absent, lacking until, truly, the time of the commentaries and vaṃsas (fourth to fifth centuries A.D.). These details are found in Buddha biographies from other traditions, but they are also texts that are much later than the time of Aśoka and shortly thereafter (which is generally treated as the date of the latest compilations of the Nikāyas and the Vinaya). The earliest text in which I have been able to locate explicit statements of the Buddha’s royal birth is Aśvaghoṣa’s *Buddhacarita*, in which the Buddha’s royal birth, connections, and status are highlighted almost to the point of absurdity. In recognizing this fact, we are enabled to start asking very interesting questions about what it meant to claim royal status for the Buddha at that point in Buddhist history (Aśvaghoṣa is believed to have worked in the court of the Kuṣāna emperor Kaṃiṣka, no less), about why this claim is made in classical Sanskrit court

<sup>47</sup> Jonathan S. Walters, “Stupa, Story and Empire: Constructions of the Buddha Biography in Early Post-Aśokan India,” in Schober, ed. (see n. 41 above).

poetry (rare to have Buddhist classical Sanskrit at all, especially weird because this biography became definitive of a genre of theist court poetry), and so on.

I will not engage in that line of questioning here, except to point out that this is by no means the only addition that Aśvaghōṣa makes to NQ and that might help illuminate the social and/or literary contexts of his day. Thus, for example, Aśvaghōṣa, a converted Brahmin, is as far as I know the first biographer to draw explicit parallels to the Rāmāyana, to justify apparent Buddhist deviance from Vedic precedents with an appeal to different Vedic precedents, and to diffuse the “God begs Buddha to Preach” segment by having Indra come down with Brahmā, more as a sort of friendly call than as a charge to preach (Aśvaghōṣa’s bodhisattva already knows he is going to preach). This, too, would have a sharp social edge in Aśvaghōṣa’s context, while adding a level of aesthetic quality and completeness to the Buddha biography that had never been achieved before but that has remained the *sine qua non* for all subsequent Buddha biographies. Indeed, a number of Aśvaghōṣa’s innovations, like the innovation that the bodhisattva was heir to a powerful kingdom, became absolutely standard in later biographies across the Buddhist world (and in scholarship on “the historical Buddha”). Thus, in addition to illuminating the sociohistorical contexts and literary practices of Aśvaghōṣa’s world, reading Buddhacarita as a later reading of NQ also raises questions about why some of those innovations, and not others, did become standard across the Buddhist world.

In this vein all the Buddha biographies we have are evidence of particular readings of NQ in particular sociohistorical and literary circumstances; one could write a veritable history of Buddhology, if not of the whole religion, as a process of supplementing the original biography in NQ. But from the perspective of this larger history of Buddha biographies, that ancient autobiographical fragment becomes most significant for its absences. Much more than the missing Śākya royal connection of the (unnamed) bodhisattva, NQ is full of startling silences: here we have no Suddhodana, no Mahāmāyā, no Mahāpajāpati Gotamī, no Yasodharā and Rāhula, no pleasure palace, no women of the harem, no four signs, no Channa, no renunciatory fanfare, no practice of austerities, no Sujātā’s milk-rice, no Māra’s army at the Bodhi tree, no three watches of the night, no seven weeks after Enlightenment, no text of the First Sermon (replaced with the heap of snares, frame IV!). The Sermon on the Noble Quest screams out for supplementation, and the tradition is still supplementing it, that same fragment, today. When we make the supplementation itself the object of study, rather than attempt to mix it all together into a complete and “reliable” single account of the biography of “the historical Buddha,” literally hundreds of possible histories emerge for investigation.

While we have been blessed with much good work on Buddhist biography in the past decade—including several excellent volumes of essays in which many of these moves toward a sociohistorical and/or literary reading of later Buddha biographies, as texts of their own days, have been made—I do not think that the role of NQ at the base of the whole house of cards has yet been given adequate attention. A failure to see that these later biographies of the Buddha are direct and indirect supplementations of NQ does more than blind us to some of the potentially fruitful sociohistorical and literary analyses that can be made of those texts. Additionally, this failure blinds us to the possibility that many of the supplementations have been spun out of the evidence of the ancient fragment itself.

Thus in the constantly repeated analysis of the ignoble quest and Noble Quest that so bores my students (the language of being destined to birth, death, etc., and the repeated passages about what is destined for these things), we might be able to detect the seeds of a fuller, supplemented Buddha biography: in the phrase “wives and sons are destined for birth” we might find the source for the stories of Yasodharā and Rāhula; “slaves and slavegirls are destined for birth” supplies the Bodhisatta’s attendants and harem; “goats and sheep . . . cocks and pigs . . . elephants and cows and horses and mares . . . silver and gold are destined for birth” intimates the opulence of the palace.<sup>48</sup> Continuing through the ancient autobiographical fragment: “being a young man with very black hair” may have been the source for stories about the Bodhisatta’s beauty, skill, agility, and so forth; “while my parents” in the plural (Mahāpajāpati as second wife/surrogate mother of the Buddha) “were weeping and wailing” (the opposition of the king and the whole cycle that explains it); “recognizing the danger in that which is destined for death . . . old age . . . disease” (the first three signs); “isn’t it the case that I ought to quest after the unborn, unsurpassed, perfectly peaceful Nirvana?” (the fourth sign).<sup>49</sup> Likewise, “This group of five monks was very helpful to me, who assisted me in my resolution to strive” (the six years’ asceticism);<sup>50</sup> whatever sermon about Māra is attached to the end of this fragment, as here the heap of snares (the battle with Māra); the initial reflection on the subtlety of *paṭiccasamuppāda* (the emergence of Buddhahood over the three watches of the night). It is possible to read all of these details as already there in the original text; the supplements work. And even if there is not so direct a relationship between NQ and the later supplements, at least it is clear that NQ’s basic structure (I was unenlightened, I sought the truth,

<sup>48</sup> M I:162.

<sup>49</sup> M I:163.

<sup>50</sup> M I:170.



I found it) is the basic structure of every extant or conceivable Buddha biography, which at least should give us pause as evidence of its force.

In this long tradition of supplementation there is a history of thought about Āḷāra Kālāma and Uddaka Rāmaputta, too. As mentioned, today it would seem that this is the one dimension of that original Buddha biography (with the possible addition of the meetings with God and the Ājīvika) that has become overall less relevant than it once was. There certainly were supplements that have all the richness and openness implied in the above discussion: Lalitavistara adds a long passage to the effect that the Buddha already had a philosophical rebuttal before he even met Rudraka Rāmaputra and that the only reason he ever sought out a teacher at all was to demonstrate the teacher's incompetence to get to the heart of the matter. (This might have spoken to the sort of context in which the Gītā was being promoted along with Yoga as a theistic alternative to Buddhist meditative practices.) Aśvaghōṣa devotes an entire chapter to “the visit to Ārāḍa” in which that teacher is made to be the proponent of a feigned proto-Sāṃkhya philosophy; the Buddha soundly argues it down in order to get this theist master's seal of approval. (It goes without saying that this will draw us into the multireligious situation of the Kuṣāna world.) But after this, within the Buddhist world there was not a lot more textual supplementation; there is a contraction, in which it suffices to say “after giving up the teachings of Āḷāra and Uddaka” or “after rejecting heretical teachers” or simply to omit mentioning the teachers at all (a move made as early as Buddhavaṃsa). Perhaps precisely the fact that made this so relevant at the time of production—the living memory of Āḷāra Kālāma and Uddaka Rāmaputta and the independent existence of their communities of followers—rendered it meaningless in a situation when those no longer obtained.

As indicated, in addition to the history of supplementation, the commentarial process also left as relics of its occurrence critically important evidence for investigating later readings of any sutta. We have commentaries on all the suttas, which as indicated is the case neither with a manuscript tradition nor with a supplementation tradition. More important, the commentary is intended to transmit just *how* one is supposed to read the original, which is not true of the manuscript record (produced as the transmission, not an explanation of it) or of the supplementations (which bury the original in themselves). Though the commentary is obviously intended to be part of the manuscript transmission—without it, the texts are in places unintelligible—and though it embeds the original within itself, the commentary assumes, even demands a reading of the original in tandem with itself. It is thus the best imaginable evidence for just how later Buddhists read each sutta or, to be more precise, for how one Buddhist whose voice was later taken as authoritative read each

sutta. That Buddhist was Buddhaghosa, a fifth-century Indian native who came to Sri Lanka, studied the ancient (and no longer extant) Sinhala commentaries on the Tipiṭaka, and reworked them (and a great deal more material) in Pāli.

On one hand Buddhaghosa is himself a supplementer. Thus in the midst of the usual commentarial explanations, problematizations, etiologies of names, geographical specifications, and so forth, Buddhaghosa adds as putative “background” (*ānupubbikathā*) to the Buddha’s question in NQ, “To whom then should I first preach the Dhamma?” a quick tour through the supplemented Buddha biography, including: the renunciation scene (Kanthaka the horse, Channa the buddy, leaving them at the river), the journey to Magadha (meeting Bimbisāra, recognizing the inadequacy and leaving behind [*sāraṃ avindanto tato pakkamitvā*] the teachers Kālama and Uddaka [their whole names are not even given], performance of austerities), preparation for Enlightenment (the story of Sujātā, attendance of the deities, the bowl going upstream in the river, resolution to achieve Enlightenment, traverse to the Bodhi-maṇḍapa), assault of Māra’s army in full detail, the stories of the seven weeks (Mucalinda, Ratanacankama, etc.), and the story of Tapussa and Bhallika the merchants.<sup>51</sup> As a gloss on the encounter with Upaka the Ājīvika he also adds the later details preserved in the Theravāda *aṭṭhakathā*.<sup>52</sup>

On the other hand, Buddhaghosa always does so much more than confirm my expectation of the details that ought to be included; he makes me hear details that I did not expect ought to be included and puts forth what strike me as rather bizarre readings of his own. These no doubt spoke to the sociohistorical and literary worlds in which Buddhaghosa, like any author, operated. But they also speak to me, starkly. Buddhaghosa is reading the same text I am reading, but he is reading it on the basis of agendas that are so radically different from my own that it takes me great effort even to fathom what he is saying and that in turn cautions me not to be too certain about seeing my own readings “in the text.” In a word, NQ always strikes me, despite the chat with God, in the same way that it apparently has struck Buddhists, and scholars, through the ages: as real biography, even autobiography, concerned with a real man, all-too-human, who must strive hard to find the truth he then, somewhat reluctantly, teaches; a man who feels a certain pride in his achievements and who cares what he is called but who speaks in homely

<sup>51</sup> MA II:181–86 (see n. 10 above).

<sup>52</sup> Upaka was love-enslaved by a hunter’s daughter, married her and lived a normal, if rather low, lay life. But when she turns out to be trouble he renounces the world and sets out looking for “the boundless Victor” (*anantajina*), the epithet that Buddha so unabashedly accepted in their earlier encounter. Knowing that Upaka would come back, he instructed his attendants to direct anyone seeking “Anantajina” to him, and sure enough Upaka shows up and is quickly initiated into the Dhamma. MA II:189–90.

metaphors and uses self-revelation as a teaching device; a man who clears his throat and knocks lightly when interrupting a group of his students whom he encounters on the way home from his afternoon bath.

But this is not Buddhaghosa's Buddha, not at all. And as mentioned, Buddhaghosa is not very interested in the details of the ancient fragment, except to explain some of the names and add the more important supplemental material. Rather, Buddhaghosa is concerned with what I have called "the outer frame" (frame I). Buddhaghosa opens his explanation of NQ by asking why the monks asked Ānanda about meeting the Buddha, rather than asking him for a face-to-face Dhamma-talk directly. The answer is startling: "Out of respect for the Master they cannot say, 'Venerable Sir, talk about the Dhamma for us'; Buddhas are to be venerated. Like the solitary lion who is king of the beasts, like an elephant in rut, like a cobra with expanded hood, like a great mass of fire, [Buddhas] are approached with difficulty."<sup>53</sup> The monks are too frightened to ask the Buddha, so they ask Ānanda instead. And how, Buddhaghosa asks, could unenlightened Ānanda have known the intention of the Buddha? The answer: he could not have known it. He told the monks to go to Rammaka's hermitage on the basis of a logical inference about the Buddha's daily habits, which are explained in rather excruciating detail to make the point.

This is merely the beginning of a remarkable series of glosses that establishes nothing less than a docetic Buddha, only pretending to be an ordinary human being. Thus in a gloss on the phrase "to wash" (*parisīñcītum*), used in reference to the bath after which the Buddha approaches Rammaka's hermitage, Buddhaghosa argues: "'To wash' [requires this clarification]: When someone bathes [*nahāyati*] by smearing his limbs with clay and chunnam and scrubbing them with a coconut shell, it is said, 'he is bathing'. When someone bathes naturally, without doing all of that, it is said, 'he is washing'. Dirt and grime to be scrubbed away like that do not cling to the body of the Blessed One. The Blessed One only descends into the water for refreshment. Therefore [the sutta] says, 'to wash his limbs.'"<sup>54</sup> Buddhaghosa actually gets quite worked up thinking about the Buddha's bath. He does some marvelous geographical gymnastics with the layout of Sāvattī in previous aeons to prove that the bathing ghat where the Buddha bathed was private, specially reserved for the purpose even above the bathing ghats dedicated to the king, the city dwellers, and ordinary monks. And this was no ordinary bath: "The Blessed One descended into the water. When he descended all the fish and turtles in his water turned gold; [when the fish and turtles moved in a stream] it was

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 163–64.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 166.

like when a stream of solid gold is shot out of the mechanical tube [in the gold-refining process; and when the fish and turtles scattered] it was like when a cloth made of gold is stretched out.”<sup>55</sup> He came out of the water—Buddhaghosa is careful to stipulate the manner in which Ānanda helped him dress in dry robes so that no one, including the attendant, could see him naked—and then he stood there in one robe (that is, bare-chested):

The body of the Blessed One, standing thus, shined as though [it were] the Coral Tree in Indra’s heaven, all covered with flowers and fruit, [or as though it were] the stars twinkling on the surface of the sky, laughing with [greater] splendor at a lake full of blossoming lotuses and lilies. The radiance surrounding his *vyāma*-wide aura and his [body which was an] excellent garland of the thirty-two [marks of a Great Man] shined enormously, like a garland of thirty-two moons held in place and strung, like a garland of thirty-two suns, as though one had placed in succession thirty-two Wheel-turning Monarchs, thirty-two kings of the gods and thirty-two Great Brahmās. This is called “Illumination Land” [*vaṇṇanā bhūmi*]. In such places the color of the bodies of the Buddhas or the quality of their virtues begins to speak, filled with competent Dhamma-talking resorting to meanings and metaphors and analyses on the basis of pithy segments or entire verses.<sup>56</sup>

The commentator is not kidding about this: “The substantiality [*thāmo*, literally, “hardness”] of Dhamma-talking in such places ought to be understood.” Nor is this the end of the bath scene: the Buddha “dries out his limbs” so that a wet robe will not immodestly cling to his body, but “of course, dirt and grime do not stick to the bodies of Buddhas, and water glides off them like a drop of water dropped on a lotus leaf. Even though this is the case, the Blessed One [pretended to dry himself off] out of respect for the disciplinary rule thinking, ‘that is certainly the duty of a renunciate’; and having taken the outer robe by both corners he stood there, in front of it, with his body covered.”<sup>57</sup>

At this moment Ānanda seizes his chance to suggest that the Blessed One tarry at Rammaka’s hermitage, thinking, “From the time the Blessed One, having dressed himself in his outer robe, resolves to go to the Palace of Migāra’s Mother,<sup>58</sup> it will be difficult to turn him back. Contradicting the resolution of a Buddha is a grave offense, like stretching out the hand to grab a solitary lion, like taking hold of a powerful elephant, intoxicated in rut, and like grabbing a venomous cobra full of power by

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 167.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 167–68.

<sup>58</sup> This is where the Buddha was then spending his nights. Buddhaghosa is careful to give a layout of the palace lest anyone infer that the Buddha was sleeping anywhere near a woman. MA II:165.

the neck. So I will mention the character of the hermitage of Rammaka the Brahmin, asking the Blessed One to go there.”<sup>59</sup>

Buddhaghosa is still reading NQ biographically, but not as the sort of biography which all of us, in discussing the historical Buddha, inevitably reproduce as though T. W. Rhys Davids’s naiveté of a century ago stands unchallenged. Buddhaghosa’s Buddha is a Buddha of his own day, reflecting an advanced Buddhology that is anything but secular humanism and that offers up such unlikely options as a Theravāda Sukhāvati, “Illumination Land.” His is a treatment that privileges the frame, the textual whole, over the embedded fragments. And his is a later reading by a member, and a pivotal member, of the tradition itself, who lived far closer than we are to whatever originary moment we may seek to understand. This should, if nothing more, serve to check our assumption that we can just pick up a sutta and “get it.”

#### V. CONCLUSION

This investigation of NQ began with a larger question about the future of historical study of the suttas. Now that the old agendas for studying them—as eyewitness accounts of the Buddha’s life and teaching, as manifestos of the world’s first scientific humanism or egalitarian democracy, as philological ends in themselves—have increasingly become discredited, I asked aloud what use a contemporary historian might make of them. The question is a genuine one, to which I will offer no easy answer. But having entertained great skepticism about even the possibility of such a future, and having therefore focused in my own scholarship to date almost exclusively on later periods of history for which precisely datable texts, inscriptions, monuments, and/or external sources exist, I must admit that this exercise, and the contemporary scholarship on which I have modeled my approaches, gives me a hopeful sense that this judgment was too hasty.

Each of the approaches that I have explored yields insight into Buddhist history that is new and, given the limitations inherent in any interpretation, well grounded. The autobiographical fragment is part of the earliest recoverable Buddhist tradition. The early community struggled to define itself in close proximity of religious others in general and of the communities of Āḷāra Kālāma and Uddaka Rāmaputta in particular. The Sermon on the Noble Quest is a carefully structured piece of literature designed to bring readers/hearers face-to-face with the Buddha. It is the core of traditions of biographical supplementation that span Buddhist history, and this sutta therefore helps us to identify the stages in the development of the Buddha biography and, by extension, the sociohis-

<sup>59</sup> MA II:168.

torical circumstances in which each was produced. That very epitome of Theravāda orthodoxy, Buddhaghosa, entertained a Buddhological vision far removed from “the historical Buddha” as he has been conceived by many scholars and Buddhist modernists in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Perhaps more important, our collaboration in Chicago suggested to me that my attempt at defining these four approaches to the historicity of the suttas may have wider application. It at least provides a vocabulary within which different approaches can be discussed, refined, and tested on the great wealth of suttas (and commentaries) that we are lucky enough to possess. While I do believe that “historical source mode” is now largely bankrupt as an end in itself, it remains—like many of the staples of the larger historicist project in which it participated (such as chronologies, critical editions, and identifications of archaeological sites)—absolutely foundational in any attempt at treating suttas or parts of suttas historically. But fixing a sutta at some point in the tradition is merely the first step in much more interesting historical projects that scholars like Bailey, Collins, and Blackburn have opened up for us. The suttas make possible a new sort of social history of the earliest stages in Buddhist history, nuanced by treating the texts themselves as actions within the sociohistorical circumstances of their production rather than as passive transmitters of neutral information. The suttas contain a wealth of literary beauty and efficacy and can therefore help us imagine early Buddhist worldviews with greater clarity than is afforded by the philosophical doctrines and historical facts we have hitherto extracted in bits from them. The suttas have their own biographies, histories of being read and of not being read, which potentially shed great light on later developments in every realm of Buddhist life.

It may of course turn out to be the case that in each of these modes NQ is uniquely significant. It is after all a sutta that has always been privileged, in Buddhist history and in the history of Buddhological scholarship, as a basis for imagining the Buddha’s own life. This privilege is no doubt the result of its obviously great antiquity, it being arguably the oldest Buddha biography in existence. At least the autobiographical fragment appears to be intentionally designed as a response to the multireligious society in which the early Buddhists, and all Buddhists, have found themselves; it is of course no surprise to learn that Buddhists discoursed on the biography of the founder in the same breath that they tried to define their identity as a separate religious order. The fact that this is so ancient a Buddha biography may be the reason that in its final form the sutta seems especially well constructed to bring the reader/hearer face-to-face with the Buddha. This antiquity likewise goes far in explaining why this particular sutta has been so elaborated and ornamented in later

traditions of supplementation and why Buddhaghosa chose it for some perhaps untypical speculation on the cosmic issues surrounding Buddhahood. In a word, it may be the case that NQ is uniquely significant for historians precisely because it is uniquely historical in its perspective.

This possibility raises an empirical matter: we will only discover what the thousands of suttas (or parallel texts from other religious traditions) may reveal to the historical imagination if we trouble to apply that imagination to them. The Chicago collaboration demonstrated that the four modes, in their various dimensions, will not be equally applicable to all suttas (let alone all religious classics). Only some suttas will have parallels in other suttas or Buddhist Sanskrit works; only some will address external circumstances in explicit or implicit terms; only some will prove to be carefully constructed and powerfully evocative; only some will prove to have been the basis of later supplementation and/or interesting commentary. But even the absence of applicability can address larger questions about the suttas in general, and our discussions did proceed in sometimes useful ways when the questions implicit in one or more of the four modes were raised. Thus it is my hope that, beyond my new historical readings of NQ, this article contributes in some small way to the ongoing history of religions project to understand historically all the “canonical” texts on which religious traditions have been based.

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