

# ENDINGS

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## INTRODUCTION

A story is always changing. It's impossible to pin it down once and for all, and a shame even to try. Each teller, each hearer will make it their own. In the act of Creation, they both have their part to play. The storyteller's task is to hold the reader's hand as they leap, together, into the unknown. The reader's task is to suspend disbelief; like the wily coyote, they can keep running right off the edge of the cliff into space until, in that foolish, fateful moment, they look down at the desert floor far, far, below... Together, the reader and the story weave a web of magic, a universe of Noplace in the time of Neverwas. This web is spun out of ghostly mind-stuff, and pops like a bubble as soon as it is formed; yet a good story has the power to change history. The trick is to stretch the boundaries of what we think is possible. A story lifts us out of our self-imposed limitations, like the tornado that whirled Dorothy out of the fields of Kansas into the Land of Oz.

I cannot resist the delicious temptation to say my piece about these Buddhist stories of the origin and evolution of the world. But be warned – I'm about to prick some magic bubbles. If you prefer your dreams uninterpreted, GO NO FURTHER! The problem is this: these stories are not pure fantasy, not a mere trip down Alice's rabbit hole. It is entirely possible that an understanding of the intellectual and cultural context will actually strengthen the spell. I do not know; and, unfortunately, neither will you – until it's too late.

## THE BUDDHIST CONTEXT

Let's start by filling in some background, so that we have some idea where these stories fit into Buddhism. There are lots of stories of the past in Buddhist literature. The famous Jataka tales tell of many wondrous and magical events. Many of these were pre-Buddhist folk tales, and versions of some are even found in such ancient Greek collections as Aesop's fables. They are little leaves of story plucked from the great tree of the oral storytelling tradition. Later they were adapted to Buddhist form and became attributed to the Buddha in past lives. Apart from these, here & there we find the Buddha telling of people or events in the past. It seems he had the amazing ability to recollect his own or other people's past lives as far as he wished. Rarely, however, do we find any attempt to connect such isolated events into a continuous history.

But there are at least three places in the early texts that give an extended account of the evolution of the world and society. The Brahmanadhamma Sutta<sup>1</sup> ('Discourse on the Principles of Priesthood', Sutta Nipāta verses 286-317) teaches of the good lives of the Brahman priests of old, and of how, being corrupted by lust for wealth, they encouraged the kings to perform animal sacrifices. The Buddha's vigorous critique of the greed and cruelty of religious superstition is, sadly, still all too relevant. The episode in 'Beginnings' on the consternation of the King of the Gods comes from here.

Far more important and detailed accounts, however, are found in the Cakkavatti Sihanāda Sutta<sup>2</sup> ('Lion's Roar Discourse on the Wheel-turning Monarch') and the Aggañña Sutta<sup>3</sup> ('Discourse on Knowledge of

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<sup>1</sup> Sutta Nipāta 284-315

<sup>2</sup> Theravāda Dīgha Nikāya 27 / Dharmaguptaka Dīrgha Āgama 5 / Sarvāstivāda Madhyama Āgama 154 / Mahāsaṅghika (?) Ekottara Āgama 40.1 / Taisho 10 (miscellaneous translation). A Sanskrit fragment has been published by Waldschmidt. The sutta also occurs twice in the Mūlasarvāstivādin Vinaya, which is found in most complete form in Tibetan, and partially in Sanskrit and Chinese; the Tibetan reference is Dulva Volume 5, folios

Beginnings'). We have versions of these discourses from several schools of Buddhism, such as Theravāda, Dharmaguptaka, Sarvāstivāda, Mūlasarvāstivāda, and Mahāsaṅghika. So these are little drops in the vast ocean of teachings shared in common between all schools of Buddhism. They belong to the trunk of Buddhism, not the branches. We can never be 100% sure that they were spoken by the Buddha exactly as we have them today; inevitably, each version is a bit different. But the gentle humour, ethical earnestness, and focus on liberation are all absolutely characteristic of the Buddha's style.

The Aggañña Sutta tells the story from the beginning of the new world cycle up to the emergence of the main classes of Indian society. Then the Cakkavatti Sihanāda Sutta takes over with an account of the good king, the 'Aryan Wheel-turner' in a fabulous Golden age of the remote past. When the kings neglect their duties, society slowly falls apart until the final collapse into total war. With the rediscovery of moral principles, society rebuilds itself, culminating in the appearance of the next Buddha.

The overall movement of 'Beginnings' comes from dovetailing these two narratives end to end. It should hardly need saying that it is not a translation, not even a loose one. It is simply inspired by the ideas and the scope of these grand old stories. As well as purely whimsical and fanciful elements, I have freely included mythic motifs from other sources – even a couple of lines from an Aussie folk song! I have downplayed cultural themes that are not so relevant for most Buddhists today, such as the Buddha's critique of the caste system – although this is still painfully relevant in modern India. Instead, I have tried to bring out connections with modern ideas. In particular, I wish to highlight some points of agreement and disagreement between the Buddhist world-story and those of science and Christianity. In making such changes, I hope to remain true to the Buddha's method: to creatively engage with his times, showing how the Dhamma is a vital force moving through history.

## THE MYTH OF TRUTH

How true are these stories? Or, better, what kind of truth should we seek in them? They certainly do not agree in all details with the record of the past as interpreted by scientists. Leaving aside fantastical elements, Buddhist stories typically think of very remote ages as being pretty similar to the Buddha's time. This is because one of the classic functions of myth is to explain and authorize present day customs by connecting them to archetypal events that happened 'once upon a time'. But archaeology, the story of the stones, tells us that India was a very different place in the long past. Given that the most important teaching of Buddhism is impermanence, the archaeological account is therefore more Buddhist than the Buddhist account!

Still, modern research often shows that legends contain more history than we think. Some of the strands in these legends can be discerned in the Indus valley civilization, perhaps BC3000-2000. For example, they had a high level of social organization, a far-flung, peaceful empire, and most important of all, there were yogic meditators. Other strands recall the later Aryan invaders/settlers. They were the people who brought the horse and chariot from central Asia for the first time down into India. This hi-tech military hardware gave them the mobility to launch devastating lightning raids on the settled Indus valley peoples. Because of this, the wheel became a symbol of irresistible sovereign power, hence the title 'Aryan Wheel-turning Monarch'. The Buddha used the wheel symbol in this sense, and even today, the wheel remains the state symbol of India.

So there is some history in myth; and inevitably, there is some myth in history. Everyone who writes about history – myself included – has some point of view, some agenda to push. Fact & fable, science & superstition, do not exist in two entirely separate domains. They are complementary ways of seeing the world, and have much to learn from each other. However, it is obvious that the main purpose of myth is

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155-166, and Volume 3, folios 421-430, translated in W. Woodville Rockhill's *The Life of the Buddha* (Asian Educational Series 1992), pp. 1-9. For full details of sutta correspondences, see [www.suttacentral.net](http://www.suttacentral.net). This sutta and the next are included in the very readable translation of the entire Dīgha Nikāya by Maurice Walshe, *The Long Discourses of the Buddha* (Wisdom Publications). The reader should beware, however, of some translation errors. At DN 26.5, for example, the translation says that a righteous king should give advice to ascetics and sages; in fact, the king should listen to advice from them.

<sup>3</sup> Theravāda Dīgha Nikāya 26 / Dharmaguptaka Dīgha Āgama 6 / Sarvāstivāda Madhyama Āgama 70.

not to preserve historical facts. As religious stories, myths deal with moral and spiritual truths, and, importantly, how these truths are lived out in a community. In this essay, then, we should look at the way these stories fulfil classic functions of myth, such as:

- 1) authorizing customs and rituals;
- 2) providing ethical guidelines;
- 3) describing a just society;
- 4) defining a religion in its religious and cultural context;
- 5) reflecting principles of psychology and philosophy.

## THE INDIAN CONTEXT

Now we can turn to examine the suttas themselves. The scene in the Aggañña Sutta is set with some Brahmins, Vāseṭṭha and Bhāradvaja, living in the monastery planning to become monks. The Buddha drops by for a chat, and asks them: 'Do those other Brahmins ever hassle you for wanting to ordain?' They reply: 'You bet! They don't hold back with their usual snide remarks.' The Brahmins tried to make out that they had been created as a special, chosen people, and had the right to look down on others. Here's a 4000-year-old example of these prejudices.

'When they divided up the Cosmic Man,  
How many parts did they make?  
What did they call his mouth, his arms?  
What did they call his thighs, his feet?

The Brahmin priests were his mouth  
The Khattiya aristocrats were made from his arms  
The merchants were made from his thighs  
But the menial class came from his feet...'<sup>4</sup>

One of the main purposes of the Aggañña Sutta is to discredit such discrimination. The sutta ends up with the outrageous claim that no less a personage than Brahma Everyyoung, the God of the Brahmins, said:

'The Khattiya's best for those who value clan  
But one with realization and good conduct is best of gods and men.'

This is in line with the Buddha's whole approach to ethics: it doesn't matter what a person's race, or colour, or gender, or religion is. What matters are their actions. So the Buddha wants to show how our ethical choices, for good or for bad, are a vital force in the structure of the world.

He does this by telling a creation myth. People everywhere want to know where they come from. In early cultures all over the world, people answered such questions with a story. These stories would be told and retold, around a campfire, in a temple, or a town. Just as the story of Adam & Eve was adapted from earlier tales in Mesopotamia, so too the Buddhist legends follow on from earlier speculations in the Brahmanical Vedas. We've already met one sample above. Here's a much more interesting one.

'At that time there was neither existence nor non-existence,  
Neither the worlds nor the sky nor anything that is beyond.  
What covered everything, and where, and for whose enjoyment?  
Was there water, unfathomable and deep?

Death was not there, nor immortality;  
No knowing of night and day.  
That One Being breathed without air by its own strength.  
Apart from it, nothing existed.

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<sup>4</sup> Rig Veda 10.90

Darkness there was, wrapped in yet more darkness.  
Undistinguished, all this was one water.  
The incipient lay covered by void.

That One being became creative by the power of its own contemplation.  
There rose at first desire, the prime seed of the mind.  
Sages, searching their hearts with their minds,  
Found the link to the existent in the non-existent.  
There were producers, there were mighty forces, free action here and energy there.

The Gods are later than this creative activity.  
Who knows, then, where all this came from?  
Where this creation came from, whether one supported it or not,  
He who looks down from highest heaven, he alone knows.  
Or perhaps he knows it not?<sup>5</sup>

The sceptical note of wonder makes this one of the most charming of all creation myths. One could go to great lengths detailing the influence of this passage on Buddhist thought; but there are significant differences, too. Most important, the Buddha rejected outright any idea of an absolute, one-off creation. As the Vedic myth asks, who could have witnessed such an event?<sup>6</sup> Inventing a God who existed before creation just begs the obvious question: well then, where did God come from? The Buddha declared that it is fruitless to try to settle on some 'ultimate' answer to how the world began, tempting though it is to try. Some physicists today, just like every previous generation, are sure they are just around the corner from the final answer. However, I confidently predict what they'll see around the corner – another corner!

Why? The easiest way to answer that is by doing a small experiment on the limits of knowledge. Look out your window. How far can you see? The next building? Across the road? Over a park? Imagine for a moment that you had lived in that room from the day you were born. You have never seen anything further than that in your whole entire life. Nor had you read any books or heard any talk of anything beyond this little world. If someone asked you: 'Where is the end of the world?' you'd answer: 'Oh, just over the road there!' The scientists, brainy though they be, are in the same boat. What they can say about the limits of the universe just depends on how far they can see out of the window of their little room. Their 'windows' are their telescopes and other measuring instruments. Though powerful, they have their limits. And beyond those limits is just educated guesswork. In the end, we must return to the question of what it is that knows, which is of course the mind. So if we really could look out to the ends of the universe, perhaps we'd end up seeing the backs of our own heads! Instead of wasting his time with such unanswerable questions, the Buddha pointed to the engine of evolution in our own minds here & now: desire.

## THE SHAPE OF TIME

And so the main narrative in the Aggañña Sutta is about time, about change in time, and about how we act our part in the drama of history through our moral choices. The choice to do good leads to integration, harmony, and happiness. The choice to do bad leads to conflict and grief. Greed is the prime evil. Greed leads to selfishness; selfishness leads to inequality; inequality leads to poverty; poverty leads to crime; crime leads to punishment; and eventually humanity spirals yet again down into war. It is our ethical choices, not our technology or political system, that make us happy or sad. The strange thing is that the more we give up the more we get.

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<sup>5</sup> Rig Veda 10.129

<sup>6</sup> Modern quantum cosmology asks a curiously similar question; for if the Big Bang was a quantum singularity it could not have occurred without an observer, or rather, a conscious participant. Below I will suggest a Buddhist answer to this problem.

It has often been pointed out that for the Indians time goes round in circles, while in the West time goes in a straight line.<sup>7</sup> The Bible thinks of time starting in one point (some say BC 4004!) and walks straight on from there until the end of the world. This is like the course of one individual life – being born, growing up, getting old, and dying. The Indian traditions think of time as something like a cosmic yo-yo, forever spinning round & round, flying up & down. The universe is repeatedly blowing up and then collapsing in on itself, a bit like a bubblegum bubble. These cycles take a long time. How long?

Well, imagine a big red rock like Uluru in the middle of Australia. There'd be no rain to wash away the rock, no wind to wear it down, and no developers to blow it up and sell the bits to Japan. Then a sparrow would fly by once every 100 years, holding in her beak a fine silken veil. She'd let the corner of the silk brush, ever so softly, against the big rock. Each time she did so, a tiny breath of dust would be rubbed off the rock. How long would it take for the rock to wear away totally, leaving only red dust? A long, long time, yes? Long though that time would be, the rock as big as Uluru would wear away sooner than the universe would breathe in and breathe out just one time.

So what do scientists of today think? Does the world go round and round or straight ahead? Well, some think one thing, some another. Typical. In biology there certainly seems to be an overall linear progression from simple to complex. Also as animals have evolved the proportion of brain mass in the body has increased, suggesting an evolution of consciousness. Our human societies, too, are more sophisticated than in the past; the notion of 'progress' is so familiar to us that we forget how rare this idea is. A computer is a more flexible and powerful tool for storing information than pen & paper, and so it requires a more abstract way of thinking. A pen & paper, in its day, was a great advance over a stone & chisel.

While linear thinking dominates biology, cyclic models are popular in physics. Some physicists believe the universe started in a Big Bang, exploding out from a microbubble of ultra-dense nothingness. Then the universe expands for millions of years, until the force of gravity wins out and the universe collapses in on itself in a mighty Big Crunch. But don't panic – we're still expanding today, so there's a long time before the universe reaches its use-by date. Some think this expansion and contraction happens just once. Others believe that it repeats over and over, which fits well with the Buddhist description. Some of the most adventurous physicists go on to speculate about an even vaster linear movement. Some say the arrow points downwards as the whole system of births and deaths of universes gradually runs out of puff. Others believe the arrow points up as universes evolve towards ever greater self-awareness.

One problem is that circles and lines don't exist in the real world. They're abstractions. The real world is more messy, more complex, and much more interesting. If we take a large enough circle and cut out a small segment of it, it will seem like a straight line. This is why the earth seems flat. In fact we might as well say that, for those living on it, the earth *is* flat. It is only for certain specialized purposes, such as launching satellites or drawing maps, that we have to allow for the curvature of the earth. But if a circle can appear straight, then might not a straight line also be a curve? Einstein showed that space is curved by gravity, so a genuinely straight line is impossible.

I would like to suggest that a more interesting way of thinking about time is as a spiral. Imagine a spiral like, say, a strand of DNA or a humungous snake rising in endless coils. Step away far enough to one side, and it'll look like a straight line. Come back in close and look down from above and the spiral looks like a circle. A spiral suggests that things will tend to follow similar patterns without repeating themselves exactly. The fact that the patterns exist means that we can recognize, compare, and learn. The fact that they don't repeat exactly leaves open the dimension of choice. What we do makes a difference; in fact, it makes all the difference.

## A UNIVERSE IS BORN

The Buddha puts a characteristic spin on his creation story – it is probably the only creation myth to start with the end of the world. Crunch! It doesn't get much more spectacular than that. But

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<sup>7</sup> It would perhaps be more accurate to say the cyclic model is Aryan while the linear model is Semitic.

consciousness doesn't vanish. Beings are mostly reborn as Gods of Streaming Radiance. This is pretty brainbending stuff. What does it feel like from the point of view of a Radiant God at the cataclysm of the cosmos? Try this for starters.

'...a molten moment, where everything was focussed together in total symmetry, and brilliant, bright with a brightness that never was before or since...absolute simplicity...no separation between past, present, or future...no division of reality...a singular and perfectly symmetric unity...All was One...'<sup>8</sup>

No, these are not the words of some New Age dreamer, but a well known Australian scientist, Darryl Reanny, describing the 'gateway into time' at the start of the universe. Yet it may as well describe what Buddhists call 'samadhi'. This is a very deep state of absorption meditation. The mind is drawn in from the senses and rests, radiant, within itself, like a tortoise with its limbs drawn into its shell. Similar experiences are described in various mystical traditions. Some call this the 'Face of God'. And in a way, that's true; for according to Buddhism, it is indeed from developing samadhi that beings are reborn in the dimension of the Radiant Gods. There they live for a long time in a state of radiant oneness and bliss. But the Buddha saw that this was not the ultimate answer. Though time is suspended there, like a spaceship at the speed of light, such states cannot last forever.

Some physicists, working in a field called 'quantum cosmology', agree that there must have been consciousness present at the birth of the universe to take part in the creative act. According to quantum cosmology, the Big Bang occurs when the perfect symmetry that lies before time is disturbed. A bulge or ripple appears, and tremendous forces rip open. This description is curiously similar to the Buddhist account. The brilliant, all-round consciousness before the dawn of Time is like the samadhi-mind of the Radiant Gods. That samadhi becomes unbalanced when a ripple of thought disturbs the symmetry and timelessness of the mind. The ripple swells into a bulge, the bulge tears open, and the mind emerges from within to face the world again.

So the universe reinvents itself, spewing out an awesome spiral of spacetime. Some myths describe this surge of creation as an act of divine masturbation, the ejaculation of God. Gradually the world as we know it takes shape. Mythic descriptions of this primeval twilight zone are remarkably uniform; we have met a Vedic version already. Here's the beautiful Song of Creation that opens the Biblical Book of Genesis.

'And the Earth was without form, and void; and darkness was on the face of the deep. And the spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.'<sup>9</sup>

The Buddhist version says:

'At that time there was just one mass of water, and all was darkness, blinding darkness.'<sup>10</sup>

And, just as in the Biblical account, the Radiant Gods moved through the air over the waters. So far, then, the Buddhist and Christian accounts show a remarkable agreement. And further, both the Bible & and the Buddha agree that God believes that he alone created everything.

'I am Brahma, the Great Brahma, the Conqueror, the Unconquered, the All-seeing, the Almighty, the Lord, the Maker & Creator, Ruler, Appointer & Ordainer, Father of All that Have Been & Shall Be. And these beings have been created by me.'<sup>11</sup>

But according to Buddhism, this self-importance is rather overblown. The great and glorious gods are not beyond delusion and conceit. When their store of merit runs out, they fall back into rebirth in this realm, subject to the universal law of impermanence. This is the main difference between the Christian and the Buddhist myths. The Christian myth sees God as essentially Other, a puppet master standing outside the world and not bound to play by its rules. The Buddhist myth sees gods as acting their roles

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<sup>8</sup> *Music of the Mind*, Darryl Reanny

<sup>9</sup> Genesis 1.2

<sup>10</sup> DN 27.11

<sup>11</sup> DN 1.2.5

on the stage of the play of creation. We have all been gods, and (unless we get enlightened first!) we will be again.

## THE UNIVERSE & U

Countless creation myths depict the beginning of the world as a watery, formless gloom. Many people have noticed that this is like the experience of an embryo inside the mother's womb. The growth and development of the world then reflect our shared memories of childhood and the pains of growing up. The Aggañña Sutta offers a particularly clear and detailed example of this analogy.

The world starts as watery, dark, and featureless as the womb. The Radiant Gods arrive like the bright spark of consciousness at the moment of conception. The 'tasty earth' is like the mother's milk, for the earth was of old always the mother; the description is suitably milky. The beings suck the stuff off their fingers like babies suckling their mother's breast. Since the little one has now come out of the womb, the days and nights appear. Gradually, the food gets coarser, just as a growing child tries out a variety of coarser foods. But food still appears without work as if by magic (thanks to the unappreciated efforts of Mum & Dad!). Their bodies get bigger and tougher; they lose their baby cuteness and look more and more different from each other. With adolescence their sexual characteristics become more prominent. They play around with sex; and so they have to move into their own private dwellings like newlyweds. But now their food doesn't just appear; they must work for it. They take to farming, become land owners, and take an active role in politics. The exaggerated lifespan of the ancients, emphasized in the Cakkavatti Sihanāda Sutta, also reflects a child's perspective, where Mum & Dad are giants, all-knowing and almighty, and apparently living forever.

When such correlations are pointed out, those with a one-sided scientific mind-set are wont to chortle with glee: 'See! It's all just a rehash of childhood memories!' This response trivializes a vital dimension of myth. It is not *just* a rehash of childhood memories; it is *also* a rehash of childhood memories. This is a most intriguing fact. The growth of each one of us as conscious, moral, rational individuals parallels the evolution of society as a whole. This reminds me of an obscure but precise saying I dimly remember from biology class: ontogenesis recapitulates phylogenesis. Got that? What this means is that the growth of the embryo in the womb goes through stages similar to a bacteria, a worm, a fish, a reptile, etc., thus retracing the evolutionary history of humanity as a whole. But not even the most absurd reductionist would say that the evolution of a species was nothing more than the growth of one individual! Appreciation of such patterns reinforces a core insight: what is truly good for oneself must also be good for all beings; and what leads to the good for all beings must also be good for oneself.

And so we notice that in the world of the Aggañña Sutta, humanity is one with the environment. The way we choose to live is intimately bound up with the natural order. Our choices affect the plant life, the climate, even the sun & moon. Not so many years ago, such ideas might have been dismissed as a fanciful allegory. But today the impact of our greed and foolishness on the environment is all too obvious. And just as obvious is our own fragile existence, totally dependent on nature's bounty. But Buddhism goes deeper still, suggesting that our moral choices are woven into the very fabric of being. If you think this sounds too airy-fairy to be taken seriously, not all scientists would agree. Darryl Reanny again.

'Acts of selfishness have the effect of weakening the links that bind universes together, whereas acts of compassion and cooperation have the effect of strengthening them; thus, ultimately, a cosmos of selfish choices unravels and disintegrates. Choices, therefore, bring about a kind of cosmological Darwinism, leading us to predict that, in the final analysis, only "unselfish" worlds survive. The significance of this is that, in this context, justice and tolerance are not human inventions but cosmological principles, the very foundations upon which worlds are built.'<sup>12</sup>

So our story suggests that we are one with our environment. It also suggests we are one with each other. Divisions such as rich and poor are only born of greed. Even our sexual differences are not absolute. Gender is just a phase we go through. Originally, beings were neither male nor female. The biologists

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<sup>12</sup> *Music of the Mind*, pg 121.

share this opinion, saying that the earliest life forms were asexual. Male embryos, too, start life as girls before changing into boys, forcing men to accept the rather uncomfortable fact that we are transsexual mutants.

We can see this during the course of our own lives, too. When we are very young or very old, our sexual identity is subdued; with bald heads and shapeless bodies we are much like the monks and nuns with their unisex robes. In fact, strange though it seems, Buddhism says that each of us has been born countless times both as a man and as a woman, as neither, as both, and as in-between. In contrast with this flexibility, the Bible sees gender as an unchangeable essential part of who we are:

'From the beginning of Creation, God made them male and female.'<sup>13</sup>

Such sayings tend to turn the distinction between men and women into a division, and divisions cause conflict: the war of the sexes. The Buddhist approach, on the other hand, points to what we share in common with others.

This brings up another issue worth noting. The Cakkavatti Sihanāda Sutta lists a number of degenerate practices, and includes the Pali term '*micchā dhammā*'. The commentary says this means homosexuality, and it is sometimes translated accordingly. But this has no basis in the text. The phrase is so vague it could be translated 'wrong things', 'bad ways', 'injustice', 'corruption', or even 'wrong ideas'. In the early texts, while homosexuality was certainly known, it was regarded as no big deal. In the entire Pali canon there is no suggestion that gay or lesbian sex is treated any differently than straight sex. Gay sex is referred to in a way that, to our ears, is surprisingly casual.

Again this contrasts with the Bible's perspective. The most important passage in the Bible on homosexuality is the shocking story of Sodom and Gomorrah. When the men of Sodom come to Lot's house demanding sex with two angels who were staying there (apparently angels look like attractive young men), Lot protested: 'I beg you, friends, do not do this wicked thing. Here are these two virgin daughters of mine. Take them – do whatever you want with them...'<sup>14</sup> To punish the gays, God is depicted as practicing genocide (which happens with disturbing frequency in the Old Testament), raining fire and brimstone onto the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, killing everyone. Afterwards those same two daughters of Lot were desperate to have kids. Unfortunately, no man was left alive but Lot; so the daughters got their father drunk and raped him!<sup>15</sup> Strangely enough, even though the fundamentalists try to use this passage to argue that homosexuality is wrong, they generally avoid the obvious inference that pack rape of young girls is preferable to gay sex, and that father/daughter incest is justifiable to produce an heir.

Thankfully, most sensitive and reflective Christians, alive to the ambiguities and historical contexts of their own scriptures, do not believe such passages are the infallible and unalterable 'Word of God', delivered once and for all to the prophets. They would prefer to see the Bible as a record of the evolving conception of God in one important spiritual tradition. In this respect, we Buddhists have much to learn from our Christian friends, as there are too many in Buddhism who stick to a literalist and anti-historical interpretation of our own scriptural heritage.

The sexual 'ethics' (if that is the right word) of the Sodom and Gomorrah story make perfect sense in the values of the older portions of the Bible. The main benefits of religion, promised by God again and again, were to annihilate other tribes and to maximise the population of one's own tribe; this is why there was hatred for gays. These are basic survival tactics of a primitive people. The same values are hardly relevant in today's cramped world.

From the Buddhist point of view this is all rather beside the point. Buddhism is probably the only major religion that did not start out as a fertility cult. For Buddhists, the values of having family and children are relative. They are good things for some people some of the time, but are not necessary for everyone

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<sup>13</sup> Mark 10.6. Here and below I rely on Mark as the earliest of the Gospels.

<sup>14</sup> Genesis 19.7-8

<sup>15</sup> Genesis 19.23-38



all of the time. Thus Buddhism is perfectly happy to accept that there are other valid lifestyle choices, such as couples who wish to remain childless, gay or lesbian relationships, or those who prefer to remain single. There are many Christians who, sensitive to the vast gap in social conditions between the Old Testament and today, would agree with this.

Within each one of these possibilities, the crucial thing is to remember that sexual ethics have nothing to do with the mechanics of the sexual act and everything to do with trust and caring. When two people embark on a sexual relationship they enter into each other's most intimate and vulnerable space. They exchange a gift of trust, and betraying that gift invariably leads to grief. The temptation is always there; for sex just doesn't live up to the hype. So often relationships fail to deliver the deep-level satisfaction people long for. So they look elsewhere for some high-voltage stimulation. In the end they risk losing everything, being left with just stale memories and wistful regrets. The message is: don't make sex your religion.

With the benefit of 2500 years of hindsight, the course of moral decay predicted by the Buddha seems remarkably accurate. One of the last stages is the loss of respect for parents, for elders, and for monks and priests. We have gone a long way down this road already. Our parents, with their unconditional love, have given us our food, our home, our health, our education, even our life itself. But in our youth culture they are increasingly left out, shunted aside in our race to the future. It's up to everyone who has a Mum and a Dad to show them that they mean as much to us as we mean to them.

But we shouldn't despair; things aren't that bad yet. There are still very many good, kind, and humble people in the world. Here's a beautiful poem to show how love and devotion can spring like a winter flower in the most unlikely places.

'When your Mother has grown older, and you have grown older,  
When what was formerly easy and effortless becomes a burden,  
When her dear loyal eyes do not look out into life as before,  
When her legs have grown tired and do not want to carry her any more –

Then give her your arm for support, accompany her with gladness and joy.  
The hour will come when, weeping, you will accompany her on her last journey.

And if she asks you, answer her;  
If she asks again, speak also;  
And if she asks another time, speak to her –  
Not stormily, but in gentle peace.

And if she cannot understand you well, explain everything joyfully.  
The hour will come, the bitter hour, when her mouth will ask no more.'

You'll never guess who wrote these gentle verses. None other than the most hated man in history, the very embodiment of evil – Adolf Hitler. Even he was capable of such human, such tender love. Should we not feel ashamed when we fail to live up to Hitler's standard? Humans are the most amazing creatures. We should never close ourselves off from the goodness in anyone; for doing so closes us off from the goodness in ourselves.

## THE UNCERTAIN FUTURE

And so the spiral turns to face the future. Are these prophecies authentic sayings of the Buddha? Well, we must admit that in the early, authentic texts the Buddha did not generally make predictions. None of the standard lists of the Buddha's powers and knowledges includes the ability to predict the future in any vulgar sense. On one of the very rare occasions when the texts depict him making a prediction, he was made to say that Buddhism would end in 500 years – a mistake we can be grateful for. Strikingly, neither the coming Armageddon nor the future saviour are mentioned anywhere else in the original texts.

Apocalyptic prophesy is suspiciously self-fulfilling. We should be rightly nervous when we hear our world leaders echoing these ancient dooms. Today, Biblical prophesy is quoted like a code recognized only by the initiates. For example, we've all heard the divisive doctrine: 'If you're not for us, you're against us.' But did you recognize this from Jesus' words at Matthew 12.30: 'He who is not with me is against me'?

What is intriguing is that, as pointed out by the Episcopalian Bishop John Shelby Spong,<sup>16</sup> this phrase is a recasting of an earlier phrase in Mark 9.40, which teaches exactly the opposite doctrine: 'He that is not against us is for us'. Luke 9.50 also follows the Marcan original: 'He that is not against you is for you'. This is a profoundly different teaching, one that emphasizes the assumption of shared unity among humanity. So why has the phrase from Matthew, here the 'minority report', been picked up and the others ignored?

For the fundamentalists to whom this message is aimed, it surely would not have escaped notice that that passage is setting the scene, a few pages later, for Apocalypse:

'And when you hear of wars and rumours of wars, do not be troubled, for such things must come to pass<sup>17</sup> ... 'Nation shall rise against nation and kingdom against kingdom, and there shall be earthquakes in many places, and famines and troubles'<sup>18</sup> ... 'In those days there shall be affliction such as has not been since the beginning of Creation.'<sup>19</sup>

Not until the sun, moon, and stars are destroyed will we see 'the Son of Man coming in the clouds with great power and glory.'<sup>20</sup> Many Christians today still, absurdly, apply such sayings to our own generation.<sup>21</sup> A 2002 poll by Time/CNN found that 59% of Americans believe that the apocalyptic events of the Book of revelations are going to come true.<sup>22</sup> But again and again, Jesus stressed that these events were just about to happen:

'Truly I say to you that this generation will not pass away until all these things are done.'<sup>23</sup>

He clearly thought that the old world order would be overthrown and the new world order established during the lifetime of his followers. Possibly he believed that his own crucifixion would be the spark to ignite the simmering Jewish rebellion against their Roman overlords. But embarrassingly, when the uprising came some 40 years later, the Son of Man was nowhere to be seen. The Jews were utterly crushed and scattered over the earth – a warning for prophets who take themselves too seriously. But the message that Jesus draws is just the same as the Buddha's:

'Take heed, and watch and pray; for you do not know when the hour will come.'<sup>24</sup>

Sensible Christians will, of course, seek in such texts a spiritual message, rather than insisting that they are literally historical. And fortunately, the Buddhist Apocalypse, like the Christian, cannot really be made to refer to any contemporary war. If we take the prediction literally it must refer to events many thousands of years in the future. We stand on firmer ground, however, if we treat the story just as a story. Then it has much to teach us, without being an inevitable doom. The war appears as an essential climax to any epic. It is the dark that heralds the dawn.

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<sup>16</sup> John Shelby Spong, *The Sins of Scripture*, Harper Collins 2005, pg. 240.

<sup>17</sup> Mark 13.7

<sup>18</sup> Mark 13.8

<sup>19</sup> Mark 13.19

<sup>20</sup> Mark 13.26

<sup>21</sup> See, eg. <http://www.csmonitor.com/2004/0218/p11s01-lire.html>,

<http://www.angelfire.com/co/COMMONSENSE/armageddon.html>

<sup>22</sup> <http://www.time.com/time/covers/1101020701/story.html>

<sup>23</sup> Mark 13.30

<sup>24</sup> Mark 13.33

But whereas in a normal epic, the war is depicted as a battle between the forces of good and evil, in this war there are no good guys. Just taking part shows moral bankruptcy. Total war is the result of total immorality. In a fight between evil and evil, the only right choice is to refuse to enter the battlefield.

We must make the choice of Luke Skywalker in 'The Return of the Jedi'. In the final battle, he defeated Darth Vader and had him at his mercy. Yet he refused to kill the evil Lord, for Luke kept his faith that Vader must still have some good inside him. How did he know this? Because Vader was Luke's father. Luke saw the relationship, the connection, the human behind the monstrous mask. If Luke were to kill, he would become just another monster. This insight gave Luke the power to pull redemption out of the pit of evil, a truly heroic act.

## LOVE OUT OF CHAOS

Morality springs from love. And love is, as the Thai saying has it, taking their heart and putting it in ours. Just as I like to be happy, so do they like to be happy. Just as I loathe pain, so do they loathe pain. It would be ridiculous for me to do something that causes suffering for myself; is it not equally ridiculous to cause suffering for another? When hate takes charge, the bonds that hold society together are cut. The moral order crumbles and society falls apart.

But this is not an absolute end. Bad as things get, still some good remains. The cycles of nature balance themselves. The extremes of chaos bear the seeds to generate a new order. The very horror of war drives home the importance of the fundamental principle of morality: non-violence. We can see that today in such institutions as the United Nations, which was formed in repulsion from war, with the recognition that nations must find a more just, humane, and civilized way of settling their differences. In the past this may have seemed like an unrealistic dream. Today we have little choice.

This sutta, then, suggests that order is born of chaos. This is a remarkable anticipation of the modern chaos theory of physics. This theory describes situations that have a large degree of chaos or randomness, such as the weather. If you're willing to hang on in there, I'll try to give a basic explanation so that you can see the connection between Buddhism and chaos theory.

Here's a classic example. Imagine there is a pot filled with ice. This ice is very stable and orderly; all the water molecules are fixed together in a rigid structure. Now take a candle and place it underneath the pot. What happens? In everyday language, we say the ice starts to melt. In the language of physics, we say the water molecules break out of the rigid structure and move freely about. (This is very much like what happens at school when the lunch-bell rings – the order of the classroom breaks down into the chaos of the playground.) As the candle flame keeps on heating the water, the energy of the molecules increases and they get even more chaotic. But wait – a strange and wonderful thing is happening. The warm water directly above the candle is rising, while the cooler air on the other side is sinking. The molecules are moving in harmony, forming regular currents. (This, too, is like a playground – kids don't just mill around at random; they spontaneously get together with their friends and play organized games.) In our pot of water, it's as if the molecules have realized that they all share the same nature, and have decided to cooperate with each other out of sympathy. The molecules are dancing; they've *fallen in love*.

Can you see what's happening? The original static order gave way to chaos; and the chaos gave way to a new, dynamic order. This just happens from within; it doesn't need any helping hand to reach in from outside. Our world story shares just the same pattern. It starts with the doomed glory of the Radiant Gods. They are blissful but stagnant – they've nowhere to go. So their frozen bliss melts drop by drop into the dark waters of chaos. But there is no need for a savior to ride in on a cloud to save the day. For even the utter gloom contains a spark of light, the magic lantern of Dhamma. A new, more beautiful world emerges, like a rosebush that survives the frost of winter and in the spring bursts forth in new flowers.

## THE FUTURE SAVIOUR

The future Utopia is described as a place of great bounty and prosperity. People are rich, healthy, and happy, living to a great age. There is a touch of Buddhist irony in the description of the crowded countryside; the land will be full of people 'just like in hell', remarks the Buddha, probably thinking of his love of solitude.

But this is a Utopia with a difference. It does not just exist for its own sake, desirable though that is. It throws up something quite unexpected, which we have not met before in our story: a Buddha. While the old static order had nowhere to go and only decay to look forward to, the new dynamic order has the unique quality that it can transcend itself.

There have of course been Buddhas before in this world cycle, even several before 'our' Buddha, Siddhartha Gotama. Why were they not mentioned in our stories? Surely they should be central to any Buddhist history? But as I've been saying all along, we are not dealing with history, but with story. And a story, especially a grand epic like this, must build up to the climax at the end. Here that climax is the crowning glory of humanity, the Buddha Maitreya.

Although Maitreya is only mentioned this once in the early texts, he went on to have a brilliant career in the later Mahāyāna sutras. The name 'Maitreya' is derived from *mettā*, loving-kindness, and so Maitreya is supposed to be a kindness-specialist, as Gotama was a wisdom-specialist. But it is worth noting that Maitreya is probably an incorrect formation from the original Pali 'Metteyya'. In early Pali this word occurs in a pair as '*metteyya petteyya*', meaning 'filial devotion to one's mother and father.' It should therefore be derived not from *mettā*, 'love', but from *mātā*, 'mother'. *Mettā* is often punningly associated with *meda*, 'fat': it makes you fat, that's why it's love. This pun was probably influenced by the image of a pregnant woman; the Earth (Goddess) was sometimes called '*medinī*,' 'Fat Lady'. In China, Maitreya thus metamorphized (or should that be 'megamorphized?') into the famous 'Fat Buddha'. Buddhas, it must be said, are not fat. This jovial Santa of the East, opulent with children, is really a Chinese god of prosperity.

Have you noticed that Maitreya seems to have a lot in common with Jesus? Both are future saviours renowned for their unconditional love and compassion. Both are connected, not just with a spiritual awakening, but also with a future utopia here on earth. There was in fact much contact between Christians and Buddhists in times of old, certainly in Persia and Central Asia, and there are even evidences of Buddhists in Egypt and Christians in India. Some of the Gospel stories and teachings betray Buddhist influence, while there are Nestorian Christian texts and ruins from ancient China. In one of those weird quirks of history, the story of the Bodhisattva's renunciation, familiar to all Buddhists, became so popular and widespread in Christendom that around the 15<sup>th</sup> Century, with a name change from 'Bodhisat' to 'Josaphat', the Buddha was made into a Catholic saint!

Etienne Lamotte, a Belgian Catholic, was a fastidious scholar whose monumental 'History of Indian Buddhism' remains a classic of modern Buddhist scholarship. He discusses at length the ancient connections between Maitreya and Jesus; here are some of his findings.

'Maitreya's name and antiquity suggest a connection with the Vedic Mitra and the Iranian Mithra, a sovereign god, but also a social and obliging deity, with a beneficent and judicial aspect. The Pārāyana [an early collection of Buddhist verses] places a certain [monk called] Maitreya or Tīśya-Maitreya at the time of Śakyamuni... With fifteen other companions, including Ajita, he is converted by Śakyamuni and attains arahantship. The author does not as yet establish any relationship between the student Maitreya and the Buddha of the future... In a whole series of [later] texts...a solemn assembly was devised during which Śakyamuni formulated his predictions regarding Maitreya and his companion Ajita....Finally...Ajita and Maitreya were fused into one and the same person: Ajita-Maitreya. Through his name, 'Maitreya the Invincible', the Buddha of the future, became a counterpart or replica of the Iranian god Mithra-Sol Invictus and was drawn into the great movement of messianic expectation which, under various symbols, pervaded the whole of the [near] East at the end of the pre-Christian era. The syncretism which was dominant culminated, in the Manichaen texts in Uighur, in a vast synthesis in which were fused 'Mithras Invictus', 'Jesus the Son of God', and 'Ajita Maitreya'. Belief in Maitreya flourished particularly in Central Asia until the advent of Islam. The sources collected by the various archaeological missions are plentiful: statues and frescoes, historical texts, documents concerning the founding of temples and monasteries, formulas of donations, religious and literary texts such as the Maitreyasamiti, confessions of sins,

Manichaeism fragments, and, finally, hymns to Maitreya, and they all attest to the presence of a new god around whom were crystallized the aspirations of the Eastern world. From this belief was born a Buddhism which was almost exclusively a religion of pure devotion, a monotheism. It was no longer in line with the earlier orthodoxy. The adherent no longer acquired merit with a view to good rebirth in the world of the gods or of mankind; the ascetic no longer trained in the eightfold path in order to attain an incomprehensible Nirvana...The only means of salvation was henceforth divine compassion, considerate and efficacious.'

This kind of assimilation is normal. In religion it is the rule, not the exception. It is natural that when Buddhists and Christians live side by side they will appreciate such compatible ideals. This process continues today. Many Buddhists, for example, would be quite happy to accept Jesus as a Bodhisattva.

The compassionate saviour, be it Maitreya, Kwan Yin, Isis, or Jesus, is a beautiful and inspiring image. But does the worship of such figures always have a good effect? I'm not so sure. As the author of the above passage suggests, sometimes we can use it as an excuse for not doing the job ourselves. It is not uncommon for Buddhists to avoid the effort of meditating here & now. Better to just wish for rebirth with Maitreya or some other saviour and be swept along in the river of his glory.

I imagine the devotee approaching Lord Maitreya in awe and humility, bowing with her head at his feet and declaring: 'Thousands of lifetimes have I waited for this moment, longing to behold your magnificence. Now my aspirations are fulfilled!' Maitreya would smile his gentle, enigmatic smile and say: 'All those lifetimes? Just to see this smelly body? You had the teachings of Gotama. What was wrong with them? I can't do anything more for you. Get out of here! Go and do some meditation!'

## OUR OWN REAL HOME

And so, after showing the magnificent flow of Dhamma through history, the Buddha brings us firmly back to the Now. He says to the monks: 'Be your own refuge! Don't take any other refuge. Have Dhamma as your refuge! Don't take any other refuge.' This is especially important at this point – the Buddha is specifically saying that just hanging out for some future saviour is not the way.

So what is the way? The Buddha says we must dwell inside our own native habitat. How? By practicing the four satipatthanas; that is, mindfully focussing awareness on the body, feelings, mind, and dhammas. Satipatthana is a basic facet of the Buddha's approach to meditation, a way of establishing watchfulness leading to peace and wisdom. Here's a brief guide to how satipatthana happens.

Go to a quiet, secluded place. A cave on a mountaintop is great; but if you don't have one handy, a bedroom or quiet space in your house will do. Sit down, cross-legged if you wish, or on a chair if you prefer. Set your back straight and close your eyes. Relax into your body. Feel where your body's at. Don't go running off into the future; don't go dragging up the past. Get into the real – here, now. Settle into the present. Gently place your awareness on your breath. (Usually this is clearest around the nose-tip.) Feel the breath coming in, the breath going out. Don't control the breath. Just let go & be with it. Stay with it. Breath coming in, breath going out – that's all. When your mind starts to think about this and that, don't worry about it, don't be interested in it, don't give it any importance. It's only thoughts. Let them go. Gently replace your awareness on the breath. If you feel any pains or sensations in the body, just ignore them, don't make a big deal out of them. Quietly, patiently, persistently, keep your awareness on your breath. Notice the softness, the peacefulness, the smoothness of the breath. After a while, it'll feel very pleasant. Notice this pure pleasure. Wallow in it like a hippo wallowing in mud. Immerse your awareness in pure, bright happiness. Stay with the meditation as long as you can, but don't force it. When it's time for the session to end, ask yourself: 'Why? Why is my mind like this? Why is it peaceful? Why is it restless? How did it change during the meditation?' There's no need to worry too much about figuring out answers to these questions; your mind will know by itself when it's ready. However it is: know it, accept it, and let go of it.

Meditate for as long as you feel comfortable. Don't be a wimp, but don't try to be a he-man either. Start with, say, 20 minutes each day. You're not trying to storm an enemy fortress; you're trying to cultivate a lifelong friend. No rush. It is, of course, good if you can find a teacher to guide your first steps in

meditation. But even without a teacher, you can still get started. Just remember, all kinds of weird stuff can happen in meditation – lights, visions, strange feelings. Don't make a big deal out of this stuff. It happens to many, but not all, meditators. Nothing special. Just forget about it, and get on with your practice.

The Buddha says that this meditation will increase the following things: long life, beauty, happiness, wealth, and strength. You might recognize these Pali words in the blessing chanted by monks at a meal offering: *āyu, vaṇṇo, sukhaṃ, dhanam, balaṃ*. Now you might think that it's a bit odd for the Buddha to promise the monks good looks and lots of money! You're right. Here he gives these words a higher meaning.

**Long life** means the four bases of psychic power, that is, samadhi or unification of mind based on enthusiasm, energy, awareness, and inquiry. When the mind is empowered with these things, it is capable of all kinds of wild and wonderful feats that we normally think are impossible. Have you ever wanted to fly through the air? Or to make a duplicate body to go off and work for you? Try for yourself & see.

**Beauty** means having beautiful conduct, especially a life guided by the refined ethics and restraint of the monastic code of discipline (*vinaya*).

**Happiness** means the four jhanas, sublime samadhi states of inner bliss that the Buddha made the core of his meditation teachings.

**Wealth** means the four divine abidings – loving-kindness, compassion, appreciation, and equanimity. As well as forming a mature, balanced emotional landscape for all, these may be developed to a sublime level of samadhi in meditation.

**Strength** is the most important of all, the realization of enlightenment. This is the power to explode the Wheel of Time and make a final end of rebirth.

Our sutta is an oracle – not one that sees far into the future, but one that sees far into the present. Amid the ever-repeating cycles, the dreary predictability of life & death, this oracle sees something new: the One who wakes up to the Matrix of time. For the Buddha, the purest evil is to choose delusion, to pass up the chance to leave our cosy dreams behind and wake up to reality. The Buddha can only show us the door; it is up to us to walk through it. But be warned. Once you've taken that step, there's no turning back. It's scary stuff; but if you believe in yourself, you can do it.

Welcome to the real world.