

The Buddha and Omniscience

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Omniscience has regularly been ascribed to the Buddha in the different Buddhist traditions. An examination of the early discourses found in the Pāli *Nikāyas* and the Chinese *Āgamas*, however, suggests a different perspective.

The term used in the Pāli *Nikāyas* to qualify someone as omniscient is *sabbaññu*, with its counterpart in the Chinese *Āgamas* in the expression 一切知, (*yī qiē zhī*). The term *sabbaññu* and its equivalent 一切知 are made up of two parts: *sabba* or 一切, “all”, and *ñāṇa* or 知, “knowledge”, just as the English term omniscience derives from the Latin words *omnis*, “all”, and *scientia*, “knowledge”. In the thought world of the early discourses, such omniscience denotes the ability to continuously and uninterruptedly have complete and infinite knowledge regarding any event,¹ such as is attributed by theistic religions to their god(s). An instance where such infinite and total knowledge is attributed to the god Mahābrahmā can be found in the Pāli and Chinese versions of the *Kevaddha Sutta*, according to which other gods in the Brahmā realm believed that there is nothing Mahābrahmā does not see or know.² The same discourse also depicts the early Buddhist attitude to such claims, as the Pāli and Chinese versions agree in describing how Mahābrahmā reacted when faced with a question posed by an inquisitive monk. In order to

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¹ MN 76 at MN I 519,13: *sabbaññū sabbaddassāvī aparisesaṃ ñāṇadassanaṃ ... satataṃ samitaṃ ñāṇadassanaṃ paccupaṭṭhitaṃ*.

² DN 11 at DN I 222,2: *n' atthi kiñci Brahmuno aditṭhaṃ, n' atthi kiñci Brahmuno aviditaṃ*. In the corresponding Chinese version, DĀ 24 at T I 102b28, the other gods in the Brahmā realm similarly believe that Brahmā has “supreme knowledge, there is nothing he does not know”, 智慧第一，無不知見, (*zhi hui di yi, wu bu zhi jian*).

avoid losing face in front of the other gods, Mahābrahmā gave evasive replies, until finally he had to admit that he did not know an answer, and that the question should better be put to the Buddha, who would be able to solve it.

In addition to Mahābrahmā, the discourses in the Pāli *Nikāyas* and the Chinese *Āgamas* record such claims to omniscience also being made by contemporary Indian religious teachers, in particular by Nigaṇṭha Nāthaputta, the leader of the Jains.³ The Buddhist attitude to such claims by contemporary teachers can be seen in the *Sandaka Sutta*, which reports how Ānanda criticized a religious teacher's claim to omniscience. His criticism highlights that once such a claim is made, the problem arises how to explain that the same teacher may go begging at a place where he does not receive any alms food, or else take a road which leads him to being attacked by a wild animal, or else need to inquire after the name of a particular village and the way to reach it, evidently not knowing the way himself. When questioned why such a thing could have happened, a teacher who claims to be omniscient will have to resort to evasive arguments, maintaining that he had to get no alms food, he had to take that road, he had to ask for the way to the village.⁴

³ Nigaṇṭha Nāthaputta's claim to omniscience occurs e.g. in MN 79 at MN II 31,7 and its counterpart MĀ 208 at T I 784a16, which differs from MN 79 in recording the same claim to omniscience made also by the other five of the six well known contemporary teachers, Pūraṇa Kassapa, Makkhali Gosāla, Ajita Kesakambali, Pakudha Kaccāyana and Saṅjaya Belaṭṭhaputta. Other instances reporting Nigaṇṭha Nāthaputta's claim to omniscience are MN 14 at MN I 92,36; MN 101 at MN II 218,1; AN 3:74 at AN I 220,27; AN 9:38 at AN IV 429,1 and MĀ 196 at T I 753c8. AN 9:38 at AN IV 428,20 also reports Pūraṇa Kassapa claiming omniscience; while according to MĀ 114 at T I 603a8 even Uddaka Rāmaputta had wrongly claimed omniscience.

⁴ MN 76 at MN I 519,22: "I had to get no alms food, that is why I did not get any", *piṇḍaṃ me aladdhabbaṃ ahosi, tena nālatthaṃ*, etc.

Though the Chinese *Āgamas* do not seem to have preserved a counterpart to the *Sandaka Sutta*,⁵ among the Sanskrit fragments discovered in Central Asia parts of the relevant passage have been preserved. In addition to the examples given in the Pāli version, the Sanskrit fragmentary version depicts how such a supposedly omniscient teacher falls into a pond, a sewer or a cesspool,⁶ or even bangs (his head) on a door.⁷ These additional descriptions further enhance the absurd situation that can result from claiming omniscience. To follow such a teacher is not advisable, Ānanda pointed out in the *Sandaka Sutta*, as to do so would be to embark on a spiritual life “without consolation”.⁸

In this way the *Sandaka Sutta* provides very clear criteria for evaluating a claim to omniscience. A noteworthy circumstance of this discourse is that its speaker is Ānanda, a disciple of the Buddha who stood out for his devoted and caring service as the Buddha’s attendant. Judging from the Pāli and Chinese versions of the *Acchariya-abbhūta Sutta*,⁹ he appears to have had a propensity to extol the superior and outstanding qualities of his teacher. Hence one would not expect him to be so outspoken in his criticism of claims to omniscience, if the Buddha had made such a claim himself.

The problem with such a claim, and Ānanda would have been well aware of this, is that a fair number of occurrences in the Buddha’s life would be difficult to explain if he had been omniscient. An instance quite in keeping with one of the

⁵ MĀ 188 at T I 734b18, a discourse otherwise not related to MN 76, also contrasts what appears to be a teacher’s claim to omniscience to his encountering various misfortunes, such as meeting with a wild animal, having to ask the way, etc. In MĀ 188 this criticism is voiced by an outside recluse, not by Ānanda.

⁶ SHT III 942 R3 in Waldschmidt (1971: 205): *palvalaṃ prapā[ta]ṃ syandanikāṃ gātho[d]igallaṃ*.

⁷ SHT III 942 R4 in Waldschmidt (1971: 205): *kavātaṃ vā [ma]r[date]*.

⁸ MN 76 at MN I 519,32: *anassāsikaṃ idaṃ brahmacariyaṃ*.

⁹ MN 123 at MN III 119,18 and MĀ 32 at T I 469c24.

examples mentioned in the *Sandaka Sutta* occurs in a discourse found in the *Mārasaṃyutta*, and in its parallels in the *Samyukta Āgama* and in the *Ekottarika Āgama*. The three versions of this discourse agree in recording that the Buddha once went begging but did not receive any alms food at all.¹⁰ Another such dilemma comes up in the *Milindapañha*, namely the question why the Buddha, if he was omniscient, nevertheless ordained Devadatta and thereby did not prevent him from creating a schism in the *Saṅgha*, an act of considerable consequences for Devadatta himself as well as for the early Buddhist monastic community.¹¹ Another dilemma would be the mass suicide of a group of newly ordained monks, who appear to have misunderstood a recommendation on developing detachment towards the body, given by the Buddha, and committed suicide while the Buddha was in solitary retreat.¹² The only way to uphold the Buddha's omniscience in the face of such events is to adopt the kind of argument criticized in the *Sandaka Sutta*, assuming that the Buddha "had to do it".

The presentation in the *Sandaka Sutta* makes it clear that omniscience in ancient India also comprised foresight of future events. The same is confirmed in the *Paṭisambhidāmagga*, according to which *sabbaññu* refers to knowing everything in regard to the past, the present and the future.¹³ According to the commentary on the *Visuddhimagga*, the Buddha's omniscient knowledge of past and future events takes place through an act of direct perception.¹⁴ To know "all"

¹⁰ SN 4:18 at SN I 114,9; SĀ 1095 at T II 288a15 and EĀ 45.4 at T II 772b2.

¹¹ Mil 108.

¹² SN 54:9 at SN V 320,22 and SĀ 809 at T II 207b25; cf. also Vin III 68,19.

¹³ Paṭis I 131,9 explains that "to know all completely, past, present and future, [that is] omniscient knowledge", '*sabbaṃ ... anavasesaṃ jānāti ... atītaṃ sabbaṃ jānāti ... anāgataṃ sabbaṃ jānāti ... paccuppannaṃ sabbaṃ jānāti*'ti - *sabbaññutaññāṇaṃ*.

¹⁴ B^e-Vism-mhṭ I 232: *atītānāgatavisayampi bhagavato ñāṇaṃ ... paccakkhaṃ eva*.

about the future, however, is feasible only if the future is predetermined. Though a few particular events can be foretold with certainty, and a few others with a high degree of probability, much of the future is still undetermined at present and will take place according to a continuously changing and evolving set of causes and conditions. Hence, to assume that the future can be foreseen in its entirety is an idea compatible only with a deterministic worldview, but would not fit the early Buddhist conception of causality. For future events to be directly perceptible at present, by whatever supernormal means or powers, these future events would have to be already predetermined in their entirety right now and thus be totally removed from the influence of causes and conditions that manifest at any time between the present moment of direct perception and the moment when the event takes place.¹⁵

Concerning predictions about the future, according to the Pāli and Chinese versions of the *Pāsādikā Sutta* the Buddha explained that he knew there would be no future rebirth for him, since he had destroyed the influxes that lead to re-becoming. Apart from that, he explained in the same discourse, to expect him to predict what will be in the future is simply a sign of being confused about what can be known and what cannot be known.¹⁶

In relation to omniscience in general, the discourses

¹⁵ Karunaratna (2004: 216) comments: “knowing everything in the future would admit of a doctrine that is pre-determinist in nature”.

¹⁶ DN 29 and DĀ 17 explain that to query why the Buddha displayed knowledge about the past but not about the future is to suppose that one type of knowledge could lead to knowing something that is quite different, cf. DN 29 at DN III 134,7: “they imagine that knowledge and vision of one type is to be pointed out with knowledge and vision of another type, like ignorant fools”, *aññavihitakena ñāṇadassanena aññavihitakam ñāṇadassanam paññāpetabbaṃ maññanti, yathariva bālā avyattā*; and DĀ 17 at T I 75b28: “[with] another knowledge, to know and contemplate also [what is] different [from that knowledge], this is said to be mistaken, 智異, 智觀亦異, 所言虛妄, (zhī yì, zhī guān yì yì, suo yán xū wáng).

record the Buddha making two explicit statements. One of these statements occurs in the Pāli and Chinese versions of the *Kaṇṇakatthala Sutta*, according to which the Buddha pointed out that it is impossible to have omniscient knowledge “at once”, *sakid*, a proposition which, according to the commentarial gloss, refers to knowing all simultaneously by a single act of mental adverting.¹⁷

While this passage is about the nature of other teachers’ claims to omniscience, in the *Tevijjavacchagotta Sutta* the Buddha was asked whether he claimed omniscience himself. In reply, the Buddha quite explicitly stated that he had never made such a claim. What he claimed, according to this discourse, was to have the three higher knowledges.¹⁸ The Pāli commentary tries to reconcile this statement with the view that the Buddha was omniscient by explaining that the Buddha’s refusal referred only to the later part of his proclamation, to being endowed with omniscience “continuously”.¹⁹ Yet, in that case one would expect the Buddha to refute only that part of the statement and explain the type of omniscience with which he was endowed, instead of reckoning the attribution of a claim to omniscience to him to be a misrepresentation, untrue and contrary to fact.²⁰

¹⁷ MN 90 at MN II 127,29: “at once knows all and sees all”, *sakideva sabbaṃ ñassati sabbaṃ dakkhiti*; and MĀ 212 at T I 793c7: “at one time knows all, at one time sees all”, 一時知一切, 一時見一切, (*yi shi zhi yi qie, yi shi jian yi qie*). The commentary at Ps III 357 explains *sakideva sabbaṃ* as referring to knowing “all past, present and future [events] through one adverting by a single state of mind”, *ekāvajjanena ekacittena atītānāgatapaccuppannaṃ sabbaṃ*.

¹⁸ MN 71 at MN I 482,14, a discourse that does not seem to have a counterpart in the Chinese *Āgamas*. Warder (1991: 137) comments that “we ought probably to admit this *sūtra* as an authentic part of the earliest *Tripitaka*, but likely to have been suppressed by most Buddhists of later times as offensive to their traditions of the greatness of their teacher”.

¹⁹ Ps III 195.

²⁰ MN 71 at MN I 482,18: *abbhācikkhanti ca pana maṃ te asatā abhūtena*.

Moreover, if the Buddha should indeed have made a claim to a type of discontinuous omniscience, one would expect to find this ability mentioned elsewhere in the discourses. Yet, the early discourses do not refer to such a type of omniscience when listing the ten powers or the four intrepidities of a *Tathāgata*,²¹ nor does any form of omniscience occur in a listing of altogether hundred epithets of the Buddha given in the *Upāli Sutta* and its Sanskrit and Chinese parallels.²²

Another statement by the Buddha, which is sometimes taken to imply a claim to omniscience, occurs in the *Kāḷakārāma Sutta*. According to this discourse, the Buddha stated that he knows what is seen, heard and experienced by men and gods in this world.²³ The commentary reports that this statement was accompanied by an earthquake, and explains

²¹ Listings of the ten powers and the four intrepidities can be found in the Chinese discourses SĀ 684 at T II 186c17 (powers); SĀ 701 at T II 189a8 (powers); EĀ 27.6 at T II 645c1 (intrepidities); EĀ 46.4 at T II 776b17+21 (powers & intrepidities); T 780 at T XVII 717c15 (powers); T 781 at T XVII 718c18 (powers); and T 802 at T XVII 747b13 (powers). Occurrences in Pāli discourses are MN 12 at MN 69,31 + MN 71, 32 (powers & intrepidities); AN 4:8 at AN II 9,3 (intrepidities) and AN 10:21 at AN V 33,11 (powers). Sanskrit fragments of the *Daśabala Sūtra* have been published by Lévi (1910: 443); Poussin (1911: 1063); Sander (1987: 181+185); Waldschmidt (1932: 209) and Waldschmidt (1958: 384). All these instances do not refer to omniscience. A reference to omniscience in such a listing can be found, however, in T 757 at T XVII 593b20, a translation undertaken between the 11th and the 12th century, which in its treatment of the four intrepidities declares that the Buddha had “realized omniscience”, 證一切智, (*zheng yi qie zhi*), in the sense that there was “nothing he did not know”, 無所不知, (*wu suo bu zhi*).

²² MN 56 at MN I 386,3; the Sanskrit fragments in Waldschmidt (1979: 5-13); and the Chinese version in MĀ 133 at T I 632b6; cf. also Karunaratna, 2004, p. 218.

²³ AN 4:24 at AN II 25,1: *yam ... sadevakassa lokassa ... sadevamanussāya diṭṭhaṃ sutam mutam viññātam ... tam aham jānāmi*. This discourse that does not seem to have a counterpart in the Chinese *Āgamas*.

that it should be understood as an affirmation of the Buddha's omniscience.²⁴

Yet, a perusal of the discourse suggests that the point made with this statement need not be a claim to omniscience, but could refer only to the Buddha's penetrative insight into whatever is seen, heard and experienced. That is, for the Buddha to say that he knows what is seen, heard and experienced by men and gods in the world may not refer to factual knowing, but rather to penetrative insight into the nature of all things. This conclusion suggests itself from the remainder of the *Kālakārāma Sutta*, which emphasizes that the Buddha did not take a stand upon or conceive in terms of what is seen, heard or experienced, nor did he cling to any of these, so that the theme of this discourse was indeed penetrative insight leading to the absence of clinging, not a factual knowledge of all that is seen, heard and experienced by anyone in the world.²⁵

The discourse that precedes the *Kāakārāma Sutta* in the *Aṅguttara Nikāya*, together with its Chinese parallel, reports a similar statement, according to which the *Tathāgata* knows all that is seen, heard and experienced.²⁶ The use of the qualification "all" seems at first sight to make this statement an even better candidate for supporting a claim to "omni"-science, were it not for the different term used in this discourse for "knowledge". The point made by this different term is that the *Tathāgata* had "awakened", *abhisambuddham* or 覺, (*jue*), in regard to all that is seen, heard, and experienced. The very next sentence in the same discourse makes it clear that this proclamation refers to the penetrative insight into all aspects of experience the Buddha achieved on the night of his awakening. In the light of the stipulation made in the *Kaṇṇakatthala Sutta*,

²⁴ Mp III 38.

²⁵ For an insightful discussion of the deeper aspects of this discourse see Ñāṇananda 1985.

²⁶ AN 4:23 at AN II 23,28: *yaṃ ... sadevakassa lokassa ... sadeva-manussāya diṭṭhaṃ sutāṃ mutāṃ viññātaṃ ... sabbāṃ taṃ Tathāgatena abhisambuddhaṃ*; MĀ 137 at T I 645b17: 有彼一切如來知見覺得, (*you bi yi qie ru lai zhi jian jue de*).

according to which it is impossible to have omniscient knowledge all “at once”, it would not be possible to interpret the present discourse to mean that during the night of his awakening the Buddha accomplished omniscient knowledge into all that is and will be seen, heard and experienced in the entire world. Instead, this discourse appears to refer to the *Tathāgata*’s penetrative insight into the nature of all aspects of experience.

In order to fully appreciate the import of such discourses, the early Buddhist usage of the term “all” needs to be kept in mind. According to the *Sabba Sutta* and its *Samyukta Āgama* parallel, the Buddha once explained that for him “all” simply refers to the senses and their objects.²⁷ That is, in its early Buddhist usage to speak of “all” is to speak of subjective experience, not of some abstract totality of all existing data in past, present and future times.

The same down-to-earth sense of the term “all” can be seen in a discourse found in the *Itivuttaka*. According to this discourse and its Chinese counterpart, the Buddha explained that without knowing “all”, it is not possible to reach awakening.²⁸ If one were to interpret this passage in line with

²⁷ SN 35:23 at SN IV 15,13: *cakkhum c' eva rūpā ca, sotañca saddā ca, ghānañca gandhā ca, jivhā rasā ca, kāyo ca phoṭṭabbā ca, mano ca dhammā ca, idaṃ vuccati ... sabbaṃ*; and SĀ 319 at T II 91a28: 眼色, 耳聲, 鼻香, 舌味, 身觸, 意法, 是名一切, (*yan se, er sheng, bi xiang, she wei, shen chu, yi fa, shi ming yi qie*). Kalupahana (1994: 43) comments that “for the Buddha, ‘all’ or ‘everything’ represented the subject defined in terms of the six senses and the object explained in terms of the six sense objects”.

²⁸ It 1:7 at It 3,28: *sabbaṃ ... anabhijānaṃ ... abhabbo dukkha-kkhaṇḍaṃ*, T 765 at T XVII 670a24: 若於一切, 未如實知 ... 不能等覺, 不能涅槃, (*ruo yu yi qie, wei ru shi zhi ... bu neng deng jue, bu neng nie pan*), the Chinese parallel differing in so far as, instead of the “destruction of *dukkha*” mentioned in the Pāli version, it speaks of the inability to reach awakening and to attain *Nibbāna*. In spite of this difference in formulation, the implications of both statements clearly remain the same. Nāgapiya (2006: 6) comments that in the present passage

the mode of explanation advanced by the Pāli commentary in relation to the *Kaṇṇakatthala Sutta*, one would have to conclude that omniscience is required for anyone to reach awakening.²⁹ Since in early Buddhism this is not the case, it becomes clear that such passages are better understood as references to penetrative insight into the nature of all things, and not as if they were to intend a factual knowledge of everything. Thus, though the Buddha “knew all” in the sense that he had penetrative insight into the nature of every aspect of experience and was thereby completely detached from “all” and free from “all” defilements,³⁰ the passages examined so far indicate that he did not claim to be omniscient in the technical sense of the term.

The attribution of omniscience to the Buddha appears to be the outcome of a historically later development,³¹ which in all traditions tended to emphasize the divine against the human

“knowing the ‘All’ (sabba) is equivalent to knowing the nature of the world (loka). It is spiritual insight into the way things are.”

²⁹ Katz (1989: 132) reasons that “if indeed the Buddha is omniscient, he is omniscient in a particular Buddhist sense of something like ‘all knowing regarding spiritual matters’ ... in this restricted sense, the arahant is equally accomplished”.

³⁰ According to MN 26 at MN I 171,3, soon after his awakening the Buddha proclaimed that he had “known all and was undefiled among all things”, *sabbavidū ‘ham asmi, sabbesu dhammesu anāpalitto*. Notably the parallel passage in MĀ 204 at T I 777b16 only records him proclaiming his freedom from attachment to anything, 不著一切法, (*bu zhuo yi qie fa*), without mentioning that he knew all.

³¹ Jayatilleke (1980: 380) explains that the “attitude of not claiming omniscience for the Buddha seems to have been maintained right up to the time when the Vibhaṅga was composed, for this book gives the most elaborate account of the ten cognitive powers of the Buddha with no mention of his alleged omniscience”. He concludes that “omniscience [was] claimed of the Buddha [only in] ... the very latest stratum in the Pāli Canon ... after most of the books of the Abhidhamma had been completed”.

in the person of Gotama Buddha.³² A factor contributing to the attribution of omniscience to the Buddha could have been the Jaina claim of omniscience for their teacher Nigaṇṭha Nātha-putta, in the face of which later Buddhist generations might have felt a need to similarly enhance the status of their own teacher.³³ An early instance of this tendency can be found in a verse in the *Theragāthā*, in which a monk referred to the Buddha as his omniscient teacher.³⁴ In continuation of the same tendency, the Pāli commentaries even go so far as to refer to the Buddha already before his awakening as the “omniscient *bodhisattva*”.³⁵ In a similar vein, the *Mahāvastu*, a *Vinaya* work of the Mahāsāṅghika tradition, in its description of queen Māyā’s delivery speaks of the birth of the “omniscient one”.³⁶ In both cases the reference to omniscience is obviously not intended literally, but rather has the sense of “the *bodhisattva* who will attain omniscience”.³⁷ Nevertheless, these instances

³² Nakamura (1960: 152+157) contrasts the early discourses, where the Buddha “was in every respect regarded merely as a superior man”, to later times when “as a consequence of the gradual process of deification, he works wonders, he is omniscient”. Harrison (1978: 37) aptly sums up: “with the passage of time the Buddha became less an object of emulation and more an object of devotion, growing in stature as memories faded.”

³³ According to Jaini (1974: 80), “in the face of the extraordinary claims of the Jains for their Tīrthaṅkaras, however, it is inconceivable that the eager followers of the Buddha could have long refrained from pressing similar claims for their ... Master”. Warder (1991: 135) similarly suggests that “since other *śramaṇas* had made this claim ... it was perhaps natural that Buddhists should wish to set their teacher at least as high as anyone had suggested it was possible to get”.

³⁴ Th 722: *sabbaññū sabbadassāvī ... ācariyo mama*. The same two qualities are also attributed to the Buddha in Kv 228: *tathāgato ... sammāsambuddho sabbaññū sabbadassāvī*.

³⁵ Ps II 135: *sabbaññubodhisatta*.

³⁶ Senart (1890: 21,16): *sarvajñāḥ jāyate*.

³⁷ This much can be seen in the same context in the *Mahāvastu* in Senart (1890: 22,5), where the *bodhisattva* refers to his

show how with the Pāli commentaries and the *Mahāvastu* omniscience has become a quality inseparable from the Buddha to such an extent that it can be used even when referring to the period preceding his awakening.

While the *Mahāvastu* and the Pāli commentaries do not seem to intend shifting the Buddha's awakening knowledge to a time when he was still a child, the *Saṅghabhedavastu*, a *Vinaya* work of the Mūlasarvāstivāda tradition, goes further. According to the *Saṅghabhedavastu*'s account of the birth and youth of the one who was to become Gotama Buddha, already at his birth the *bodhisattva* was in possession of the divine eye, one of the three knowledges he acquired - according to other traditions - only on the night of his awakening.³⁸ In this way, the *Saṅghabhedavastu* does seem to transplant aspects of the Buddha's awakening to a period preceding even his quest for awakening, thereby turning them from an achievement accomplished through practice and effort to endowments the Buddha already had since birth. This shows the extent to which the knowledges related to the Buddha's awakening were subject to various stages of elaboration,³⁹ and reveals the beginning of docetic tendencies, which in the course of time led some Buddhist traditions to assume that the Buddha was already awakened at birth and that his various activities were merely an illusory display for the sake of saving sentient beings.⁴⁰

omniscience as a future event: *sarvajño sarvadarśāvī bhaviṣyaṃ*.

³⁸ Gnoli (1977: 52,7): *sāmpratajāto bodhisattva ... divyena cakṣuṣā samanvāgato*; and its Chinese counterpart in T 191 at T III 940c18: 菩薩兩目清淨 ... 天眼, (*pu sa liang mu qing jing ... tian yan*).

³⁹ Endo (2002: 23) explains that "the Buddha's knowledge is one of the favourite areas of exaltation and expansion. It is in this area that quite a number of new attributes emerge subsequently."

⁴⁰ Kv-a 172 records such a view, according to which the Buddha did not really leave Tusita heaven, and what was seen in the human world was only a magical apparition, *Bhagavā tusitabhavane nibbatto tatth' eva vasati, na manussalokaṃ āgacchati, nimmitarāpamattakaṃ pan' ettha dasseti*.

The tendency to exalt and deify the Buddha is also reflected in archaeological findings, which show the stages in the development of figural representations of the Buddha. After a first period during which the presence of the Buddha was indicated merely by footprints or other symbols, figural representations of the Buddha attempted to depict some of the Buddha's physical marks, the thirty-two marks of a superior man. According to the *Brahmāyu Sutta*, one of these marks is that the Buddha's head was shaped like a turban.⁴¹ The commentary explains that this refers to the roundness of the Buddha's head.⁴² The Chinese versions of the *Brahmāyu Sutta*, however, speak of a "meat topknot" instead, an expression that apparently has in mind a real fleshy protuberance on top of the head.⁴³

The idea of a real protuberance could be due to a misunderstanding caused by a feature found on Buddha images. Ancient Indian artists represented gods and divine beings with long hair, which at times was depicted as being worn in a topknot.⁴⁴ Artists soon took to portraying the Buddha as well with long hair, thereby giving expression to the divine status he had acquired by their time.⁴⁵ This mode of

⁴¹ MN 91 at MN II 137,9: "turban [like] head", *uṇhīsaṣisa*.

⁴² Ps III 386: "according to one method of explanation, 'turban [like] head' [means] that his head is like a 'head wrapped with a turban', according to a second method of explanation, [it means] that his 'head is all round like a turban'", *purīmanayena 'uṇhīsavēthitasiso viyā'ti uṇhīsaṣiso; dutiyanayena 'uṇhīsaṃ viya sabbattha parimaṇḍalasiso' ti uṇhīsaṣiso*.

⁴³ MĀ 161 at TI 686c13 and T 76 at TI 884a9: 肉髻, (*rou ji*).

⁴⁴ Banerjea (1931: 510+512) explains that "the various gods depicted in the early Indian monuments of the pre-Christian period ... are shown with luxuriant hair dressed in various ways", with the hair worn in a topknot being "one of their most prominent adornments". When with the passage of time the Buddha was seen more and more as a divine being, "in the anthropomorphic representation of the Bhagavat, the depiction of the flowing tresses was quite natural".

⁴⁵ Coomaraswamy (1928: 838) comments that "the activity of the earthly Buddha, originally a living memory, has become, as it

presentation stands in contrast to the early discourses, which leave little doubt that the Buddha was shaven-headed just like other monks. According to the Pāli and Chinese version of the *Ariyapariyesanā Sutta*, on going forth the *bodhisattva* shaved his hair;⁴⁶ and a discourse found in the *Sutta Nipāta* and in each of the two versions of the *Samyukta Āgama* describes how a Brahmin noticed that the Buddha's head was shaven, indicating that the Buddha must have continued to shave his hair.⁴⁷ Yet, the need to give expression to the divine status the Buddha had acquired by the time the first Buddha statues were sculptured caused him to be depicted with hair, which at times was worn in a topknot. The topknot used in such representations was then apparently misunderstood to represent an actual protuberance on the Buddha's head, a feature that soon became standard for Buddha statues.⁴⁸ The evolution in the development of the Buddha from an awakened man to an omniscient divinity comes to its completion when this protuberance is then interpreted to represent the Buddha's attainment of omniscience.⁴⁹ This tendency to enhance and

were, the *līlā* of a deity”.

⁴⁶ MN 26 at MN I 163,30 and MĀ 204 at T I 776b4.

⁴⁷ Sn 3:4 at Sn p 80,7; SĀ 1184 at T II 320b28 and SĀ² 99 at T II 409a4. Krishan (1966: 281) points out that the early sculptural representations of Jaina saints also depicted them with hair, even though the literary sources of the Jaina tradition record that on going forth these saints had plucked out their hair.

⁴⁸ Foucher (1918: 297) relates the arising of the idea of a protuberance to a change in the way the hair was being represented. Lohuizen-de Leeuw (1995: 164) notes that “not only the Buddha but also gods show the *uṣṇīṣa* ... there is no doubt that it was intended to reproduce a hair-knot on top of the head ... not until *much* later was it understood as a protuberance of the skull”. Waldschmidt (1930: 274) suggests that perhaps awareness of the fact that the Buddha had been shaven-headed caused the topknot to be interpreted as a protuberance.

⁴⁹ Sackler (2006), describing the protuberance on top of a Buddha head, notes that it serves as “a sign of the Buddha's omniscience”. Wimalaratna (1994: 146) explains that “in Mahāyāna works the *uṣṇīṣa* of the Buddha is invested with the function of emitting light ... as the outward emblem of his

glorify the status of the Buddha at the same time inevitably creates a distance.⁵⁰ The more the Buddha becomes divine, the less human he becomes and thereby the less an example to be emulated by other humans.

From a psychological perspective, the tendency to glorify and deify the Buddha could be an expression of “dependency needs”. Such psychological dependency needs arise out of the deep-rooted wish of human beings for someone powerful and reliable. This wish has its origin in the infant’s experience of oneness with its mother, of being protected and cared for. During growth, when the development of a sense of individual self-hood leads to an increasing separation from the mother, such feelings of oneness and protection are lost. Attempts to return to this initial experience of unconditional love, protection and oneness with a superior and powerful being can find their expression in projecting such qualities onto a divine being or god, immensely powerful and endowed with infinite knowledge.

The early discourses treat this all too human tendency to depend on a god or divine being with a good dose of humour. Though early Buddhism integrated the Indian pantheon into its thought world, in doing so it introduced a considerable change of perspective. An example in point are the earlier mentioned Pāli and Chinese versions of the *Kevaddha Sutta*, which treat the belief that Mahābrahmā has infinite and total knowledge as a false claim, and depict in amusing detail how Mahābrahmā attempts to avoid having to admit ignorance. The same humorous tone can also be seen in a discourse in the *Samyutta Nikāya* and its *Samyukta Āgama* counterpart, which describe an old Indian lady making regular oblations to Brahmā. Her oblations were successful, since in reply to her offerings

enlightenment”. On various connotations of the *uṇhīsasīsa* as an emblem cf. also Kramrisch (1935). The fascination aroused by this protuberance can also be seen in the Siamese tradition’s belief, noted by Senart (1882: 126), that the crowns of kings all over the world are fashioned in imitation of this protuberance.

⁵⁰ Nāgapriya (2006: 12) explains that “so long as implausible claims such as omniscience are made on behalf of the Buddha, his true significance cannot be fully understood or appreciated.”

Brahmā Sahampati, or according to the Chinese versions one of the four great heavenly kings, appeared in mid air and addressed the old lady in verses.⁵¹ The verses, however, come as quite an anti-climax to this thrilling personal encounter with manifest divinity, since the old lady was told that instead of throwing the food into the fire as an oblation, she would be better off giving it to her son, who had gone forth as a Buddhist monk and was out on the roads of the town begging his daily alms.

With this entertaining sense of humour, early Buddhism redirected the search for something dependable on the outside towards a search for independence, to a quest for becoming self-dependent. According to the Chinese, Pāli, Sanskrit and Tibetan versions of the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta*, the Buddha enjoined his disciples to find security within by becoming a refuge to themselves.⁵² By becoming self-dependent through finding a refuge in oneself, any need to depend on an omniscient and almighty external refuge can be transcended.

⁵¹ SN 6:3 at SN I 141,7; SĀ 99 at T II 27c10 and SĀ² 265 at T II 466c20.

⁵² DĀ 2 at T I 15b8: 當自歸依, 歸依於法, 勿他歸依, (*dang zi gui yi, gui yi yu fa, wu ta gui yi*; cf. also T 6 at T I 180b1 and T 1451 at T XXIV 387b18); DN 16 at DN II 100,19: *attasaraṇā ... dhamma-saraṇā, anañña-saraṇā*; frag. 360 folio 172 R5 and folio 173 V1 in Waldschmidt (1950: 18): *[ātma]śaraṇā ... dharmasaraṇā ... 'nanyasaraṇah*; and *'dul ba kha* 50b6 (Derge edition): *bdag nyid skyabs dang ... chos kyi skyabs kyi gnas par bya'o ... skyabs gzhan gyis ni ma yin no*.

Abbreviations :

(Quotations are according to the PTS and Taishō editions, giving first the discourse by number, and then its location by volume, page, line. References to two different pages in secondary sources are separated by a + sign)

AN	<i>Aṅguttara Nikāya</i>
B ^c	Burmese edition
DN	<i>Dīgha Nikāya</i>
DĀ	<i>Dīrgha Āgama</i> found at T 1
EĀ	<i>Ekottarika Āgama</i> found at T 125
It	<i>Itivuttaka</i>
Kv	<i>Kathāvatthu</i>
Kv-a	<i>Kathāvatthu-aṭṭhakathā</i>
MN	<i>Majjhima Nikāya</i>
MĀ	<i>Madhyama Āgama</i> found at T 26
Mil	<i>Milindapañha</i>
Mp	<i>Manorathapūraṇī</i>
Paṭis	<i>Paṭisambhidāmagga</i>
Ps	<i>Papañcasūdanī</i>
SN	<i>Saṃyutta Nikāya</i>
SĀ	<i>Saṃyukta Āgama</i> found at T 99
SĀ ²	other <i>Saṃyukta Āgama</i> found at T 100
Sn	<i>Sutta Nipāta</i>
T	Taishō
Th	<i>Theragāthā</i>
Vin	<i>Vinaya</i>
Vism-mhṭ	<i>Paramatthamañjūsā</i>

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