The Buddha Counsels a Theist:

A Reading of the *Tevijjasutta* (*Dīghanikāya* 13)

Glenn Wallis

Department of Religion, University of Georgia, Peabody Hall, Athens, Georgia 30602, USA

Won Institute of Graduate Studies, 137 S. Easton Road, Glenside, Pennsylvania 19038, USA

Abstract

The dominant culture in India in the Buddha's day, Brahmanical culture, took as axiomatic the existence of a supernatural creator deity. This deity, termed 'Brahmā', was conceived as being 'the all-seeing, the all-powerful, the Lord, the maker and creator, ruler, appointer and orderer, father of all that have been and will be'. Although the Buddha completely rejected such apparent metaphysical speculation as a 'thicket of views', he nowhere formulated a systematic repudiation of theism. In one canonical text, however, the Buddha, encountering a young Brahmin espousing theistic beliefs, gives a series of analogies and similes that help to illuminate his views on the matter. In short, the Buddha saw such a belief as being dangerously reflexive, and hence as a symptom of a debilitating conceptual and affective disorder. Thus, in the dialogue, the Buddha aims to ease this ailment of his interlocutor through a threefold strategy: (1) *displaying* the language usage that under girds the problem; (2) *reorienting* the interlocutor toward the primacy of his conceptual apparatus as the proper locus of concern; and (3) providing a *practice* through which the interlocutor may develop the skills necessary for conceptual and affective health. The parameters of the discussion in this *sutta* are wide enough to render it of relevance to contemporary debates on theism. That is, the issue at stake in the *sutta* may be read as being not only about a restricted local notion of deity, but about *God*,

broadly conceived. The article contains fresh translations from the text under consideration, the *Tevijjasutta* of the *Dīghanikāya* (13).

God?

Faith means not wanting to know what is true.

— Friedrich Nietzsche

Is there any theme in the history of the world's religions or in the contemporary study of religion that even approaches the pride of place granted the discourse on 'God'? The Buddha, in contrast to the discipline that studies him, was unimpressed by the supposed importance of this issue, and thus refrained throughout his life from posing the very question of 'God's' existence. It is thus not surprising that in thousands of dialogues with all manner of interlocutors, as recorded in the Pāli canon, the Buddha nowhere formulates anything like a cohesive response to the issue of theism.[1] The *Tevijjasutta* of the *Dighanikāya* (text 13), however, contains a revealing account of the Buddha's encounter with a theist.[2] In this article, I will translate and analyse relevant portions of this *sutta*, and consider just what light it might shed on the Buddha's position regarding an issue that continues to animate so much of humanity to actions both heart-warming and monstrous.

The Buddha's Technique

Before beginning, it will be helpful to the reader if I make explicit the basic interpretative framework that I am employing in my reading of the *Tevijjasutta*. This framework is based on what I see as the central methodological tack of the Buddha in the *sutta*. The Buddha's technique involves three moves. The first is to *put on display* the problem raised by

his interlocutor as being one *not* presented by the world — as the interlocutor erroneously assumes — but as being rooted in the interlocutor's unreflective acceptance of certain ways of using language. The second is to *reorient* his interlocutor towards what *is* present and generative: his sensory apparatus. Finally, the Buddha provides his interlocutor with a *practice* whereby he may cultivate a state of being that approaches that which he previously imputed to an absent, supernatural being.

Through sustained dialogue, the Buddha helps his interlocutor to clarify *to himself* his very practice of speaking and thinking with, specifically, theistic language (i.e., language that assumes supernatural agency). The Buddha enables him to see that his language is riddled with imprecise usage, unfounded claims, and vacuous notions; and that such language, furthermore, engenders an entanglement in delusion and unwarranted expectation. Once there is some understanding of the nature of his language, the interlocutor can see *for himself* just how his life had been oriented toward a counterfeit promise (of heaven, salvation, union, etc.) — one that had no real capacity for being fulfilled *in life*, but remained always in the realm of a particular story that was fashioned by his language. The Buddha's method thus serves his broader aim as a teacher: to lead his partner in dialogue to self-awareness. Only once the interlocutor becomes aware of what he is doing when he speaks and thinks in the particular terms that he does can he free himself from entrenched tendencies, and begin to cultivate the skill of wisdom, the primary disposition gained through the Buddha's training.

This coupling of a dialogical method and careful attention to the individual's specific conceptual and affective confusions reveals, furthermore, the therapeutic nature of the Buddha's encounter with others. The disquiet exhibited in the question of the interlocutor in the *Tevijjasutta* is relieved under the very examination of the Buddha. The interlocutor's question,

rooted as it was in ignorance or mis-knowledge (*avijja*), ceases to have force. But if conversation with the Buddha amounts to a sort of talking cure, it is not because the interlocutor has been *convinced* of anything, say, some logical or conceptual error in his position. Rather, he is cured because he has simply *seen* his position for the first time. *Seeing* his position means gaining insight into the premises, suppositions, psychological dependencies, and emotional commitments that have been opaquely entrenched in that position all along. This insight liberates the interlocutor from the unconscious force exerted by culturally acquired pictures of the world.

The Buddha's technique is consequently inseparable from the ultimate aim of his teachings. A dialogical encounter with the Buddha is permeated by the same 'flavour' as is the entirety of his *dhamma*, namely, insight and liberation. We may glimpse in this fact a possible reason for the Buddha's refusal to expound a general critique of theism — or of anything else, for that matter. The reason might be this: general critiques and theories lack the force to expose the affectively potent *individual* practices operating behind specific world-building strategies, such as one's employment of language, concept, and analogy.

The Struggle

We are engaged in a struggle against the bewitchment of the intellect by means of language.
— Ludwig Wittgenstein

The *Tevijjasutta* begins with the Buddha staying in a mango grove near the 'Brahmin' village called Manasākaṭa, in the region of Kosala. Many wealthy and famous Brahmins also

happen to be staying in Manasākaṭa at that time. As if demonstrating the characteristic feature, in the Buddhists' view, of this class of Indians, two young Brahmins begin arguing.

> Now, as they were wandering along the road, a dispute arose between Vāseṭṭha and Bhāradvāja concerning the right and wrong paths. The young Brahmin Vāseṭṭha said: 'This is the only direct path; this is the straight path that leads to salvation, and leads one who follows it to communion[3] with Brahmā. This is what is proclaimed by the Brahmin Pokkharasāti'.
>
> And the young Brahmin Bhāradvāja said: '*This* is the only direct path, this is the straight path that leads to salvation, and leads one who follows it to communion with Brahmā. This is what is proclaimed by the Brahmin Tārukkha'.
>
> But neither could Vāseṭṭha convince Bhāradvāja, nor Bharadvaja convince Vasettha (*Dīghanikāya* 13.3-5).

There are three premises operating in the debate. For the young men engaged in argument, these premises amount to cultural axioms, since the Vedic Brahmin class, into which they were born, posited them as incontrovertible. The first premise holds that there exists an entity known as 'Brahmā'. This entity was understood to be an indefinable potency that created the phenomenal world. Omnipresent, omnipotent, and omniscient, in some sense immanent and in some sense transcendent, 'Brahmā' has been understood by Christian observers of Indian culture since the sixteenth century to be remarkably similar to their own conception of deity; so similar, in fact, that the term 'God' is generally considered an appropriate translation. So, in these latter terms, the first premise is: ''God' is given.'[4] The second premise at work for both

disputants in the argument is that this entity is *directly* knowable, i.e., its existence is not merely a matter of inference. And the third premise holds that certain Brahmin teachers know, and have revealed, the way to that direct knowledge of God. Vāseṭṭha and Bhāradvāja disagree only on which teachers have revealed the right path to the direct knowledge of God.

Vāseṭṭha suggests that they go to the ascetic Gotama, the Buddha, who, they had heard, was staying nearby. The two young men viewed the Buddha as a great teacher 'perfected in knowledge and conduct'(*Dīghanikāya* 13.7), and thus agreed to take to heart whatever he told them. They approach the Buddha and, after exchanging the proper courtesies of greeting, explain to him the nature of their argument. The Buddha's immediate reaction shows that he was unable to discern any real disagreement. He says, 'so what, then, Vāseṭṭha, is the dispute, the argument, the difference of opinion between you all about' (*Dīghanikāya* 13.9)?

Looking again at the basic structure of the argument, the Buddha's response could not be more reasonable. The argument says: it is given that there is an X; this being the case, X is knowable; P and T teach the means of discerning X. The structure of the argument conforms precisely to how language functions in the everyday world when it is employed as a means of positing, locating, and describing existents. So, the young Brahmins' argument is wholly commonsensical at the structural level. The Buddha's inability to see a substantive disagreement at this point is just a recognition that the argument is, so far, grammatically intact.

But then Vāseṭṭha makes a move that stirs the Buddha into full counselling mode. In response to the Buddha's question, Vāseṭṭha continues:

> [We have a disagreement concerning] the right and wrong paths, Gotama. Various Brahmins, Gotama, declare various paths . . . Do all of these paths lead the one who

> follows them to communion with God? Just, Gotama, as near a village or a town there are many different paths, yet they all meet in the village — just in that way are all the various paths declared by various Brahmins . . . Do all of these paths lead the one who follows them to communion with God?
>
> [The Buddha responds:] Do you say, 'they lead', Vāseṭṭha?
>
> I say, 'They lead', Gotama.
>
> Do you say, 'They lead', Vāseṭṭha?
>
> I say, 'They lead', Gotama.
>
> Do you say, 'They lead', Vāseṭṭha?
>
> I say, 'They lead', Gotama (*Dīghanikāya* 13.10).

(By the third time the Buddha asks 'They *lead*?', he is, I imagine, vigorously rubbing his temples. He was relaxing in a grove of mangoes — now this!) By comparing the path to God to a path leading to a village, Vāseṭṭha is now claiming more for his terms than the logical structure of everyday descriptive usage will allow. The idea of *a village and a path leading to that village* is a non-controversial notion: everyone understands what it means. Even more crucially, *village/path* is a technically verifiable referent. *God and a path leading to God* is neither non-controversial nor obviously referential. The analogy thus exposes a misuse of language on the part of Vāseṭṭha, which, for the Buddha, is symptomatic of an unhealthy confusion. If Vāseṭṭha wants to claim for *a path to God* that it *leads*, then the *question* of the proper path would never arise; it would simply require a straightforward act of verification, just as the proper path to the village is transparently known by the countless people who tread it. As the dialogue continues, the Buddha endeavours to show his interlocutor that this transparency is

not at all the case in regard to *the path to God*. I imagine that the tone in the Buddha's voice becomes gentler at this point, and that his countenance softens. The reason is this: in uttering the words that he does without any apparent inkling as to their problematic nature, Vāseṭṭha has now shown himself to be *entranced* by a view or picture of the world. In this particular case, the picture is a theistic one, in which there is some notion of an anthropomorphic supernatural creator deity. The combination of three factors point to Vāseṭṭha's entrancement with this picture. The first factor is the fact that the *idea* of 'God' is utterly nonsensical to anyone who does not already share the quite particular system of reference (Vedic/Brahmanical, Christian, Deistic, etc.) within which it is afforded meaning. The second factor is the fact that the wide-ranging consequences of this theistic picture (some notion of revelation, sacred scripture, bodily resurrection, heaven, etc.) are so transparently dubious to anyone who is not already captivated by that picture. The final factor is Vāseṭṭha's apparent obliviousness to the very fact that he *holds* this picture at all, i.e., that there even exist alternative ways of seeing the world — that one may *choose*. Vāseṭṭha's situation is indeed self-enforced. Although the notions that form his view are culturally derived, he himself *holds* them in view with precisely such locutions as 'They lead; they lead'.

Vāseṭṭha's simplistic equating of the of *path to the village* with the *path to God* is entertained by the Buddha because it marks the precise place where Vāseṭṭha's conceptual and emotional sore points are located. The Buddha thus begins a series of questions aimed at relaxing these points, thereby permitting Vāseṭṭha to gain some insight into the unconscious practice of holding a view in place. I present here the Buddha's summation of his own questioning.

So, you say, Vāsettha, that not one of the Brahmins who are learned in the three Vedas has ever seen God with his own eyes,[5] nor has any of their teachers or any of the teachers' teachers, going back seven generations. Neither could any of the ancient seers among those Brahmins — the creators and expounders of the sacred texts [*mantra*] who composed, declared, and recited the ancient verses . . . say: 'We know, we see, when, how, and where God appears'. So, the Brahmins who are learned in the three Vedas are saying this: 'We teach this path to communion with God, this path which we do not know, and which we have not seen; this is the only direct path, this is the straight path that leads to salvation, and leads one who follows it to communion with God'.

Now, what do you think, Vāseṭṭha? This being the case, does not the talk of the Brahmins learned in the three Vedas turn out to be ridiculous?

Yes, indeed, Gotama (*Dīghanikāya* 13.14).

If there is nothing even approaching an instantiation of anyone's having encountered some entity 'God', then what does it mean to claim, as the theists do, that 'this is the direct path that leads to liberation, and leads one who follows it to communion with God'? The sentence certainly does not carry meaning in the obvious way that the claim that one can come across *the path to the village* does. Again, the Buddha is not concerned here with discussing matters of language theory, rules of evidence, or the conditions for valid syllogisms and logic.[6] Since Vāseṭṭha has not shown himself to be held captive by any of these strategies of argument, such a concern on the Buddha's part would be misplaced. Vāseṭṭha, rather, has shown himself to be captivated by the *story*, told by Brahmins since time immemorial, about the existence and nature of 'the all-seeing, the all-powerful, the Lord, the maker and creator' — the story about God. The

Buddha is thus aiming at dismantling something much more instinctive than an intellectual apparatus. He is endeavouring to expose the language practice that supports Vāseṭṭha's conceptual and linguistic *storytelling*. So, in keeping with the nature of the argument — i.e., its being story-like — the Buddha now tells some stories of his own.

Saying that the Brahmins' notion of a *path to God* 'is not reasonable' (*Dīghanikāya* 13.15), the Buddha offers a series of parallels. The first one highlights the problematic nature of Vāseṭṭha's usage of the verbs *to see* and *to know*.

> Vāseṭṭha, it is just as a single line of blind men clinging to one another, and the first one sees nothing, the middle one sees nothing, and the last one sees nothing – just so, Vāseṭṭha, is the talk of the Brahmins learned in the three Vedas nothing but blind talk: the first one sees nothing, the middle one sees nothing, and the last one sees nothing. The talk then of these Brahmins learned in the three Vedas turns out to be ridiculous, mere words, vacuous, and desolate (*Dīghanikāya* 13.15).

Not only are the seven generations of Brahmins, their teachers, and the founding sages like a great file of blind men speaking blindly of what they do not see, but even if they did have the eyes to see — even if there were something such as 'God' *to be seen* — they would still not know anything like a *path* to that supernatural entity. The Buddha next points out that although the Brahmins direct prayers to the sun and moon, they are not able to point out anything like a path *that leads* to those celestial bodies (*Dīghanikāya* 13.16-17). That is, theists do not articulate any but the most figurative, analogical, and allegorical notions of seeing and knowing a path to God.

As if bringing Vāseṭṭha down, step by step, from his lofty imaginings to a more realistic view of life, the Buddha turns from this celestial image to an image of love and desire in the human realm.

> Vāseṭṭha, it is as if a man were to say: 'I am going to seek out and love the most beautiful woman in the land'. And the people would ask him: 'Dear man, this 'most beautiful woman in the land' — do you know which class she belongs to?' Asked this, he would have to answer, 'no'. And then the people would ask him: 'Dear man, this 'most beautiful woman in the land' — do you know her name, or her family name, whether she is tall or short or of medium height, dark or brown or golden in complexion, or in what village or town or city she lives?' Asked this, he would have to answer, 'no'. And then people might say to him: 'So then, foolish man, you neither know nor see the one whom you seek and desire?' Asked this, he would have to answer, 'no'.
> Now what do you think, Vāsettha? This being the case, does not the talk of that man turn out to be ridiculous?'
> Certainly so, Gotama (*Dīghanikāya* 13.19).

We might perceive in this story an implicit hypothesis concerning the very presence of theistic notions in a culture. People, in this view, seek an agent such as 'God' for the same reasons that the young man in the story seeks out the most beautiful woman in India: in response to a compulsive longing for satisfaction. The Buddha's first noble truth already proposed that an invariable human experience is the fact that *available objects* produce at best a fleeting satisfaction; and that such satisfaction, on closer examination, is really just another, if a

more subtle, register of pain. The solution chosen by the figure in the story is to imagine the perfect woman, affectively bond to her, and then seek her out for love. How can Vāseṭṭha not admit that such behaviour is 'ridiculous'?

Vāseṭṭha, however, could have objected that whereas the young man in the story knows nothing about the woman he seeks, the Brahmanical theologians have in fact worked out the details *about* God. On this account, the young man presented by the Buddha is nothing but a straw man, a poor example of a believer, comparable to one of the all-too-common proponents of theism who are ignorant of the intricacies of their theological traditions. In another text (*Majjhimanikāya* 95), the Buddha gives us some idea of how he might respond to this objection. There, he mentions five bases for having conviction in a religious system: faith (*saddhā*), inclination (*ruci*), oral tradition (*anussavo*), careful consideration of the grounds (*ākāraparivitakko*), and reflective acceptance of a view (*diṭṭhinijjhānakkhanti*) (*Majjhimanikāya* 95.14). It is acceptable to make a truth claim on the basis of any one of these modes; but the 'truth' being claimed must, in honesty and fairness, be limited to the scope encompassed by the particular mode of conviction. That is, the person who posits 'God' on the basis of faith is 'protecting the truth' (*saccam anurakkhati*) when he says, 'thus is my faith' (*Majjhimanikāya* 95.15), and acknowledges that he has no warrant to make a more elaborate claim or come to a definite conclusion. Thus the person may not justly claim: 'only this is true, anything else is wrong' (*Majjhimanikāya* 95.15). So, while it may be true that a religious tradition has constructed an elaborate theology, far-reaching institutions, weighty authorities, intricate devotional practices, and complex, sophisticated doctrines in the name of some all-powerful creator deity — all of which, furthermore, are 'fully approved of by society and tradition, well transmitted, well conceptualised, and well reflected on' — it does not change the

'empty, hollow, and false' nature of the *universal* claim to truth required by theism (*Majjhimanikāya* 95.14).

The final analogy that the Buddha presents to Vāseṭṭha as a means of revealing to him the errors in his conceptualisation of *the path to God* might be read as alluding to what the Buddha viewed as both the intricacies and vacuity of theistic traditions.

> Vāseṭṭha, it is just as if a man were to make a staircase at a crossroads, leading up to a palace. And people would say to him: 'Dear man, this staircase leading to the palace — do you know whether it is for a palace that will face east, south, west or north, or whether it will be of high, low or medium size?'
> Asked this, he would have to answer, 'no'.
> And people would say to him: 'Well, foolish man. you are making a staircase leading to a palace that you neither know nor see?'
> And when asked, he would have to answer: 'Yes'.
> Now, what do you think, Vāseṭṭha? This being the case, does not the talk of that man turn out to be ridiculous?'
> Certainly, Gotama (*Dīghanikāya* 13.21).

This analogy is a particularly apt way for the Buddha to end this portion of the dialogue because it points out what, in his view, is *really* waiting for the theists at the end of all of their complex systems and doctrines. In the end, no matter how intricate and elaborate the staircase may be, the fact remains that it leads to empty space. There is no palace: *it is all staircase*.

In the World

'The true life is absent'. But we are in the world. Metaphysics arises and is maintained in this alibi.

— Emmanuel Levinas

Emmanuel Levinas begins *Totality and Infinity* with the above words. This statement captures beautifully the Buddha's own impatience, perhaps even bafflement, with speculative metaphysical notions such as 'God'. In positing a path leading to communion with God, Vāseṭṭha and other theists are in essence submitting that *the true life is absent*. Understanding 'the true life' to refer to a religion's ultimate aim for a person — heaven, liberation, salvation, union — the various strategies of theistic religions (faith, devotion, prayer, etc.) can then be understood as means of insuring that that which is absent *here* is fully realized *there*. *There*, of course, is always some presumed *beyond*, whether conceived in spatial, epistemological, cognitive, affective, or some other terms. In the second section of the *Tevijjasutta*, the Buddha, like Levinas' imaginary interlocutor, insists: *But we are in the world*. He does this by showing that *even if* there were a God and a path to God such as the theists claim, and *even if* the Brahmins could see or know the path, they would *still* be incapable of treading that path to the heavenly communion they so sought.

The reasons given by the Buddha for this state of affairs are couched in a group of analogies involving a river 'brimful of water' and a Brahmin who not only speaks ridiculously, as in the previous analogies, but also 'continuously neglects the duties of a Brahmin (or, conversely, 'undertakes what a Brahmin should not do'). The Buddha seems intent here on disabusing Vāseṭṭha of any belief in the magical quality of religious practices. He presents a

humorous image of the Brahmin summoning the far bank of the river to come to him so that he can cross to the other side: ‘Come here, other bank, come here’ (*Dīghanikāya* 13.24)! The Buddha is concerned with more here than making the obvious observation that no amount of ‘wheedling’ will have an effect in the world of real objects. He is, more importantly, lampooning the Brahmins’ primary vehicle to ‘spiritual’ power and social prestige — their liturgical language — as being equally ineffectual. In his next statement to Vāseṭṭha the Buddha explicitly equates such ‘wheedling’ with the supplications of the Brahmins.

> Vāseṭṭha, in just the same way [as the Brahmin summoning the river bank], do the Brahmins who are learned in the three Vedas, who continuously neglect the duties of a Brahmin and undertake what a Brahmin should not do, declare: ‘We call on Indra, Soma, Varuṇa, Isāna, Pajāpati, Brahmā, Mahiddhi, Yama!’ That such Brahmins . . . by reason of their summoning, wheedling, requesting or delighting, should, after death, when the body is dissolved, attain communion with God – this just is not reasonable (*Dīghanikāya* 13.25).

With this analogy, the Buddha begins to orient Vāseṭṭha towards the proper mode of practice and life, or, as that orientation is symbolized later on, ‘to the farther shore’ (phrases such as ‘the other bank’, ‘the farther shore’, ‘the other side’ are, of course, common locutions for *nibbāna/nirvāṇa*). Then, in quick succession the Buddha has the Brahmin unable to cross the river because of a failure of technique (his ‘wheedling’), then bound and immobilized with his hands tied behind his back, and, finally, lying prostrate with his head covered with a shawl.

After each telling, the Buddha asks: ‘What do you think, Vāseṭṭha, would that man be able to cross to the farther shore’ (*Dīghanikāya* 13.26, 29)?

One way of understanding the problem in each of the analogies given by the Buddha in the *Tevijjasutta* is to consider that in each case someone was involved in an incorrect, hence fruitless, orientation: building a staircase *towards* empty space; moving blindly *towards* some indeterminate place shrouded in darkness; searching *throughout* the land for the most beautiful woman; calling out for help *to* the river bank. And in the final two analogies, the person is incapable of being oriented toward anything at all: he is bound, immobilized, and prostrate *on the ground*. The Buddha has him just where he wants him — back on the ground! And he has the ever-consenting Vāseṭṭha figuratively in the same place. Lying on the ground, now with his head shrouded (*Dighānikāya* 13.29), there will be no more wheedling, no more talk about a path to God.

In such a position, and, for someone with his former conceptual commitments, *only* in such a position, is Vāseṭṭha open to the teaching of the Buddha. The cause of the kind of disorientation experienced by the figures in his analogies, the Buddha explains, lies in one’s inability to attend carefully to the workings of his or her sensory apparatus. The result of such inattentiveness is confusion: the person confuses non-substantial, ephemeral phenomena for phenomena capable of being grasped and of yielding genuine satisfaction. As the following statement indicates, the Buddha equates this state of confusion concerning the sensory apparatus with being bound and chained.

> These five strands of sense desire are called in the noble [i.e. Buddhist] discipline ‘chains and bonds’. Which five? Forms perceptible to the eye which are pleasing,

> enjoyable, charming, agreeable, desirable, enticing, sounds perceptible to the ear . . . scents perceptible to the nose . . . tastes perceptible to the tongue, tangible objects perceptible to the body. These five strands of sense desire are called in the noble discipline ‘chains and bonds’. And Vāseṭṭha, those Brahmins learned in the three Vedas are enslaved, infatuated by these five strands of sense desire, which they enjoy guiltily, not realizing the danger, knowing no way out (*Dīghanikāya* 13.27).[7]

In the Buddha’s typology of beings, what is being described here is someone who is an ‘ordinary’ person (*puthujjana*) as opposed to an ‘accomplished’ (*arahant*) or ‘awakened’ (*buddha*) one. A person is ordinary by virtue of his or her being entangled in the ‘five obstacles’, which the Buddha describes to Vāseṭṭha as follows.

> These five obstacles are called in the noble discipline ‘obstacles, obstructions, coverings, envelopings’. Which five? The obstacle of attachment to sensuality, of ill-will towards others, of lack of energy, of anxiety and worry, and uncertainty. Those Brahmins learned in the three Vedas are obstructed by, caught up in, engulfed in, entangled in, these five obstacles (*Dīghanikāya* 13.30).

The Buddha’s point is driven home in the next sequence of comments. First, he gets Vāseṭṭha to assent to the notion that those who claim *communion with God*, being but ordinary people, are bound by the five obstacles; and being so, it follows that they are ‘impure, undisciplined, encumbered, full of ill-will’ (*Dīghanikāya* 13.35). *God*, as theists generally conceive that being, by contrast, possesses precisely the opposite characteristics. *Communion*,

in the Buddha's view here, obviously must presuppose *commonality*. Hence, the Buddha ends this portion of the dialogue by commenting that the theists' so-called 'threefold knowledge'[8] turns out to be a barren proposition.

> These Brahmins learned in the three Vedas, having sat down desperately [on the bank], having sunk down despairingly, were hoping to cross over to the other dry shore. Therefore, their threefold knowledge is called 'the threefold knowledge of desolation, the threefold knowledge of bewilderment, the threefold knowledge of ruin' (*Dīghanikāya* 13.36).

Like the Brahmins in the passage, Vāseṭṭha realizes that he is at a dead end. But while the Buddha has convinced his interlocutor of the vacuity of the Brahmins' claim to know the way to communion with God, he has not, apparently, completely dissuaded him from the notion 'God'. For Vāseṭṭha next says that he has heard from others that the Buddha 'knows the way to communion with God'. The Buddha, for his part, does not ask for a complete repudiation of what is obviously a deeply held conviction. Rather, like a good doctor facing a stubborn patient, he prescribes for Vāseṭṭha a *practice* that will cure him once and for all of his misapprehension.

The Buddha first establishes the parameters within which the practice is effective. His instructions in this section amount to a summary of early Buddhist practice. In brief, it is necessary that the practitioner first accept that the Buddha is 'unsurpassed as a trainer of men capable of training' (*Dīghanikāya* 13.40), and that his teaching is correct. This acceptance leads him to abandon the householder's life. In the state of mendicancy, he trains himself in restraint and mindfulness, leading eventually to his overcoming of the five hindrances, mentioned above. Free of these, his entire being is filled with joy and peace. Then, the Buddha prescribes the

practice involving the cultivation of concerned sympathy (*mettā*), sympathetic joy (*muditā*), compassion (*karuṇā*), and equanimity (*upekhā*). In saying, as he does at the end of this section, that the cultivation of these traits *is* communion with God, the Buddha is engaging in the practice of cultural-linguistic inversion. As on numerous other occasions, the Buddha is taking a notion (together with its exactly corresponding term) that is held sacrosanct by the Brahmanical communities and re-outfitting it to serve distinctly different — Buddhist — purposes. Having attained the qualities and skills engendered by the practice (such as expansiveness, unencumberedness, purity, loving-kindness, and equanimity), it is indeed possible that the practitioner attain communion with *brahmā* (now used literally, to mean 'expansiveness, greatness, the supreme good').

> Then with his mind filled with thoughts of concerned sympathy . . . (*Dīghanikāya* 13.76) with compassion, with sympathetic joy . . . with equanimity, the practitioner dwells pervading one quarter of the world, and so the second, the third, and the fourth. And thus the whole world, above, below, around, everywhere, in every respect he continues to pervade with a mind of concerned sympathy, abundant, vast, boundless, without hatred or ill-will.
>
> Vāseṭṭha, just as a mighty trumpeter makes himself easily heard throughout the four directions, so by this meditation, Vāseṭṭha, by this liberation of mind through equanimity [etc.], he leaves nothing unaffected, nothing untouched in the sensuous sphere.
>
> *This*, Vasettha, is the way to communion with God / *This*, Vasettha, is the way to unify with the supreme good (*Dīghanikāya* 13.79).

Concluding Remarks

Through the sustained practice that presupposes the above meditation, the practitioner is radically reoriented towards what the Buddha calls 'one's proper range' (*gocaro sako*) (*Saṃyuttanikāya* 5.47.6). This is the field within which, according to the Buddha, human life is properly lived. The proper range is the scope given by immediate experience. This point may seem obvious, but a central contention of Buddhism is that we are *constantly* wandering outside of that range, and into the improper, detrimental range of storytelling, fantasy, fabrication, personal narrative, and metaphysical conjecture. Throughout the canonical texts, the Buddha holds that to be careless toward, or inattentive to, immediate experience is to be as good as dead.[9] Immediate experience is not only our proper range; it is, if we are honest about the manner in which our lives actually unfold moment by moment, our *only* range — immediate experience is *all* there is. The Buddha, in fact, used the term 'the all' (*sabba*) to denote this range.[10]

'God' fits into *the all* in no different a manner than the sound of rain striking the roof, the scent of a flower wafting through the air, the sensation of skin touching cold metal, or the taste of salt on the tongue. In each case, a specific process unfolds: a phenomenon arises out of the confluence of numerous conditions; it comes into contact with a sense faculty; a specific type of consciousnesses arises at the point of contact: visual-consciousness, sound-consciousness, scent-consciousness, taste-consciousness, tactile-consciousness, or mental-consciousness. 'God', in this account, does indeed arise in the mind; but not as the entity posited by theistic traditions. 'God' arises as a thought, a concept, a notion, an idea, etc., conditioned, like every other thought or idea, by cultural practices, linguistic usages, personal

need, and so on. The Buddha calls such conditioned entities 'fabrications' (*saṅkhāra*) and notes that they exhibit in every instance the qualities of impermanence (*anicca*), non-substantiality (*anattā*), and unreliability (*dukkha*). The notion 'God', like the sound of rain, arises in accordance with the confluence of necessary conditions, persists as long as those conditions hold together, begins to disappear as those conditions dissolve, then dies away when those conditions have ceased. What is left at the end? Just ask: What follows the final step of the elaborate staircase leading to the absent palace in the desert?

So, we may summarize the Buddha's view of theism as follows: it seems that the Buddha's general position is that theological language has embedded within it such far-ranging yet indemonstrable metaphysical presuppositions that it never escapes from the orbit of the purely speculative. And any usage of speculative language is by nature a life-limiting, even life-denying, 'thicket of views' (*diṭṭhigahana*) (*Majjimanikāya* 72.14). To answer 'God' in the context of any religious or philosophical query, the Buddha suggests, is really no answer at all; it is, rather, merely an admission that one has subscribed to a pre-established program of belief. Because no such claim or view is actually verifiable in any meaningful sense of that term, such an 'answer' is tantamount to holding an unsubstantiated opinion or believing a rumor that one has heard.

For the Buddha, any solution to our human problem that is founded on aimless conjectures about the state of things will fail to fulfill its purported promise of human well-being. Whatever answer a person receives from others, and however fervently he or she may accept that answer, it does not change the fact that 'there is birth, there is aging, there is death, there are sorrow, disappointment, pain, grief, and despair' (*Saṃyuttanikāya* 5.56.11). As a 'physician', as opposed to a saviour, the Buddha's only concern is to *show* the way to overcome

the illness — the pain — of human existence. This is, in fact, one of the meanings of the Pāli term that is routinely translated as ‘teacher’ in English: *desika*. A teacher is a teacher precisely by virtue of being adept at *pointing* at the matters of real and immediate concern, *orienting* the patient to those concerns, and *prescribing* the practice that leads to their resolution.

Notes

[1] This is not to say that the Buddhist canons are short on references to 'the gods' (*deva*). In fact, *suttas* containing material on *devas* are quite extensive in the Pāli canon. The *Saṃyuttanikāya*, for instance, opens with an extended mixed prose verse section containing dialogues that the Buddha and his followers engaged in with *devas* of various classes (*devatā, devaputta, devaduhitā, yakkha, vanadevatā*), as well as individual *devas* (*Sakka, Brahmās* — plural — *Māra*). In translation (the recommended one is Bodhi 2000) this section alone is over 250 pages in length. There is also the *Gandhabbhasaṃyutta* (3.31), the *Sakkhasutta* (4.40.10), and three *suttas* titled *Visiting the devas* (5.55.18-20). Virtually every other division of the Pāli canon contains numerous references to *devas*. Furthermore, the Buddha is commonly referred to as 'a teacher of gods and men' (*satthā devamanussānaṃ*). A common gloss for 'the world' in the canon is 'this place with its gods, Māra, and Brahmā (*imaṃ lokaṃ sadevakaṃ samārakaṃ sabrahmakaṃ*). Finally, the Buddha did not overtly contest the cosmology of his day, in which there were held to be numerous *deva* realms, actual places where one might be reborn. Of course, the Buddha would often graft his system of 'meditative absorption' (*jhāna*) over this cosmological scheme, suggesting an appropriation more symbolic than literal; but he would generally retain the *deva*-designations (e.g., 'realm of the *devas* of streaming radiance,' 'realm of the *devas* of measureless aura'). In short, Buddhist literature of all stripes, Theravāda, Mahāyāna, and Vajrayāna, is permeated, like a rag in oil, to use a Buddhist simile, with *devas*. So, *that* there is an abundance of material on 'the gods' in the Pāli canon is incontestable. But what it all *means* is still unclear (to me, to us), and has gone largely unexplored in the secondary literature. (See the bibliography for references.) My own view, tentative, pending a more thorough investigation of the material in total, is that there are at least four ways of viewing the *deva* material. The first view is that the Buddha really did see 'with his divine eye … thousands of *devas*' (*Dīghanikāya* 16.1.27), converse with them, debate with them, and so on; that is, we may hold out the possibility, as many 'believers' do, that there really are such entities in the world. An obvious, perhaps somewhat simplistic rebuttal to this view is that, as the *sutta* under investigation in the present article makes clear, *no one* has ever seen such entities *outside of the literature itself.* That is, while it is true that Indian literature (including what we would call 'religious' literature) is rife with *devas*, Indian anatomical studies are not. Another, more serious rebuttal to this view is that a literal reading of the *deva* material (along with many features of the Buddha's Indian cosmology) is incompatible with an anti-metaphysical reading of the Buddha's teachings; and that the Buddha's teachings are clearly such is a central theme of my argument in the present article. These rebuttals point to the second way to view the *deva* material; namely, as a literary conceit. The *devas* always make intriguing — and to their Indian audience, recognizable — interlocutors; and intriguing, recognizable interlocutors make for provocative literature, oral or otherwise — just look at our own fairy tales; and provocative tales are attended to, responded to, remembered, and handed down. There may, in fact, be a cognitive compulsion to do so (see, for example, Boyer 1994.) A third view is that *deva* is pre-Freudian code for 'psychological force'. As Bhikkhu Bodhi notes, 'the devas usually come to visit the Buddha in the deep stillness of the night, while the rest of the world lies immersed in sleep' (*op. cit*., p. 73). What might such a qualification suggest? I don't know, exactly; but I would begin making sense of such a state of affairs by seeing it as suggesting a psychological situation *within* a literary one. Of course, the notion 'psychological' is just as vague and ghost-like as *deva*, but at least it is our notion. And this fact points to the fourth way of viewing the material on *devas*; namely as cultural coin. Buddhist teachers in contemporary North America reflexively adopt certain axiomatic American cultural constructs (the notion of equality, the inevitability of materialism, the necessity of therapeutic healing, the need for scientific validation and philosophical sophistication, and so on). Similarly, the Buddha adopted some basic cultural axioms of his own time and place. Some, of course, he would reject; but some he would not. Why not? For the sake of communication perhaps; or perhaps he did so just as reflexively and unconsciously as modern-day teachers do. The present article is meant as a contribution towards a fuller understanding of the meaning of 'the *devas*' in the Buddha's teaching and in Buddhist literature. We still have a long way to go.

[2] I translated from Rhys Davids and Carpenter 1967. The title, *Tevijja* (threefold knowledge) refers to the three *Vedas*, the texts held sacred by the Brahmins.

[3] The term that I am translating as 'communion', *sahavyatā*, means, more literally, 'companionship, fellowship'. Rhys Davids 1890-1910 and Maurice Walsh 1995 both translate the term as 'union'. As Walsh points out, 'union' probably goes too far theologically since it implies 'mystical union rather than merely belonging to the company of Brahmā' (*ibid*., p. 43). But, as he also mentions, the dialogue concerns a dispute about doctrines, so it is not clear

precisely what is being referred to here. 'Communion' captures equally a sense of togetherness and unity while preserving the 'religious' nuance implied by the young Brahmins.

[4] It might be possible to reconstruct a more exact notion of what the disputants had in mind for the term ' Brahmā'. But any theological intricacies that we might thereby uncover would be beside the point. The terms of the argument are broad. The Buddha does not require certain clarifications about how 'Brahmā' is being construed before he begins his therapeutic questioning. It is enough for him that there is some notion in play of a supernatural deity who is 'the all-seeing, the all-powerful, the Lord, the maker and creator, ruler, appointer and orderer, father of all that have been and will be' (*Dīghanikāya* 1.2.5). Thus, any and all notions of supernatural agency are under question here. So, in order to make the argument less exotic, and to place it more squarely in the western discourse on the matter, I am going to translate 'Brahmā' as 'God' from now on. This equation of the two terms will raise for many readers of this journal the larger issue of the comparative religions project. Keeping the discussion about 'God' at the general level that I do may be responsible *vis-à-vis* the data under investigation, but it probably won't satisfy those who are interested in advancing inter-religious dialogue. The discussion in this article, however, can, in fact, be viewed as a contribution to the comparative project in this sense: the Buddha's response to his interlocutor in the present text *is* precisely a response to those who would engage in inter-religious dialogue about supernatural agency. And his response is that no such project is possible because of the very issues raised in the *sutta*, beginning with the fact that the basic condition for such dialogue — coherent shared language — is *never* established. Whenever some sort of agreed upon terminology is established, the *comparative* nature of the project disappears. What appears in its place is some hybrid tradition that is no tradition at all.

[5] The term *sakkhi* means quite literally 'with' (*sa*) 'eyes' (*akkhi*). It implies *being in the presence of*, *seeing face to face, witnessing*.

[6] The scholastics of later centuries were, of course, interested in precisely such matters. See Hayes1998.

[7] Whether it is intentional or not, the term for "knowing no way out" (*a-nissaraṇa-paññā*) puns nicely with the term for "knowing no creator God" (*an-issara-[n]a-paññā*).

[8] The term here is *tevijja*, as in the title of the *sutta*.

[9] A succinct example of this notion is found at *Dhammapada* verse 21: Diligence is the path to the deathless. / Negligence is the path of death. / The diligent do not die. / Those who are negligent / are as good as dead (Wallis 2004).

[10] See, for example, *Saṃyuttanikāya* 4.35.23.

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