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Early Buddhist imagination

The *Aṭṭhakavagga* as Buddhist poetry

Eviatar Shulman

As is customary, this study on the *Aṭṭhakavagga* ('The chapter of eights,'[1] AV) of the *Suttanipāta* (SNip) opens by recalling that the AV is possibly the most ancient Buddhist scripture extant today. Almost certainly, together with the *Pārāyaṇavagga* ('The chapter on the passage beyond,' PV) and the *Khaggavisāṇasutta* ('The discourse on the rhinoceros horn,' KVS), which are also housed in the *Suttanipāta*, this is the oldest layer of Buddhist texts in existence; many even see these scriptures as returning to the days of the historical Buddha. The main reason for this attribution is that these are the only texts that have a commentary on them included in the Pāli canon. Although we do not know when the canon received the shape we are familiar with, the archaic language of these texts, and in some cases their use of meter, suggests that they are very old. The AV is also referred to by name in other canonical sources and, like the PV, it is quoted in numerous instances.[2] This corpus is thus considered to offer insights regarding what are possibly the earliest recorded forms of Buddhism.

While most scholars agree that the PV is at least as old as the AV,[3] if not older,[4] the latter has received far greater scholarly attention. This is probably due to its more appealing teachings, which

[1] The AV has a second name – 'The chapter on the principal meaning.' The translation depends on how one reads *aṭṭha* in *Aṭṭhakavagga*, whether it corresponds to Sanskrit *aṣṭa* ('eight') or *artha* ('meaning'). Both readings are attested in the historical Buddhist tradition.

[2] See Norman 1992: 511.

[3] E.g. Norman 1992: 516–517, 2001 [1992]: xxxi–xxxiii.

[4] Nakamura 1989 [1980]: 45.

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broadly conform to the favorite themes of Buddhist modernism.[5] If there is a text that can justify an interpretation of the Buddha's teachings as eschewing metaphysics, as practical advice for living truthfully while avoiding philosophical speculation, as offering a confident form of 'non-attachment' that suits modern preferences,[6] it is the AV. According to this picture, the acme of Buddhist realization is the full implementation of a 'no-view' approach to life and to religious practice. This is the doctrine that many would have liked the Buddha to have preached, and this too is, ultimately, one of the reasons for the attribution of such antiquity to this corpus.

In what follows I will not confront the prevalent and probably correct view regarding the antiquity of the AV. This does not mean, however, that this text reveals the teachings of 'primitive Buddhism.' Key studies on the AV, such as Vetter 1990 and Norman 1992, have already questioned the idea that it should be seen as an expression of *the early* Buddhist doctrine. This study will take a step further by arguing that the AV is not really interested in doctrine; rather, the AV should be read as a specimen of Buddhist poetry. The recording of the aesthetic, religious, social and emotional motivations that underlie this text, rather than the philosophical and doctrinal ones, will bring us closer to penetrating its main concerns and to appreciating its place in the history of Buddhist ideas.

The AV is not only commonly read as doctrine; it is read is a doctrine whose chief instruction is to hold no doctrine. This non-doctrine is taken at times as an expression of pre-dogmatic Buddhism, which had yet to develop an interest in such metaphysical notions as karma, rebirth, or the exit from and annihilation of *saṃsāra*. The clearest expression of this approach has been conceptualized by Grace Burford (1991), whose main strategy is to compare the AV with its commentaries, in which she identifies the fully evolved

[5] The term 'Buddhist modernism' was coined by Bechert (1973: 91) to refer to the Buddhism that evolved in order to accommodate Western, modern, rational, scientific tastes. See also Berkwitz 2012: 33–35. For a broader perspective on these issues, see Hallisey 1995.

[6] Salient examples of this common presentation of Buddhist doctrine are Rahula 1974 [1959] and Gombrich 2009.

metaphysical Buddhist doctrines.[7] According to Burford, such notions are absent from the AV almost completely, and any traces of them must result from later interpolations.[8]

Burford's presentation has been tackled by K. R. Norman (1992), who, in a study titled 'The *Aṭṭhakavagga* and Early Buddhism,' convincingly demonstrated that Burford's identification between what she sees as the AV's views and the earliest forms of Buddhism is unfounded. Norman argues that although it seems reasonable that the AV characterizes a very early stage of Buddhist thought, this does not mean that it encapsulates all that was philosophically important at this developmental stage; even if these were the philosophical positions of some Buddhists of the day, this does not imply that there were no other Buddhists who entertained different understandings, which did recommend "views." Norman further points out that there are many references to Buddhist doctrinal concepts in the text, such as *nibbāna*, *sa-upādi-sesa*, or 'the crossing of the flood.' Although these fall outside the scope of the AV's main interests, they nevertheless attest to the existence of these doctrines at that time. In light of these claims, any perception of the AV as the kernel of the historical Buddha's teachings seems romantic.

Norman's paper is a significant contribution to the study of the AV and puts the idea that this text reveals the 'original form of Buddhism' to rest. It is also important to notice that Burford's reading, which sees the AV as maintaining little interest in solving the problem of death and in ending the painful realities of rebirth, is incorrect. Rebirth plays a central role in at least two of the sixteen discourses of the collection, the *Guhaṭṭhakasutta* and the

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[7] Burford's view is in actuality more refined than the way I present it here, as she identifies two distinct value theories in the AV – one that focuses on the attainment of an ultimate goal, and another that speaks of "the view of 'no-view'." From the perspective of this study, these two supposedly distinct approaches are equal in that they are thought to contain no metaphysical purport. I am also skeptical of the distinction between them, since they overlap in the text. Premasiri (1972) has read the AV in a similar way to Burford, but his discussion is very general and relies on little textual analysis. See also Nakamura 1989 [1980]: 45.

[8] Burford 1991: 40.

Jarāsutta, and finds expression in many other discourses as well.[9] For example, the third verse of the *Guhaṭṭhakasutta* says:

> 774 Those who are greedy for pleasures, driven toward them, bewildered in relation to them, who have yet to understand them, are stationed in crookedness. Heading toward pain, they cry 'what shall be of us when we have passed away from here?'
>
> 774 *kāmesu giddhā pasutā pamūḷhā avadāniyā te visame niviṭṭhā / dukkhūpanītā paridevayanti kiṃ su bhavissāma ito cutāse //*[10]

This verse clearly sets an ideal of overcoming fears regarding the afterlife: People suffer since they do not know what will happen to them when they die, or more precisely – 'after they have passed away from here' (*ito cutāse*), suggesting that there is some form of continuity after the present life ends. Note also the subtle hint that these people are concerned for good reason, they are *dukkhūpanītā*, 'headed toward pain' they will encounter in the afterlife.

The author then proceeds to characterize the main problem of humanity:

> 776 I see these people trembling in the world, driven by desire toward states of being – lowly people chattering in the mouth of death, their desire toward states of being and non-being unquenched.
>
> 776 *passāmi loke pariphandamānaṃ pajaṃ imaṃ taṇhāgataṃ bhavesu / hīnā narā maccumukhe lapanti avītataṇhāse bhavābhavesu //*

People are in the grip of death since they crave states of being and non-being, presumably states they will attain in the afterlife.[11] The implication is that once people quit this specific form of desire, death will have no more hold on them and they will 'climb out of its mouth;' these people will transcend death. In the next verse the poet ('the Buddha') suggests that one should not 'create any holding toward states of being' (*bhavesu āsattim akubbamāno*), mean-

[9] The assumption of rebirth is crucial to the framing of the *Purābhedasutta*.

[10] For the Pāli text of the SNip I rely on Bapat 1990 [1924], which I compare to the Chaṭṭa Saṅgāyana Tipiṭaka edition of the Vipasanna Research Institute.

[11] For the meaning of *bhava* as a 'state of being' or 'rebirth,' see Lamotte 1988 [1958]: 38, Williams 1974: 59 and Schmithausen 2000: 52–53.

ing that one should not be concerned with rebirth. This raises the question whether the problem is only with craving for rebirth, and not with the concrete, painful realities one will experience in the afterlife. Even if this were true, the implication is that relinquishing all interest in rebirth solves the problem down to its root – this allows one to elude 'the jaws of death.' In any case, the suggestion to quit craving is framed in reference to the idea of transmigration.

The final verse of this 'discourse' – we may begin to translate *sutta* in this context as 'song' or 'poem' – is especially suggestive:

> 779 Having understood perception, the wise man will cross the flood, unstained by things he grasps at. His dart removed, he goes about without distraction – he hopes neither for (this) world nor for the next.
>
> 779 *saññaṃ pariññā vitareyya oghaṃ pariggahesu muni nopalitto* / *abbūḷhasallo caram appamatto nāsiṃsatī lokasmiṃ paraṃ ca* //

This verse can be interpreted in two main ways, leaving aside the question what the author meant by 'having understood perception' (*saññaṃ pariññā*) – whether this allows perception to continue or not. First, the verse can be read along with Burford as implying that one should quit all interest in the afterlife and that this is the highest achievement possible. Second, it can be interpreted as suggesting that one who 'hopes neither for (this) world nor the next' is freed from being born and from dying; indeed the verse should probably be read in this way, since we are told that the adept will 'cross the flood' (*vitareyya oghaṃ*). Both readings are acceptable.

In anticipation of our later discussion, we may add another complication. Possibly, it may be best to accept both interpretations – the one that envisions a transformation of existence in this life that carries no metaphysical consequences, and the other that believes one can truly overcome death and rebirth. If we are dealing with poetry, rather than with doctrine, there is no need to prefer one interpretation over the other. Perhaps the author deliberately created a vague, undetermined semantic space that hints at both options of this world and beyond this world, as well as any possible combination between them. Maybe the author did not incline exclusively to one interpretation and felt both vectors of understanding to be meaningful; the aesthetic resonance can be seen as primary to the

formalized, well-defined philosophical position.

Such ambiguity is made explicit in the following verse from the *Jarāsutta*, another poem that takes issue with the ‘problem’ of death and suggests that the recluse can remedy this human ailment. Here the poet says:

> 810 For the monk who goes about withdrawn, who has tasted the seat of seclusion, people speak of this agreement – he *may not* show himself (again) in the realms of existence.
>
> 810 *patilīnacarassa bhikkhuno bhajamānassa vivittam āsanaṃ* /
> *sāmaggiyam āhu tassa taṃ yo attānaṃ bhavane na dassaye* //

Note the significant use of the optative *na dassaye* – some people say that a withdrawn, secluded monk may not show himself again in the realms of existence. This remains an indefinite possibility, however, an enigma. Does the author agree with this claim? Does he condemn it? It appears that he has yet to decide. At the same time, he finds this option intriguing enough, and it was important enough to the cultural milieu he was writing in, that he thought to mention it.

Many other verses in the AV refer to the doctrine of rebirth and imply that the practices it recommends are meant to have an effect in this respect.[12] Some of these verses could be read as pointing to views the author does not necessarily entertain,[13] while in other cases he appears to hold these positions himself.[14] The AV’s sister-text, the PV, is patently concerned with the idea of rebirth.[15] It thus seems that the authors of the AV, or at least the authors of some of its poems, were troubled by this problem. I will refrain from laboring this point here, however, since my main aim is to reframe the question – the problem is not what the doctrine of the AV ‘really is,’ but rather if the AV should be read as doctrine to begin with. Once I will show that philosophical doctrine is not the

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[12] SNip 801, 836, 839, 846, 849, 864, 876–877 (see below), 898, 902.

[13] E.g. 836, 864.

[14] E.g. 849, 898.

[15] Shulman forthc.-a. Scholars who discuss the PV normally accept that it is more metaphysically oriented than the AV.

collection's main purport, the views it voices will be freed of the demand to express clear-cut philosophical positions.

A great step forward in understanding the AV was made by Tilmann Vetter (1990),[16] in a study on 'the older parts of the *Suttanipāta*' (the AV, PV and KVS). The main contribution of this careful analysis is to make a strong case for the understanding that the poems of the AV were not composed by one author.[17] Relying on earlier scholarship, mainly on Warder 1967, Vetter accepts that a number of the AV's *sutta*s are of later origin due to considerations relating to meter.[18] Vetter then defines what he sees as the core texts of the AV according to their exposition of a 'no-view' teaching, settling on seven discourses he sees as the original corpus. He regards the other nine discourses of the collection as later insertions.[19] Interestingly, Vetter thus divides the AV into two main groups of texts. In the first are placed discourses that express the doctrine of holding no position, which he sees as the kernel of the AV. Only in the second group does Vetter identify allusions to conventional Buddhist doctrine, which for him means the four *jhāna*s and the four noble truths. Connecting these two types of Buddhist wisdom – 'no-view' on the one hand, the realization of the four noble truths in the fourth *jhāna* on the other – is indeed no easy task, since the second group, which is introduced primarily in the prose

[16] See also Vetter 1988: appendix.

[17] This position was articulated less forcefully by Norman (1992: 513) as well, and goes back at least to Bapat 1990 [1924]: xvi.

[18] These are the *Kāmasutta* (no. 1), *Guhaṭṭhakasutta* (no. 2), *Jarāsutta* (no. 6, although on this see Jayawickrama 1978: 54–55) and *Tuvaṭṭakasutta* (no. 14).

[19] Here Vetter refers to the texts that were not quoted by Gomez (1976), according to Vetter since they contain no trace of the no-view approach. These are the *Kāmasutta* (no. 1), *Guhaṭṭhakasutta* (no. 2), *Duṭṭhaṭṭhakasutta* (no. 3), *Jarāsutta* (no. 6), *Tissametteyasutta* (no. 7) and *Sāriputtasutta* (no. 16). He thus adds three texts to the previous four. He then claims that there is only faint indication of the no-view teaching in the *Purābhedasutta* (no. 10) and the *Attadaṇḍasutta* (no. 15), thus reaching a total of nine *sutta*s he positions outside the original core of the AV. Notice that regarding the *Duṭṭhaṭṭhakasutta* Vetter is surely mistaken; see SNip 781, 785–787, and Jayawickrama (1978: 48), who sees this discourse as one that denies philosophical views.

discourses of the *Nikāya*s, is based on the adoption of correct views (*sammā diṭṭhi*). Collins (1982) was the first to reconcile these two approaches with the insight that the no-view realization, articulated almost exclusively in the AV, should be viewed as the full embodiment of the views one is to cultivate at earlier stages of the path.[20] This elegant solution remains problematic, however: if it were true, we would expect the two complementary forms of wisdom to resonate each other more powerfully. This scheme should also have been defined in the texts.

Vetter's approach parallels the distinction made by Burford between the AV and the more mature Buddhist doctrines, although these two scholars' perceptions of Buddhist doctrine are quite different. Vetter reaches the compelling conclusion that the no-view approach originated outside the early Buddhist tradition, with a rival group of ascetics that practiced this particular form of 'mysticism.' He goes so far as to suggest that these were the disciples of Sañjaya Belaṭṭhiputta, known from the *Dīghanikāya*'s *Sāmaññaphalasutta*. This tradition, according to Vetter, practiced a form of stoic, mystical silence, and was later incorporated into the Buddhist tradition.

Vetter's analysis is, in my mind, ingenious; but it remains, inevitably, heavily speculative. It is also problematic because of the exclusion from the original corpus of the *Duṭṭhaṭṭhakasutta* (no. 3), which contains explicit references to both the instruction to hold no-views (although Vetter denies this),[21] and at the same time to numerous elements of conventional Buddhist doctrine, such as the *ariya* path or the negative view of conditioned (*saṅkhāta*) events.[22] This discourse is also part of the first group of four discourses to be collected together in the 'chapter of eights' (*Aṭṭhakavagga*) according to Vetter himself.[23] Vetter also excludes the *Guhaṭṭhakasutta*, another original member of the 'chapter of eights,' due to consid-

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[20] Collins (1982: ch. 3.1), who was followed by Fuller (2005) and Webster (2005).

[21] See note 19 above.

[22] See verses 782 and 784, respectively.

[23] Vetter 1990: 42; these are discourses 2–5, which all have 8 verses.

erations of both meter and content. This discourse is also clearly concerned with subject matter that is related to the 'no-view *sutta*s' and includes forms of expression that are central to the parts of the text Vetter sees as authentic.[24] Thus, two of the four poems of eight verses that gave the collection its name are left outside the original corpus, while the two other poems of eight verses are grouped with five other discourses of differing lengths; this seems unreasonable. One can also easily identify more connections between the two types of texts, and discontinuities within each group. Finally, the fact that these core texts were so quickly commented on and quoted in other early texts speaks against their external origin. Even if Vetter's story is true, the fact that these initially heretical texts were placed in a collection together with other Buddhist scriptures and quoted in other texts suggests that we should open our mind to readings that identify continuities between the two groups of texts.

The new perspective that will be developed here, which sees the AV first and foremost as poetry, allows us to see its 'no-view *sutta*s' as a specific genre within the collection. These texts are all creative expressions of what it means to be a Buddha; these are poems that were deemed valuable since they offered insights into the nature of the liberated, wise man, in a tradition whose main cultural contribution was to shape the image of the thoroughly awakened, enlightened being.

It is important to notice that Vetter's approach carries the reading of the AV as doctrine to the extreme. In order to portray such a stark division within the AV, Vetter takes even faint references to terms that are known to express Buddhist doctrine as evidence of 'Buddhist influence' upon these texts. He thus takes the widely used *sato* ('mindful'), or a reference to *upekkhā* ('equanimity') as expressions of the theoretical construction of the four *jhāna*s, since these terms figure prominently in that doctrine. Vetter also sees the term *jhāyin* (e.g. in 925) as recalling this same theory, and *paññā* ('wisdom') receives similar treatment.[25] Obviously, there is no im-

[24] Vetter 1990: 44. See especially SNip 778. See also the last verse of the *Jarāsutta* (813).

[25] Vetter exempts *paññā* in 847 from the inherent connection to 'discrim-

perative to take these terms as expressions of fossilized doctrine; surely, they should be allowed, especially at this early stage, to suggest pre-theoretical meanings. The *jhāyin* is an adept engaged in deep meditation, and this need not necessarily imply that he cruises the four *jhāna*s. Similarly, 'mindfulness' need not be reserved for the fully developed Buddhist direction of attention,[26] and 'wisdom' does not have but one, specific meaning.

Vetter's disregard of the poetic, pre-doctrinal significance of the terms employed by the poets of the SNip is particularly striking in his treatment of the KVS. This *sutta*, which admittedly is filled with instructions for the devoted practitioner, has become famous primarily thanks to its aesthetic appeal – the instruction to wander alone like a rhinoceros horn is to be taken metaphorically! The aesthetic impact of this image is the primary message of this discourse, which makes it a poem before a doctrinal statement. In fact, what appear to be instructions for practitioners may be idealized pictures intended for wider audiences. Vetter, however, sees this *sutta* as a manifestation of fully developed doctrine. In this respect, he is part of an august crowd – most scholars who have studied the SNip have virtually ignored its creative elements.

Vetter sets a high standard for understanding the AV; his dissection of the collection is remarkably coherent and consistent. Yet he ends up making the same mistake he warns against – after identifying the 'nucleus' of the AV, he takes it as an expression of one authorial voice. He thus, for example, takes all references to the transcendence of perceptions (*saññā*; Vetter and Gomez both translate 'apperception') as referring to the same 'mystical state.' This results in an almost hopeless attempt to reconcile diverse statements – different verses recommend overcoming views (*diṭṭhi*), perception(s) (*saññā*), 'contact' (or sensory apprehension, *phassa*), claims that resonate with the recurrent injunction 'not to rely on the seen, the heard, the contemplated, or on morality and vows.'[27]

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inating insight' and takes it as a more general expression of 'wisdom' (1990: 48).

[26] See Shulman 2010 for the meaning of *sati* in the early *sutta*s.

[27] E.g. in 798: *tasmā hi diṭṭhaṃ va sutaṃ mutaṃ vā sīlabbataṃ bhikkhu na*

Must all these statements, even the ones in the supposed core seven texts of the AV according to Vetter, express the same religious and philosophical message? I would suggest otherwise. The main reason for this new interpretive strategy is the genre in which these texts are written – they are poems before they are philosophical 'discourses.' These poems convey religious, philosophical thinking, but they do so in more complex ways than has been realized and are driven by motivations that are beyond theory. In order to recognize the expressive nature of these poems, we must first take a broader look at the corpus in which the AV was placed by the redactors of the Pāli canon, the KN.

1. The poetry of the *Khuddakanikāya*

In order to appreciate the creative aspect of the *Aṭṭhakavagga*, we must first notice that it is placed in the *Khuddakanikāya* (KN), the fifth and according to its name – 'the minor / miscellaneous / trifling corpus'[28] – a collection apparently deemed less important than its more stylized and homogenized prose sister-collections, often called 'the major four *Nikāya*s.' To the best of my knowledge, it has yet to be pointed out that the KN is a gathering of Buddhist poetry: all the texts it included before the modern era are in verse, and in most of them narrative and poetic elements are central.[29] The

nissayeyya.

[28] Von Hinüber (1996: 41) calls the collection 'the group of small texts,' after Geiger (1978 [1943]: 19): 'The collection of short pieces.' The KN could possibly be seen as a collection of short texts, although this would only be true if they are compared to the whole of one of the prose *Nikāya*s; if they are compared to specific discourses, most texts in the KN are longer than any discourse even in the 'long' *Dīghanikāya*. Given that the name of this last *Nikāya*, for example, is determined by the length of the particular discourses it contains, it seems incorrect to see the KN as a collection of short texts. Rather, the term *khuddaka* appears to hint at the relative importance attributed to the materials.

[29] For surveys of the materials in the KN, see Law 2000 [1933], Norman 1983 and von Hinüber 1996. Given that the KN is a collection that 'remained always open for new texts' (von Hinüber [1996]: 73), in opposition to the other corpuses of the canon that were closed long before, some traditions added

majority of the original texts in the KN (11 of 15) are completely, or almost completely, in verse.[30] Two more texts include prose sections that introduce a verse and provide the context in which the verse was composed; they thus attest to the value attributed to the verses, which are embellished by the prose.[31] One more text of the KN, the *Niddesa*, is a set of commentaries on early sections of the SNip. The only text of the KN that is unrelated to verse is the *Paṭisambhidāmagga*, which is considered a late addition to the collection, being an Abhidhamma-style text that was composed after the Abhidhamma section of the canon was sealed. It was thus placed in the KN since there was nowhere else to put it.[32] In speaking of the KN as a collection of Buddhist texts composed in verse I leave this last text outside my inquiry.

Some will argue that the formal consideration of composition in verse does not necessarily make these texts poetry.[33] This clas-

new texts to this *Nikāya*. For example, the Burmese tradition has added the *Suttasaṃgaha*, the *Nettippakaraṇa*, the *Milindapañha* and the *Peṭakopadesa* (von Hinüber 1996: 76).

[30] These are the *Khuddakapāṭha, Dhammapada, Suttanipāta, Vimānavatthu, Petavatthu, Theragāthā, Therīgāthā, Jātaka, Apadāna, Buddhavaṃsa* and *Cariyāpiṭaka*.

[31] These are the *Udāna* and *Itivuttaka*. The *Jātaka* collection is also effectively of this genre, since like most '*Jātaka*s' it includes verses that are almost meaningless without a story that introduces them, which is supplied by the commentary that is not included in the KN. The longer *Jātaka*s in the collections are stories in their own right.

[32] Von Hinüber 1996: 59–60.

[33] Norman (2007 [1969]: xxvi–xxvii), in his introduction to his translation of the *Theragāthā*: "Although it is probably true to say that the authors of these verses were not trying to be poets, but were merely aiming to give an account of their religious experiences in the way in which they felt was most appropriate for such a statement, i.e. in verse, nevertheless it is noteworthy that, together with some of the verses of the *Dhammapada* and the *Suttanipāta*, *Theragāthā* and its companion collection *Therīgāthā*, form some of the more poetical, as opposed to more Buddhist, parts of the Pāli canon." One wonders why these authors "were merely aiming to give an account of their religious experiences," and why they "felt that the most appropriate way to express such a statement" was verse. Others scholars would be more liberal in seeing these texts as poetry. See Law 2000 [1933];

sification would obviously depend on what we mean by poetry, a point I do not wish to labor here. For the present context I will rely mainly on the unanimous definition for poetry in any available English dictionary, which boils down to two central factors: (1) A rhythmic composition in verse; (2) A literary expression with enhanced artistic, imaginary and creative character.[34] All will agree that the KN texts comply with the first article; in this sense they are poetic by definition. This in itself is a meaningful observation, since the fact that texts are composed in verse situates them in a particular realm of human experience; the composition, reading and hearing of verse are qualitatively distinct from those of prose. Verse demands unique, sensitive attention and bears a semi-mystical sense of authority, which must have been enhanced in ancient India, given the power attributed to the meters and sounds of Vedic meters and mantra.

Formally, the KN is poetry. Nonetheless, it is important to see that texts like the AV are poetic also because of their motivations. These poems suggest that the envisioning of the Buddha and of his idealized disciples was a central driving force for the early religious community. Early Buddhists cultivated a deep sentiment for the founding master and employed their creative energies in fashioning compelling images of him.[35]

Jayawickrama 1977, 1978; Collins 1998: esp. 669ff. Von Hinüber (1996: 53), following Lienhard, is clear that he sees the *Theragāthā* as a form of early Indian poetry. Bapat (1990 [1924]: xiv) has called the SNip "the oldest of the poetic books of the Tipiṭaka" (emphasis in the original), and he treats many of the *sutta*s as poems.

[34] For example, the entry for 'poetry' of the Oxford English Dictionary online, includes:

1. Imaginative or creative literature in general.
2. The art or work of a poet.
    a. Composition in verse or some comparable patterned arrangement of language in which the expression of feelings and ideas is given intensity by the use of distinctive style and rhythm; the art of such a composition.

See http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/146552?redirectedFrom=poetry#eid (last accessed 02-09-2012).

[35] This resonates with Harrison's (1995) thoughts about the early beginnings of Buddhist devotion.

Although going beyond this working definition for poetry could be beneficial – an underlying concern of this paper is indeed the question of how we read (early) Buddhist texts – a satisfying discussion of this theme would take us too far adrift. Nevertheless, I do wish to add a few words in order to give a better idea of what I intend when I treat the KN materials as poetry. If we take a recent work by Ruth Nevo as our standard, surely many differences can be identified between her discussion of Occidental, modern poetry and the ancient poetry we are discussing.[36] Although both traditions share many stylistic features – such as multiple meanings, recurrent use of metaphor and simile, or the fundamental invitation to re-read the poem in order to penetrate its rich use of language and its many echoes of connotation – we could hardly expect traditions so different in time and space, and more importantly in values and in their conception of the individual, to create the same poetry. To put it in a nutshell, in the modern world poetry is more personal, and here it is more social and, mainly, religious.

The notion of poetry I have in mind relates not so much to its formal properties, but to the realms of experience or types of consciousness it involves. In his celebrated *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (1982), Northrop Frye, drawing on Vico, defines three levels of the human use of language, which according to his perception developed sequentially in the history of human culture.[37] In the first of these, which he calls the 'hieroglyphic' and which Vico terms 'the poetic,' words are more of a power or a dynamic force, working like magic to create shared experiences in which there is little differentiation between subject and object. At this stage, when Heraclitus teaches that 'all things flow' he acts

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[36] Ruth Nevo is best known for her work on Shakespeare. *The Challenge of Poetry*, her mature discussion of the nature of poetry, is freely available online.

[37] Frye brings to light the narrative techniques of the bible and its underlying patterns of meaning. For an excellent treatment of the poetical aspect of the biblical text and of the history of understanding biblical language as poetry, see Prickett 1986: esp. 37–68.

I thank Prof. Ruth Fine for introducing me to the study of narrative and poetic aspects of the bible.

more like a guru than like what we call a philosopher; similarly, the word 'god' is here more a power one uses, rather than any describable, or indescribable, entity.[38] In the second, 'hieratic' phase, which appears first in the Dialogues of Plato, "subject and object are becoming more consistently separated, and 'reflection,' with its overtones of looking into a mirror, moves into the verbal foreground."[39] Here one can begin to speak of a function of representation and prose becomes the dominant verbal expression. Resonating Walter Ong's *Orality and Literacy* (1982), this stage is also characterized by a move from oral to written expression, which involves more cognitive and analytic, rather than more bodily and emotional, mediums of experience.[40] In the final, more scientific, 'demotic' stage,

[38] Notice that there is more than an echo here of Cassirer (1953 [1946]), who in his chapter on "Word magic" speaks of the "original bond between linguistic and mythico-religious consciousness" (p. 25) and sees the religious emphasis on the Word as an expression of language's creative potency. Cassirer speaks of "the essential identity between the word and what it denotes" (p. 49) and says that "…the word which denotes that thought content is not a mere conventional symbol, but is merged with its object in an indissoluble unity. The conscious experience is not merely wedded to the word, but is consumed by it. Whatever has been fixed by a name, henceforth is not only real, but is Reality" (p. 58).

[39] Frye 1982: 7.

[40] For Ong the defining moment in human history is the move from oral to written culture. Although Ong has received a good share of attention from Buddhologists, especially in the context of the rise of the Mahāyāna (e.g. Harrison 2004: 133–143), earlier Goody and Watt (1963), and later Goody (1977: esp. chs. 2, 3), had offered an equally compelling articulation of this theme, which Goody (1977: 37) summarizes as follows: "The specific proposition is that writing, and more specifically alphabetic literacy, made it possible to scrutinize discourse in a different kind of way by giving oral communication a semi-permanent form; this scrutiny favoured the increase in scope of critical activity, and hence of rationality, skepticism, and logic… [A]t the same time increased the potentiality for cumulative knowledge, especially knowledge of an abstract kind, because it changed the nature of communication beyond that of face-to-face contact as well as the system for the storage of information…"

Notice that David Shulman (personal communication) offers the insight that Ong's ideas have little applicability to ancient India, which harbored an intensely analytic and reflective oral tradition, best attested by Pāṇini's grammar.

which begins in the 16th century but fully matures only in the 18th, language is seen "as primarily descriptive of an objective natural order." Subject and object are now fully differentiated and a new notion of truth arises, according to which words can be faithful to an external reality. Logic follows close on the heels of language to offer new, verifiable truths.

This cursory presentation of Frye is not introduced in order to support his perception of phylogenetic development, but to point to different mediums in the human use of language. For us, so accustomed to rational modes of thought, it is valuable to contemplate other aspects of experience through language. My intention here is that the texts of the KN are poetic not only because of their metered composition and creative, artistic expression, but also in the sense that they rely on pre-reflective, non-analytical notions of truth, in which words like 'Buddha' or *nibbāna* are experiences, or even 'powers,' before they are ideas; they are not just 'things' out there in the world. The genres we are discussing are neither descriptive nor prescriptive; they are an artistic creation meant to allow shared experience, rather than to teach philosophical truth.[41]

A resonant approach to poetry was articulated by Heidegger.[42] For him, poetry is the paradigmatic, idealized form of human expression. Words carve out, or 'gather' 'things' from the given world of Being,[43] in which they continue to exist in an intimate state of difference. Language is thus the 'bidding' of things into being, the highest and original form of which is poetry itself. Hence poetry is the primal creation of meaning – "The primal calling, which bids the intimacy of world and thing to come, is the authentic bidding. This bidding is the nature of speaking. Speaking occurs in what is spoken in the poem."[44] Here, too, Emerson says:

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[41] Bloomfield and Dunn (1989), as well has Goody (1977: 29) have highlighted the public and social nature of traditional, ancient poetry.

[42] I rely here mainly on the collection Poetry, Language, Thought.

[43] The notion of 'gathering' is articulated in the paper on 'Things.'

[44] Heidegger (1975 [1971]: 206), in his essay on language.

> By virtue of this science the poet is the Namer or Language-maker, naming things sometimes after their appearance, sometimes after their essence, and giving to every one its own name and not another's, thereby rejoicing the intellect, which delights in detachments and boundaries. The poets made all the words, and therefore language is the archives of history, and, if we must say it, a sort of tomb of the muses. For though the origin of most of our words is forgotten, each word was at first a stroke of genius… *language is fossil poetry*.[45]

I thus speak of poetry not only as conforming to a formal definition, but as an inspired and creative use of language, which generates unique, vibrant complexes of meaning. In this sense poetry is an aspect of language, which carves new images and things and imbues them with unique significance. Poetry relates to a particular realm of experience, whose philosophical and analytical content is only its external face, which is more clearly objectified and discussed.

We will take the *Udāna* as our paradigmatic example of poetry in the KN. This text is structured around *udāna*s, 'inspired utterances' or succinct poetic expressions, most commonly of one verse, which are preceded by a prose section that introduces the context in which the verse was composed, most commonly by the Buddha. The prose is thus a narrative technique that serves to embellish and enhance the poetry. The stories relate to diverse themes, such as the lives of monks, their ascetic practices and attainments or their therapeutic and supernatural powers. Together the stories and verses – the correlation between the two is rather weak at times[46] – offer a rich picture of the life and ideals of a (relatively) early Buddhist community.[47]

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[45] Emerson (2000: 296), from his essay 'The Poet,' published originally in 1844. Emphasis mine.

[46] Anālayo 2009: 45–46.

[47] Anālayo's (2009) excellent study of the *Udāna*, which compares the Pāli *Udāna* to the extant Chinese versions, makes it clear that the prose sections in the Pāli *Udāna* are unique to the Theravādin tradition. In the only Chinese text version that contains prose sections, there is generally no more than a commentary on the words of the verse; only in few cases do the same stories appear in both versions (pp. 39–46).

Our interest is in the numerous, conflicting descriptions of enlightenment in the text, some of which are particularly well-known. One such verse is 1.10,[48] which follows a story in which an ascetic named Bāhiya mistakenly believes he has become an arahant, only to be corrected by a supernatural being (*devatā*) who directs him to the Buddha for more reliable spiritual guidance. Bāhiya intercepts the Buddha in the midst of his alms-round and insists on receiving his teaching there and then. The Buddha reluctantly complies and Bāhiya is immediately liberated, but is then run over and killed by a cow. After giving special instructions for the treatment of Bāhiya's corpse and clarifying that Bāhiya reached *parinibbāna*, the Buddha voices this 'inspired utterance:'

> Where water, earth, fire and wind find no footing,
> There stars do not shine and the sun gives no light;
> There the moon does not glow, and no darkness is found –
> When the wise man, the Brahmin, knows through his own silent wisdom,
> He is released from forms and non-forms, from pleasure and pain.
>
> *yattha āpo ca pathavī tejo vāyo na gādhati*
> *na tattha sukkā jotanti ādicco nappakāsati*
> *na tattha candimā bhāti tamo tattha na vijjati* /
> *yadā ca attanāvedi muni monena brāhmaṇo*
> *atha rūpā arūpā ca sukhadukkhā pamuccatīti* //

A beautiful depiction of Buddhist wisdom – yet what does it precisely teach? What is most important about this verse is that it can lend itself to diverse strategies of interpretation. How should we understand, for example, the opening statement that there are no water, earth, wind and fire? This could be because the adept has transcended to a level of reality beyond the elements, because he has annihilated them physically or psychologically, or because he does not conceptualize or grasp at them. He is deeply quiet, but we cannot gauge his precise depths or penetrate the silence of his wisdom (*mona*). The fact that the moon does not shine, but that there is still no darkness, could be due to the absolute transcend-

[48] According to Anālayo (2009: 41), the story that introduces the verse in the Pāli version is absent from the Chinese *Udāna*.

ence of light and darkness – of either an ontological, perceptual or a conceptual kind – or it could be because darkness is so utterly complete that there isn't really anything there. We understand that the realized one has gone beyond pleasure and pain, but we can only guess what the poet intended by saying that he is released from forms and non-forms. Ultimately, this may not be the level this *Udāna* speaks on; this is not a doctrinal, philosophical statement on *nibbāna*, but an aesthetic portrayal whose main impact is in stimulating a unique experience.

The multi-dimensional set of meanings in *Udāna* 1.10 echoes other references to enlightenment in the *Udāna*. *Udāna*s 8.1–4 are among the most familiar depictions of *nibbāna*, but they too can be interpreted in more than one way. 8.1 speaks of an *āyatana*, a 'base' or a place, which is characterized by utter stillness.[49] 8.2 then defines truth as 'unbending' (*anata*) and makes the enigmatic statement that 'for him who sees, there is nothing' (*passato natthi kiñcana*).[50] 8.3 adds a more positive flavor by insisting that there must exist a place that is unmarked by any conditioned, transitory category – 'there is, monks, the unborn, the un-become, the unmade, the unconditioned.' If there was not such a place, it says, 'there could be no refuge from the born, become, made and con-

[49] 'There is, monks, that base, where there is no earth, no water, no fire, no wind, no base of infinite space, no base of infinite consciousness, no base of nothingness, no base beyond perception and non-perception, no this world, no other-world, no both moon and sun. There, monks, I say there is no coming, no going, no staying, no passing, no being reborn. It is thoroughly without foundation, without occurrence, without basis. This is the end of suffering.'

atthi, bhikkhave, tad āyatanaṃ, yattha neva pathavī, na āpo, na tejo, na vāyo, na ākāsānañcāyatanaṃ, na viññāṇāñcāyatanaṃ, na ākiñcaññāyatanaṃ, na nevasaññānāsaññāyatanaṃ, nāyaṃ loko, na paraloko, na ubho candimasūriyā. tatrāpāhaṃ, bhikkhave, neva āgatiṃ vadāmi, na gatiṃ, na ṭhitiṃ, na cutiṃ, na upapattiṃ; appatiṭṭhaṃ, appavattaṃ, anārammaṇam evetaṃ. esevanto dukkhassāti.

[50] 'What is called the unbent is hard to see – truth is not easy to see! Desire is pierced for one who sees. For him who knows there is nothing at all.'

duddasam anatam nāma na hi saccaṃ sudassanaṃ / paṭividdhā taṇhā jānato passato natthi kiñcananti //

ditioned.'[51] 8.4 then hints that this 'unborn, unconditioned' place may still be in this world, in a consciousness that has reached deep equanimity and indifference.[52] Here we come full circle and realize that no interpretation of these passages can exhaust their meaning and tell us what exactly they intend. In fact, there is no need to see *Udāna* 8.1–4 as a unity; these expositions were not necessarily composed by one author and by no means must be made to convey a unified position. Furthermore, this diversity need not be taken as a tension between or within the texts, but can be seen as a sign of open-ended creativity.

Other important articulations of enlightened experience appear at the opening of the *Udāna* (1.1–3). These, however, do not produce as splendid an array of possible readings. Here the stories speak of the Buddha's meditation at the end of the week following his enlightenment in which he 'experienced the bliss of liberation' (*vimuttisukhapaṭisamvedī*). Then he investigates, in each of the three watches of the night, the processes of conditioned origination in forward, backward and forward and backward order, respective-

[51] 'There is, monks, the unborn, un-become, unmade, unconditioned. If there were not, monks, the unborn, un-become, unmade, unconditioned, one could not make known the refuge from the born the become, the made, the conditioned. Since, monks, there is the unborn, un-become, unmade, unconditioned, one makes known the refuge from the born, the become, the made, the conditioned.'

atthi, bhikkhave, ajātaṃ abhūtaṃ akataṃ asaṅkhataṃ. no cetaṃ, bhikkhave, abhavissa ajātaṃ abhūtaṃ akataṃ asaṅkhataṃ, nayidha jātassa bhūtassa katassa saṅkhatassa nissaraṇaṃ paññāyetha. yasmā ca kho, bhikkhave, atthi ajātaṃ abhūtaṃ akataṃ asaṅkhataṃ, tasmā jātassa bhūtassa katassa saṅkhatassa nissaraṇaṃ paññāyatīti.

[52] 'There is movement for one who relies, no movement for one who does not rely. When there is no movement, there is tranquility; when there is tranquility, there is no inclination; when there is no inclination, there is no coming and going; when there is no coming and going, there no passing away and arising; when there is no passing away and arising, there is no here and beyond and nothing in between – this is the end of suffering.'

nissitassa calitaṃ, anissitassa calitaṃ natthi. calite asati passaddhi, passaddhiyā sati nati na hoti. natiyā asati āgatigati na hoti. āgatigatiyā asati cutūpapāto na hoti. cutūpapāte asati nevidha na huraṃ na ubhayamantarena. esevanto dukkhassāti.

ly. The stories correlate with the verses, as two of the three *Udāna*s speak of a vision regarding the arising or the cessation of conditioned mental events. The three *Udāna*s all begin with the same two lines – 'when things appear to the ardent, meditating Brahmin' (*yadā have pātubhavanti dhammā ātāpino jhāyato brāhmaṇassa*), a statement that emphasizes that no transcendent reality is intended. In the final watch of the night, this vision is felt to be strikingly liberating –

> When things appear to the ardent, meditating Brahmin,
> He stands vanquishing the army of Māra,
> Like the sun lighting up space.
>
> *yadā have pātubhavanti dhammā ātāpino jhāyato brāhmaṇassa /*
> *vidhūpayaṃ tiṭṭhati mārasenaṃ sūriyova obhāsayam antalikkhanti //*

The fact that there are still mental occurrences in this state and that liberation is seen as an active process is underscored by the use of present participles *vidhūpayam* and *obhāsayam*. These express the Buddha's continuous action in face of Māra's army, just like the sun continuously lighting up space. This perception of enlightenment is different from what we found in 8.1–4, and resonates in interesting ways with 1.10.

There are still other pictures of liberation in the *Udāna*.[53] What is primary for our concerns is not to list them all, but to see that this text is comfortable with such diversity and that this need not necessarily be seen as a problem. The compilers, or storytellers, of the *Udāna* apparently felt no impulse to speak in one voice on such a pivotal matter. Even the stories make no attempt to fill in the gaps and to turn the distinct statements into a more consistent one. Unlike the prose *Nikāya*s, which relate the same formalized tales of enlightenment again and again (even if these disagree with each other),[54] here each tale is unique – the aesthetic impact is more

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[53] See for example 2.10 and especially 3.10.

[54] In Shulman forthc.-b I discuss the different theories of enlightenment articulated in the prose *Nikāya*s and suggest that most of them revolve around one basic logic. The case for the irreconcilable variety of the theories of liberation in the *Nikāya*s was made, among others, by Schmithausen (1981) and Bronkhorst (2009).

important than any standardized, 'official' position.

In fact, this understanding may give us a hint regarding the significance of the name *Khuddakanikāya*, 'the trifling collection.' The poetic impact must have been, eventually, valued less than the tradition's favored doctrinal articulations. Here is precisely where we can make a clear differentiation between the authorial voices that find expression in verse and prose *Nikāya*s. Drawing from Bakhtin,[55] the prose expression regarding enlightenment is monologic – it intends that the understanding it presents is the one and only truth. In deep contrast, the poetic voice in verse is polysemic – it allows for multiple levels of meaning and does not wish to exhaust its subject matter by a strict following of its verbal content. Here words can be suggestive, complex, rich and enigmatic. They are pregnant with meaning not only in what has been said, but also in what has not been, and maybe cannot be, said, becoming fully expressive only when they are apprehended in real life. These poems are interested in images that are not exhausted by the conceptual content or theoretical positions behind them.

When we look at the texts assembled in the KN, we find that the concern with the character of the Buddha, and in a broader sense with Buddhist holy men and women, is a central, constitutive interest of the collection. The *Jātaka*s are a primary example, offering glimpses of the Buddha's previous lives. The *Theragāthā* and *Therīgāthā* are also good examples of the importance attributed to the expression of realized experience, as well as to the portrayal of the people who strive to attain it.

To conclude this section, we read two verses from the *Dhammapada*, which itself is a collection of *udāna*s. Chapter four has a clear poetic character, as it assembles verses that mention flowers. Among them we find:

> 54 The smell of flowers does not blow against the wind – neither sandalwood, nor tagara nor jasmine. The smell of the true ones blows against the wind – the right man blows in all directions.

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[55] Mainly from his *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (1984), an expanded edition of the original Russian version published in 1929.

54 *na pupphagandho paṭivātameti na candanaṃ tagaramallikā vā /*
satañ ca gandho paṭivātameti sabbā disā sappuriso pavāyati //

Notice the effort to give words to the nature of the people who tread the right path, as well as the impulse to do so poetically. The high proportion of such forms of expression in the *Dhammapada* is arguably a central reason for the great historical popularity of this text. The following is the opening verse of the chapter on the Buddha:

179 He whose victory is not undone, whose victory no-one in the world attains – with what step will you lead him, the Buddha, whose range is limitless, who leaves no footprint.

179 *yassa jitaṃ nāvajīyati jitaṃ yassa no yāti koci loke /*
taṃ buddham anantagocaraṃ apadaṃ kena padena nessatha //

The statement that the Buddha's victory is the greatest and that it cannot be undone is conventional. But here the expression is more than that; that the Buddha 'leaves no footprint' (*apadam*) is not a point of doctrine. The main effect of this statement is to magnify the audience's special feelings toward the Buddha, who cannot, the poet elegantly suggests, be grasped.

We shall now move on to examine these themes at work in the SNip.

2. The poetry of the *Suttanipāta*

The *Suttanipāta* (SNip) collects diverse forms of Buddhist poetry. Although scholars have considered parts of the collection to be younger than others, as a whole it is considered one of the oldest texts in the KN.[56] The collection contains five books, the last two of which are the AV and PV. Our next step is thus to consider the first books of the SNip in order to understand the significance of the placement of the AV in this collection.

[56] Bapat 1990 [1924]: xiv; Geiger 1978 [1943]: 20; Warder 1967: 16; Jayawickrama 1978: 101; Norman 1983: 63ff.. Von Hinüber (1996: 50) speculates that the SNip may be 'some kind of earlier ritual handbook' in relation to the *Khuddakapāṭha*.

Jayawickrama (1977, 1978) has made a convenient classification of the SNip into a number of central poetical genres and provided a thorough examination of its main texts.[57] These genres include '*yakkha* ballads,'[58] 'pastoral ballads,'[59] 'narrative ballads,'[60] and '*sutta*s of popular character.'[61] Jayawickrama devotes particular attention to the texts he sees as carrying special doctrinal and historical importance – the *Uragasutta* (SNip I.1), the KVS (SNip I.3) and the *Munisutta* (SNip I.12), which he sees as '*muni* ballads' that are part of the oldest strata of the SNip. We will take these three texts, together with the 'pastoral' *Dhaniyasutta* (SNip I.2) that is placed between them, as a representation of the overall character of the SNip.

The *Uragasutta* (US), the opening poem of the collection, is named after a metaphor that is repeated in all its seventeen verses. The verses depict the ideal monk's detachment, saying that the monk who lives truthfully 'defeats this world and the world beyond (or the near and far shore)[62] like a snake that sheds his old, worn-

[57] Jayawickrama relies to a large extent on Law 2000 [1933]. See also Bapat 1990 [1924]: xvii.

[58] These include the *Hemavatasutta* (SNip I.9), *Alāvakasutta* (I.10) and *Sucīlomasutta* (II.5). These discourses are basically question and answer dialogues similar to the *yakṣa-praśna* section of the *Mahābhārata* where a *yakkha* threatens to harm the Buddha if he does not answer his questions. The Buddha remains unalarmed, supplies convincing answers and coverts the *yakkha*.

[59] These include the *Dhaniyasutta* (SNip I.2) and the *Kasibhāradvājasutta* (I.4). The first is a dialogue with a herdsman, the second with a ploughman.

[60] These include the *Pabajjāsutta* (SNip III.1), *Padhānasutta* (III.2), Nalakasutta (III.11) and the *Vatthugāthā* of the PV.

[61] In this category Jayawickrama (1977) counts five discourses: The *Parābhavasutta* (SNip I.6), *Vasalasutta* (I.7), *Mahāmaṅgalasutta* (II.4), *Mettasutta* (I.8) and the *Ratanasutta* (II.1).

[62] The precise meaning of *orapāra* is unclear. Norman (2001 [1992]: 1–3) is among those who translate "this shore and the far shore." Saddhātissa (1994 [1985]: 1) translates "the cycle of existence." I find 'this world and the world beyond' to be more correct. This reading is supported by the use of *oraṃ* in verse 15 – 'he who has no causes born of anxiety that will lead back to this world (*oraṃ*)…' (*yassa darathajā na santi keci oraṃ āgamanāya*

out skin' (*jahāti orapāraṃ urago jiṇṇam iva tacaṃ purāṇaṃ*). This metaphor points to the effortless, spontaneous freedom experienced by the detached monk from worries regarding this life and the next, his hopes and fears, etc. Although there is clear doctrinal purport to the poem – one is instructed to overcome desire and cultivate strict detachment – it is founded on the image of the genuine practitioner shedding his 'worn-out skin' of perplexity.

The US is rich with metaphors that give color to the familiar portrayal of the ideal monk's behavior. The monk is meant 'to lead astray arisen anger, like medicines (that treat) snake poison that has spread (in the body);' 'to fully sever passion, as one would cut the stalk of a lotus;' 'to fully sever desire, as one would dry up a river that is quick as an arrow;' 'to fully defeat pride, like a great flood overtaking a weak bamboo-bridge;' 'to find no essence in states of being, as one would search for a flower in a fig tree (that never flowers).'[63] If a monk does any of these he 'defeats this world and the world beyond like a snake that sheds his old, worn-out skin.'

Clearly the poetic elements of this poem are integral to its message. Although the aesthetic effect does not remain as heightened throughout the poem,[64] the image in the refrain continues throughout. We must also note the poet's endeavor to offer a compelling image for the Buddhist holy man, in this case the *bhikkhu*. This is one of the defining characteristics of the poetry in the SNip – many of the poems offer imaginative elaboration on the nature of the perfected human being – the Buddha, the *muni*, the *bhikkhu*, or others. Jayawickrama has counted 80 references to the *bhikkhu* in the verses of the SNip in addition to over 15 more in the accompanying prose sections of the text, 77 references to the *muni*, 24 of which pertain to the Buddha, and 40 more to the *samaṇa*.[65] To these we may add many other allusions to the *dhona* (purified), *dhīra* (wise

paccayāse).

[63] These images appear in verses 1 through 5.

[64] The poem includes ever more conventional, doctrinal elements as it develops; in an inelegant, probably later elaboration, verses 9–13 reiterate verse 8 while changing only one word.

[65] Jayawickrama 1977: 20.

man), *cakkhumā* (the possessor of correct vision), *satthā* (teacher), *isi* ('seer,' *ṛṣi*), etc.

The *Dhaniyasutta* (DS), which follows the US, is not one of the '*muni* ballads,'[66] but it is nonetheless significant that the editors of the collection placed the texts together. This is a theatrical encounter between the Buddha and the rich and content herdsman Dhaniya.[67] Once again, there is unmistakable doctrinal purport to the poem, which says that the recluse life, in which one masters one's self, is superior to the household life, in which one may attain material comfort. Yet this doctrinal content is no more than thin packaging for the rich encounter between the dramatic figures of the herdsman and the enlightened master. The poem is built as a discussion between the two, and the specific details of their expression give intense flavor to the familiar, almost self-evident theoretical position. The opening two verses of the poem will exemplify this theme. Dhaniya says:

> 18 I have cooked my rice and milked my milk;
> I live with my family on the bank of the Mahī;
> My hut is well-covered and my fire prepared –
> Pour down the rain, skies, if you will!
>
> 18 *pakkodano duddhakhīro 'ham asmi anutīre mahiyā samānavāso* /
> *channā kuṭi āhito gini atha ce patthayasī pavassa deva* //

To this the Buddha responds:

> 19 I have no anger and my barrenness is gone;
> I stay for just one night on the bank of the Mahī;
> My hut is wide open, my fire quenched –
> Pour down the rain, skies, if you will!
>
> 19 *akodhano vigatakhilo 'ham asmi anutīre mahiyekarattivāso* /
> *vivaṭā kuṭi nibbuto gini atha ce patthayasī pavassa deva* //

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[66] Regarding its relative age, considering the language, style, meter and doctrine of this *sutta*, Jayawickrama (1977: 150–154) concludes that it is 'considerably old.'

[67] Jayawickrama (1977: 150) highlights the dramatic aspect of this poem and suggests that this *sutta* was the base of a theatrical performance with two reciters each singing one of the roles.

Dhaniya is content with the home life – he has rice, milk, a well-covered house, company, he lives by the river, and later he will share that his wife is faithful – what more could a herdsman want? The Buddha, however, reveals a much deeper sense of confidence, having perfected himself. Much of the elegant word-play is lost in translation – the two verses are mirror images of each other not only in the conceptual space they generate, but also in the author's choice of words: *pakkodano* ('having cooked rice') versus *akodhano* ('having no anger'); *duddha-khīro* ('having milked the milk') versus v*igata-khilo* ('barrenness gone'); and so forth.[68] In this poem as well, the refrain 'pour down the rain, skies, if you will' is repeated in all verses except the last five, in which following a heavy downpour of rain Dhaniya and his wife hail the Buddha's achievement and become his devotees.[69] The good audience will identify with both heroes, but will inevitably join the poet in feeling that the Buddha's accomplishment is greater; here one must consent that overcoming anger is preferable to having cooked rice.

The next discourse in the collection is the famous 'Discourse on the horn of the rhinoceros' (KVS), which speaks in poignant, lyrical expression:

> 35 Having laid down the stick in relation to all living beings, Without harming even one of them.
> Not desiring a son, and certainly not any other company –
> He should wander alone, like the horn of a rhinoceros.
>
> 35 *sabbesu bhūtesu nidhāya daṇḍaṃ aviheṭhayaṃ aññataraṃ 'pi tesaṃ* /
> *na puttam iccheyya kuto sahāyaṃ eko care khaggavisānakappo* //
>
> 39 Like a free deer in the forest
> Who goes to graze as he wills –
> The perceptive man who gazes at independence
> Should wander alone, like the horn of a rhinoceros.
>
> 39 *migo araññamhi yathā abaddho yenicchakaṃ gacchati gocarāya* /
> *viññū naro seritaṃ pekkhamāno eko care khaggavisānakappo* //

[68] Parts of the poem have apparently been lost and hence the word-play is not always evident.

[69] The last two, apparently later, verses summarize the lesson in heavy moralistic overtones.

44 Having removed the decorations of the household life,
As a kovilara tree that has shed its leaves;
Having cut the connections to household life, the hero
Should wander alone, like the horn of a rhinoceros.

44 *oropayitvā gihibyañjanāni saṃsīnapatto yathā kovilāro* /
chetvāna vīro gihibandhanāni eko care khaggavisānakappo //

53 Like a massive, noble, spotted elephant
Who having left his herd
Would reside in the forest as he pleases –
He should wander alone, like the horn of a rhinoceros.

53 *nāgo 'va yūthāni vivajjayitvā saṃjātakhandho padumī uḷāro* /
yathābhirantaṃ vihare araññe eko care khaggavisānakappo //

As with the other poems we examined, we can glean a doctrinal statement from these verses. If we would take this as the principal element of the poem, however, we would miss out on the heart of the message – the point is not only in the instruction to wander alone, but in the image of the lonely recluse. Nevertheless, the KVS has often been read with focal attention on its doctrinal content. We noted this tendency in Vetter's article above, but Vetter is by no means unique in this respect. Jayawickrama's represents the prevalent trend, when in speaking of the "doctrinal import of this *sutta*" he says that "it has been emphasised earlier that the quest of the secluded life pertains to the earliest stage of Buddhism and sheds light on the life of the hermits (*munayo*)."[70] The idea that this poem and others like it contain "traces of primitive Buddhism"[71] is common.

It would be useful to recall Norman's critique of Burford's view that the AV represents pre-dogmatic Buddhism: even if this text does reflect the earliest stages of Buddhism, he argued, this does not make it an exclusive representation of this developmental phase. Furthermore, the fact that the text contains references to other approaches – the mere fact, in this case, that the solitary life

[70] Jayawickrama 1977: 28–29; Nakamura 1989 [1990]: 46, quoted by Norman (1992: 511).

[71] Here in the words of Law (2000 [1933]: 247).

must be chosen over other forms of spiritual cultivation – evidences their existence. The recommendation in the KVS to live 'like a rhinoceros horn' does not imply that instructions to practice with others did not circulate (as suggested by the Buddha's 'biography'). More importantly, this is not necessarily a doctrinal instruction, but the main purport of this sanction may be less concrete – this is an artistic representation of what the author(s) felt the life of a recluse could be like. We find here not an historical statement, but an idealized picture.

The distinction between doctrine and history, on the one hand, and poetry, art, narrative, imagery and creative vision, on the other, is both fine and tricky. It allows a fresh look at central Buddhist texts, which uncovers important, constitutive motivations and creative patterns that were at the heart of the budding Buddhist tradition. This distinction, however, should not be made too strongly. Surely, there is much evidence of doctrine in these early Buddhist poems, and although they should not be read as historical photographs, they do grant historical insights. To quote John McRae in his authoritative study of Zen storytelling – "it's not true, and therefore it's more important."[72] Comparably, we can identify creative elements in the shaping of doctrine. It takes many years and much deliberation until doctrines reach their gravitational centers – to give an example, the authors of the poems in the SNip would probably have felt uneasy in face of what later became the prominent doctrine of *anupādisesa parinibbāna* ('complete *nibbāna*, the extinguishing of the aggregates, with no remainder').[73] We can, however, see that these authors grappled with the ideational world of their tradition in a way that eventually led to this theoretical position.

The examination of the first three 'discourses' of the SNip reveals that they are, at least to a substantial degree, poetic creations that arouse emotion and make ample use of imagery. The placement of the DS – the least doctrinal of the three and the only one

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[72] McRae 2003: xix.

[73] For cogent presentations of this doctrine, see Harvey 1995: ch. 11, Hwang 2006 and Brahmāli 2009.

that is not part of the '*muni* ballad' genre – between the US and the KVS, which are more susceptible to doctrinal formulation, is revealing and suggests that these texts were meant not only to teach, but also to entertain. We should notice also that the majority of the poems in the chapters of the SNip outside the AV and PV are much closer to the DS than to the other two poems we discussed. The AV and PV are more similar to the US and the KVS, blending creative motivations with philosophical formulations. Another poem of this type, which may be taken as a template for a number of the AV's poems, is the *Munisutta* (MS) – 'The discourse on the sage.'

The MS endeavors to characterize the sage and offers ever more captivating images for the figure of the *muni*. Again and again the poet says that 'the *muni* is X' or that 'the *muni* is Y.' Rather than seeing these statements as clearly articulated Buddhist, or pre-Buddhist, doctrine, I argue that texts of this sort should be taken as part of a collective attempt to define, conceptualize, understand, express, and ultimately – to imagine the figure of the sage, the holy wise man, the cultural image of perfection. The discourse opens with:

207 From relations fear arises, from the house-life dust is born.
Having no home and no relations –
This is the teaching of the sage.

207 *santhavāto bhayaṃ jātaṃ niketā jāyate rajo* /
aniketam asanthavaṃ etaṃ ve munidassanaṃ //

Here we seem to have a clear opening statement of doctrine – one is to have no home and no relations. This statement is meant, though, to be taken literally only to some extent – having no relations whatsoever seems incompatible with the fact that this claim is actually formulated; or, if this is all there was to it, there would be no need to proceed. The second verse is more complex:

208 He who has cut what has grown (and) does not plant (anew)
Will not engage with what grows for him in the present[74] –

[74] I take *anuppavecche* as equivalent to Sanskrit *anupra*<*viś*> and translate *jātaṃ* and *jāyantaṃ*, 'to be born,' in accordance with *roppayeyya* ('to grow') and with *bījaṃ* in the following verse.

He is called the sage who walks alone;
He is the great seer who has seen the quiet place.

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

In this verse we find a more specific instruction, which can even be seen as an explicit guide for practice, possibly for meditative practice. This verse gives a refined explanation for the solitary life advocated in the previous verse – one is not to concern oneself with past, future or present events; complete disinterest is the rule. This articulation of the *muni*'s disentanglement is far less common than what we found in the last verse and expresses a distinct understanding of *muni*-experience. The poet continues:

209 Having examined things, he has deserted the seed;
He will not engage with what is dear to him;
He is the sage who envisages the end of birth –
Having deserted reasoning, he cannot be measured.

209 *saṃkhāya vatthūni pahāya bījaṃ sineham assa nānuppavecche /*
sa ve munī jātikhayantadassī takkaṃ pahāya na upeti saṃkhaṃ //

The sage is said 'to see the end of birth.' While the previous verse can be treated as a 'this-life' method of perception that remains detached from the content of experience, here we realize that the author of the MS saw this realization as a metaphysical one that involves bringing rebirth to an end.[75] As we observed earlier, the texts speak in different voices regarding the aim to annihilate rebirth. Some poets posited the end of rebirth as a major goal, while others believed that any interest in the afterlife can have dangerous consequences for the religious path. Others thought that no claims could be made about such a state.

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[75] This understanding is also at the root of the following verse (210): 'Having realized all abodes, not desiring even one of them, this sage who has lost his greed, who has no greed at all, has no more aim – he surely has gone beyond.'

aññāya sabbāni nivesanāni anikāmayaṃ aññataraṃ 'pi tesam / sa ve munī vītagedho agiddho nāyūhati pāragato hi hoti //

How should we reconcile the different positions? How is it possible that these early texts voice different opinions on such a crucial question? One approach would be to see these differences as distinct stages of doctrinal development. We could then go so far as to adopt Vetter's suggestion and decide that one of the positions was originally non-Buddhist. A preferable method, I believe, would be to free these authorial voices from the demand to be faithful to each other, and at the same time to allow them to speak for the same tradition. This approach allows for a multiplicity of positions and approaches within the tradition, which resonate with each other but diverge at certain points. Resonant images of religious perfection were developed by different authors, as each expressed his or her own creative understanding of the adept and of his attainment. The creative composition within the philosophical and religious range was primary to the doctrinal content, and the compelling articulation of religious meaning more important than the philosophical message. The collections we are discussing should thus be seen as assemblages of poetic efforts to express Buddhist truth that were felt to possess unique, powerful resonance.

An interesting feature of the last verse speaks in favor of this reading – we are told that the *muni* described is 'beyond measure' (*na upeti saṃkham*). This concern 'to measure' the sage, to understand, imagine and conceptualize him, is central to the creative impulse of this genre of Buddhist poetry. Often, the poet admits his own failure, saying that the person he describes cannot really be known; he attempts to give words to perfection, but true perfection leaves words behind. This inability to understand (or 'measure,' *saṃkham*) the sage is also gently contrasted to the way 'things' (*vatthūni*) are known by the sage who has 'examined' (*saṃkhāya*) them. The first and last words of the stanza are thus mirror-images of each other.

The explicit interest in the way a sage should be thought of is central to the MS. The next nine verses all speak of the way wise men (*dhīra*) understand the *muni*. The next two are:

211 The wise know him as a sage who
Overpowers everything, knows everything, is intelligent,
Unstained in relation to all things, who has given everything up,

Who is released in the destruction of craving.

211 *sabbābhibhuṃ sabbaviduṃ sumedhaṃ sabbesu dhammesu anūpalittaṃ /*
sabbaṃjahaṃ taṇhakkhaye vimuttaṃ taṃ vā 'pi dhīrā muniṃ vedayanti //

212 The wise know him as a sage who
Has the power of wisdom, who is endowed with morality and vows,
Concentrated, finding pleasure in *jhāna*, possessive of mindfulness,
Freed from attachment, with no barrenness and no inflows.

paññābalaṃ sīlavatūpapannaṃ samāhitaṃ jhānarataṃ satīmaṃ /
saṃgā pamuttaṃ akhilaṃ anāsavaṃ taṃ vā 'pi dhīrā muniṃ vedayanti //

Unlike the poems of the AV, these verses exhibit a fond affection for sanctioned Buddhist categories. Specifically, we can note that the man 212 defines as a *muni* is *sīlavatūpapanna*, 'endowed with morality and vows,' which certain poems of the AV see as an impediment.[76] Once again, we should take this lack of correlation as a license for uniqueness and creativity, rather than as an incongruity in need of explanation.

These last two verses should not be seen as an historical picture, but as a generalized, idealized one. We have here lists of character traits, attitudes, approaches to practice, which had evolved by this time, or maybe were becoming at this very place and time standard items on a list of a growing tradition's vision of truth. It is important to note that some of these elements conform to other 'check-lists of perfection,' but others do not. We are not speaking of a unified, fully-dogmatized authorial voice, as we find in the commentaries, where nine times out of ten terms criticized by the poets are glossed as 'desire' (*taṇhā*). Rather, we are looking at images, some of them stock, ready-made ones, others more creative ones, which the poet uses to glorify his religious hero.

At this point the poet turns to metaphor. Verse 213 is irregularly long, since reciters borrowed from the KVS the depiction of the sage as 'having no fear, like a lion in face of sounds; not clinging,

[76] E.g. SNip 790, 799, 803.

like the wind in a net; un-smeared, like a lotus by water.' In the next verses the metaphors are original:

> 214 The wise know him as a sage who
> In the midst of turmoil, when others say extreme things about him,
> Becomes steady as a pillar,
> Whose passion is gone and his senses are well-collected.
>
> 214 *yo ogahane thambhor ivābhijāyati yasmiṃ pare vācāpariyantaṃ vadanti* /
> *taṃ vītarāgaṃ susamāhitindriyaṃ taṃ vā 'pi dhīrā muniṃ vedayanti* //
>
> 215 The wise know him as a sage who
> Remains steady as a shuttle,
> Disgusted by ill deeds,
> As he examines what is even and uneven.
>
> 215 *yo ve ṭhitatto tasaraṃ 'va ujjuṃ jigucchati kammehi pāpakehi* /
> *vīmaṃsamāno visamaṃ samaṃ ca taṃ vā 'pi dhīrā muniṃ vedayanti* //

The employment of metaphor points us in aesthetic directions, suggesting meanings that emphasize experience, rather than theory.

We leave the MS at this point. Although we could continue reading through the poem, examining the images it chooses for the *muni*, asking whether they are more creative or more conventional, more theoretical or more poetic, more or less apt to classical Buddhist categories of analysis, this would not alter the core understanding that I hope that by now has become steady as a shuttle – the MS, as well as the other texts of its genre, are creative images of human perfection that struck a deep chord in the Buddhist consciousness of their times. They are not uniform and rely on creative expression. They should not be seen only as doctrinal statements but first and foremost as images that suited the religious inclinations of the early Buddhist community. We now move on to examine the AV in light of these understandings.

3. The poetry of the *Aṭṭhakavagga*

We have seen that the KN can be defined as a collection of early Buddhist poetry and have examined this definition at work in parts of the SNip. The justification for this definition is first that the

materials in this corpus are in verse, or at least structured around verses. Although verse easily lends itself to inspired expression, this in itself may not be enough in order to view the AV as poetry in a robust sense, since large parts of Indian philosophical discourse were formulated in verse. In the present case, however, it is not difficult to identify poetic elements in the subject matter of this corpus as well. The poems of the AV contain refined, creative articulations of Buddhist ideas; they make ample use of metaphor and participate in the imaginative elaboration and enhancement of Buddhist sentiment. Specifically, they betray a special interest in inquiring into the figure of the religious adept and his defining experiences.

As discussed in the opening section of this paper, the AV has often been read as an historical document that introduces the earliest phases of Buddhist thought. This is certainly the case with the major scholarly discussions of the text, such as Gomez (1976), Vetter (1990) and Buford (1991). Here I wish to question this approach: The Buddhist perceptions of the AV obviously lend themselves to doctrinal formulation, yet reading these texts as doctrine forces them into a straitjacket – if it is true that these are poetic creations, then they relate historical and philosophical realities only as these were perceived and idealized by the poets who composed them. No less importantly, these poems teach that the dedicated effort to create representations of the Buddha and of his students was deemed a valuable spiritual endeavor. The construction of the Buddhist 'imaginaire' appears as a foundational driving force in the heart of the rising tradition from its earliest days.[77]

We begin our reading of the AV with the last verses of the *Kalahavivādasutta*, 'The discourse on contentions and disputes.' This is a good starting point since the *Kalahavivāda* is possibly the most mature discourse in the corpus from the perspective of Buddhist doctrine.[78] This text conducts a fascinating discussion re-

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[77] I borrow the concept of the 'imaginaire' from Collins (1998, 2010), who defines it as "a mental world created by and within [Pāli] texts" (1998: 41). The present study follows Collins in placing the notion of religious perfection in the context of the minds of the people that envisioned it.

[78] See also Vetter 1990: 51, although I disagree with his reasoning, which

garding the understanding of awakening, after offering a detailed psychological description of the working of the afflicted mind according to the logic of *paṭiccasamuppāda* ('dependent-origination').[79] Nonetheless, the discourse ends not by presenting a crystallized philosophical message but by venturing into the realms of poetic ambiguity.

The discourse is structured as a set of questions and answers in which the Buddha explains the nature of conditioned psychological existence. This exposition reaches its acme in verse 872, when the Buddha explains that 'events of sensory contact (*phassā*) depend on name and form' (*nāmaṃ rūpaṃ ca paṭicca phassā*) and that 'with no forms coming into being, one does not experience sensory contact' (*rūpe vibhūte na phusanti phassā*). This position suggests an apophatic annihilation of perception, which leads the interlocutor to question the Buddha's intention. The Buddha explains that no forms come into being when one 'does not perceive perceptions, does not perceive no-perceptions, is not without perceptions, and does not perceive what does not exist;' 'Indeed,' he says, 'the multiplying of *papañca* is rooted in perception.'[80] This complex statement points to a subtle middle-way between perception and non-perception, which apparently does not demand the complete end of life in the world, although it is heavily critical of normal human perception. The interlocutor realizes the significance of the position and agrees that 'some wise men say that this is the highest purity here (*idha*) for the *yakkha*,'[81] yet he continues to inquire whether 'there are not others who speak of something other than

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presumes that the discourse must be late since it refers to the doctrine of *anupādisesa*. I intend that the discourse is doctrinally mature in its well-developed presentation of Buddhist patterns of thought.

[79] For the early context of this doctrine, see Shulman 2008.

[80] 874. *na saññasaññī na visaññasaññī no 'pi asaññī na vibhūtasaññī / evaṃ sametassa vibhoti rūpaṃ saññānidānā hi papañcasaṃkhā //*. Vetter sees this verse as the most developed doctrinal formulation of the AV, which announces its mature middle-way.

[81] In numerous verses in the SNip, and specifically in the AV, the perfected being is referred to as a *yakkha* or a *nāga*.

this (as the highest purity)?'[82]

This last question echoes the recalcitrant theme of the afterlife, which is subtly raised by the ostensibly innocent *idha*, 'here,' meaning 'in this very life.' Thus, the question is if realization has significance in the worlds beyond. Surprisingly, the Buddha's answer leaves the question mark in place:

876 Some wise men indeed say that this is the highest purity here for the yakkha. Among them, some who speak of themselves as intelligent speak of a time (*samaya*) when there is no remainder of burning-material (*anupādisesa*).

876 *ettāvat aggaṃ 'pi vadanti heke yakkhassa suddhiṃ idha paṇḍitāse / tesaṃ puneke samayaṃ vadanti anupādisese kusalā vadānā //*

Most other verses of the AV that employ the terms *kusalā vadānā*, 'those who speak of themselves as intelligent,' do so in a derogatory sense.[83] Here too, the author may be suspicious of the view these people endorse, yet he avoids making a stronger point that would settle the matter. We sense, as we did with verse 810 above (see page 368), that the question about the afterlife is left deliberately open. The author does not seem to subscribe to the view that the attainment of the true consciousness will have consequences in the afterlife; but he does not wholly deny it either. Neither does he reveal if he values the doctrine of complete *anupādisesa* annihilation, which is thought to occur at death. He calls the people who advocate this position 'wise men' (*paṇḍita*), and says somewhat vaguely that 'some (*eke*) wise men say that this is the highest purity,' without indicating if he is one of them. The final verse of the discourse echoes the ambiguity:

877 Knowing these as 'supports,' knowing the foundations,
The wise man examines.

[82] 875. *yaṃ taṃ apucchimhi akittayī no aññaṃ taṃ pucchāma tad iṅgha brūhi / ettāvat aggaṃ no vadanti heke yakkhassa suddhiṃ idha paṇḍitāse / udāhu aññaṃ pi vadanti etto //*

[83] The phrase appears also in SNip 825, 879, 885, 898, 903, and appears nowhere else in the canon (aside from the *Niddesa*'s commentary). In 783 and 909, the very similar *kusalā vadanti* is used in a sense that *kusalā* are considered 'wise' by the author, and not only by themselves.

> Having known, liberated, he does not turn to argument –
> The steadfast does not go to states of being or non-being.
>
> 877 *ete ca ñatvā upanissitā 'ti ñatvā munī nissaye so vimaṃsī /*
> *ñatvā vimutto na vivādam eti bhavābhavāya na sameti dhīro 'ti //*

Prior to the previous two verses, nothing in this *sutta* related directly to rebirth.[84] The theme is important enough, however, to receive attention in the final verse, which intensifies the ambiguity by saying that 'the steadfast do not go to states of being or non-being.' As in other cases we examined, this statement can be read in two main ways – in psychological or metaphysical terms. In the first case, the poet would intend that the liberated have no interest in the afterlife; in the second, that they have no afterlife. No indication is given here regarding the correct reading, so that a third option arises – that the claim implies both meanings; it is at the same time psychological and metaphysical, or, maybe better – it hints at both meanings without deciding between them. The poet leaves his audience in an open, interpretive space and allows it to make its own choices, which include the natural, candid choice of not knowing. In this genre, the author need not force a univocal doctrinal position.

The last verse of the *Kalahavivāda* remains un-deciphered for another reason as well. The Buddha says that the wise man, who knows supports and foundations, 'examines,' or is 'an examiner' (*vimaṃsin*), and thus enters no argument. With this the poet returns to the question he opened with, but this second avoidance of argument is based on a far deeper withdrawal. Here, once again, we have difficulty identifying the author's precise intention. We understand that he is pointing to a significantly quieted mind, but we have little idea just how quiet he believes this mind to be. This could be a quiet that 'merely' does not grasp at any 'foundation' or 'support,' but this non-grasping could be a more profound and intensified one in which the turning away reaches a meditative state

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[84] Earlier, in verses 867, 869, and 870, the terms *bhava* and *vibhava* are used. These apparently do not refer to the afterlife, however, but to a differentiation of the perceptual field into 'things' and 'non-things.' The afterlife may be hinted at in verse 864 as well, but its significance is tangential.

beyond normal, waking consciousness. This statement is reminiscent of the *Udāna*'s perplexing characterizations of *nibbāna* (see section I), where we encountered a conscious choice to remain in an aesthetically pregnant space of multiple meanings. In the present verse, too, we realize that the poet need not have necessarily intended to offer a strict characterization of the meditative mind of the wise man, but rather ended by pointing to the general direction of the wise man's path. His final chord creates the right emotional impact but leaves things open on the level of the poem's ideas.

Many of the AV's characterizations of the realized state should be read in this fashion, as poetic expressions of truth with no pinpointed, precise meanings behind them. This is particularly true of two favorite terms employed by the AV poets – *santi* ('quiet' or 'calm') and *nibbuta* ('blown out,' 'appeased') or its derivatives (*abhinibbuta*, 'thoroughly blown out'). Although the AV poets employ these terms liberally, nowhere are they explicitly defined or explained. An example could be:

783 (And) the quiet, thoroughly blown out monk
Says not 'I' in relation to his virtuous conduct;
He who swells nowhere in the world –
It is him the wise call 'noble.'

783 *santo ca bhikkhu abhinibbutatto iti 'haṃ 'ti sīlesu akatthamāno |*
tam ariyadhammaṃ kusalā vadanti yassussadā natthi kuhiṃci loke ||

The terms 'quiet' and 'blown out,' which echo the peaks of the Buddhist path, are used to augment the verse's aesthetic appeal and not because the poet intends a specific scholarly position. The monk is said 'not to swell' (*yassussadā natthi*), a captivating image of selflessness, which gives color to this particular vision of 'blown out' quiet. He employs these terms as part of conjuring the image of the true holy man, not in order to describe a real person he has ever met.

The *Purābhedasutta* opens with a question regarding who is called 'quiet.'[85] The answer consists of thirteen verses that include

[85] "He who is called 'quiet' – how does he see, how is his conduct? Tell me this Gotama, the highest of men, now that you are questioned."

a long list of characteristics that can be attributed to the quiet man. This definition is not meant to be final, however, but is presented as an attempt to retrieve the image of the quiet man and to verbally sketch the contours of his figure – he has no anger and fear, no perplexity or argument, speaks only the truth, and so forth. Eventually, the Buddha says:

> 856–857 He for whom there is no reliance on foundations,
> Having understood the dhamma with no reliance;
> He for whom no desire toward things and non-things[86] is found –
> It is him I call 'calm,' who regards not the pleasures,
> Who has no bonds and has crossed attachment.
>
> 856–857 *yassa nissayatā natthi ñatvā dhammaṃ anissito* /
> *bhavāya vibhavāya vā taṇhā yassa na vijjati* //
> *taṃ brumi upasanto 'ti kāmesu anapekkhanaṃ* /
> *ganthā tassa na vijjanti atāri so visattikaṃ* //

A few verses later, in the final stanza, the Buddha says:

> 861 He for whom there is nothing in the world that is his own,
> Who feels no sorrow because of unpleasant things,
> Who does not approach things (*dhamma*) –
> He is called 'quiet.'
>
> 861 *yassa loke sakaṃ natthi asatā ca na socati* /
> *dhamesu na gacchati sa ve santo 'ti vuccatīti* //

These definitions of the quiet man can be seen to coalesce; they could also be thought to reflect subtle differences. But whatever divergence or identity we would mark is negligent, since the delineation of the quiet man is here a poetic image, not a philosophical theory. The point is not whether the quiet man is X or Y, but concerns the subjective act of imagining him. The resonance between merging perspectives is essential and the impact builds up as the poems develop.[87]

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kathaṃdassī kathaṃsīlo upasanto ti vuccati / taṃ me gotama pabrūhi pucchito uttamaṃ naraṃ //

[86] Or we may translate 'toward states of being and non-being' (*bhavāya vibhavāya vā*).

[87] Another good example of this theme, which offers a new combination of concepts, including *santi* and *nibbuti*, would be 933:

We spoke of polysemic meaning as a defining feature of the Buddhist poetry of the KN; statements need not be flattened out to one set of sharp meanings, but can speak on more than one level as multi-dimensional, heteroglossic expressions.[88] A second vital poetic element in the AV is the frequent use of metaphor – like all other heroes of Indian poetry, monks, we learn, are similar to lotuses.[89] A third, crucial aspect of the AV's poetic quality is the dedicated inquiry into the nature of the perfected being (or of the man aiming himself at perfection).[90] In each of the verses we have read, we can see that the poet presents a unique vision of the religious adept, be it the *muni*, the *bhikkhu*, the *brāhmaṇa* or the quiet man. This concern with idealized images and with the notion of perfection, which is motivated by a sense of wonder at the rare attainments of these men, is one of the leading features of the AV.

Having realized this truth, the monk should practice, examining, ever mindful. Knowing blowing out as 'quiet,' he will not slack in his attention to Gotama's teaching.

etaṃ ca dhammam aññāya vicinaṃ bhikkhu sadā sato sikkhe / santīti nibbutiṃ ñatvā sāsane gotamassa nappamajjeyya //

[88] See for example SNip 776, 779 and 810, quoted above in the first section of this paper.

[89] E.g. 812: 'As a drop of water does not stick to a lotus leaf, the wise man does not stick to the seen, the heard or the contemplated' (*udabiṃdu yathā 'pi pokkhare padume vāri yathā na lippati / evaṃ muni nopalippati yad idaṃ diṭṭhasuttaṃ mutesu vā //*). For further examples of metaphor, see 767 – 'He will avoid pleasures like stepping on the head of a snake;' 770 – whoever has possessions is defeated 'like water entering a broken ship;' 772 – 'the cave' (*guha*) as a term for the body or one's inner being; 777 – people grasp at their possessions as fish in a dried up stream with little water gasp for air; 791 – people grasp and let go like a monkey grabbing a branch; 792 – the man attached to perception 'swings up and down;' 816 – he who has left solitary life and harbors sexual desires is like a staggering cart; 920 – whoever has gone beyond excitement (*aneja*) is like the middle of the ocean, where there are no waves; 937 – in the essenceless world 'all directions wobble' (*disā sabbā sameritā*). To these we should add more conventional Buddhist metaphors such as 'darkness' (e.g. 958), 'the flood' (e.g. 779), 'disease' (e.g. 788), leaving 'the home' (e.g. 805), and so forth.

[90] I would have liked to say 'men and women,' but the character of woman adepts appears to fall outside the scope of the AV poets' interests.

Almost any verse we would quote from the AV would exemplify this concern with the nature of the perfected being:

793 He who is 'disarmed' in relation to all things,
Who sees in this way anything seen, heard, or thought,
And goes about open-wide –
In what way can he be imagined in this world?

794 They do not conceive, do not prefer,
Do not speak of 'extreme purity,'
Having cut the well-tied knot of taking up,
They hope for nothing in the world.

795 For this Brahmin who has crossed the boundary,
Having understood, having seen,
There is nothing to grasp at.
Craving no passion, finding no joy in no-passion,
There is nothing else for him to grasp at here.

793 *sa sabbadhammesu visenibhūto yaṃ kiñci diṭṭhaṃ va sutaṃ mutaṃ vā* /
tam eva dassiṃ vivaṭaṃ carantaṃ kenīdha lokasmiṃ vikappayeyya //

794 *na kappayanti na purekkharonti accantasuddhīti na te vadanti* /
ādānaganthaṃ gathitaṃ visajja āsaṃ na kubbanti kuhiṃci loke //

795 *sīmātigo brāhmaṇo tassa natthi ñatvā va disvā va samuggahītaṃ* /
na rāgarāgī na virāgaratto tassīdha natthi param uggahītaṃ //

We could, if we wish, collect all the characterizations of the true man offered by the AV poets and create an inventory of all these terms and conceptions. We could then analyze how these conceptions combine with each other, noting their agreements and disagreements. We would ask, for example, how being 'disarmed' (*visenibhūto*) and 'going about open-wide' (*vivaṭaṃ carantaṃ*) in 793 relate to 'the monk who goes about withdrawn, who has tasted the seat of seclusion' (*patilīnacarassa bhikkhuno bhajamānassa vivittam āsanam*) in 810 or to the man 'who has no support, who makes no preference in relation to the seen or heard' (*anūpayo so… diṭṭhe sute khantim akubbamāno*) in 897. This will not bring us closer, however, to understanding the AV. What will, I believe, bring us closer to the minds of the people who composed these poems, as well as to the way these poems were heard and appreciated

by their early audiences, is the understanding that a fundamental motivation underlying their composition is the creation of Buddhist images. These are pictures of religious adepts, which do not necessarily describe behavior, nor proscribe it, but combine ideas and feelings into a reflection that has broader cultural, as well as personal, interests. It is at this point that we realize that the fashioning of Buddhist consciousness, of the Buddhist mental world and imaginaire, is the main goal of these poems.

In many verses, the poets resort to questions like ‘in what way can he be imagined?’ (*kenīdha vikappayeyya*).[91] This recurring theme is possibly the best exhibition of the understanding that the effort to imagine and conceptualize the figure of the religious adept is a central motivation underlying the AV’s poems. Interestingly, in the final section of the PV,[92] the concluding verses of the SNip, this point appears prominently, when it is said of the Buddha four times, including in the final verse of the whole text, that ‘no metaphors can describe him’ (*yassa natthi upamā kvaci*).[93] This statement is put in the mouth of Piṅgiya, an experienced, elderly practitioner who earlier approached the Buddha with a set of questions that are motivated by his fear to end his life with no religious achievement. After receiving a transformative teaching (verses 1120–1123) he expresses great confidence in the Buddha (1131–1137). He is then asked why he has departed from the Buddha’s presence (1138). Piṅgiya’s response can be thought to disclose the Buddhist practice that is at the base of the SNip’s poems:

1140 I do not depart from him even for an instant, Brahmin,
From Gotama of extensive wisdom,
From Gotama of extensive intelligence,

1141 He whom no metaphors can describe,
Who taught me, from his own experience,

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[91] E.g. 793, 802.

[92] The poetic elements of the PV have not been discussed in this paper. Ultimately, their analysis would reveal a similarity to the conclusions offered here regarding the AV. I devote a separate study to the PV in Shulman forthc.-a.

[93] SNip 1137, 1139, 1141, 1149.

The truthful, timeless teaching of the destruction of craving,

1142 I see him with my mind, Brahmin, as if with my eye,
Night and day, without losing attention.
I spend my nights praising him –
This is why I think I have not departed from him.

1143 My conviction, my joy, my mind and awareness
Do not stray from Gotama's teaching.
My mind inclines in whatever direction
He of extensive wisdom turns.

1144 My body is old and weak;
This is why I do not go there, Brahmin.
Yet my mind being yoked to him
I constantly set out on pilgrimage in thought.

nāhaṃ tamhā vippavasāmi muhuttam api brāhmaṇa /
gotamā bhūripaññāṇā gotamā bhūrimedhasā //
yo me dhammam adesesi sandiṭṭhikam akālikaṃ /
taṇhakkhayam anītikaṃ yassa natthi upamā kvaci //
passāmi naṃ manasā cakkhunā 'va rattiṃdivaṃ brāhmaṇa appamatto /
namassamāno vivasemi rattiṃ teneva maññāmi avippavāsaṃ //
saddhā ca pītī ca mano satī ca nāpenti me gotamasāsanamhā /
yaṃ yaṃ disaṃ vajati bhūripañño sa tena teneva nato 'ham asmi //
jiṇṇassa me dubbalathāmakassa teneva kāyo na paleti tattha /
saṃkappayattāya vajāmi niccaṃ mano hi me brāhmaṇa tena yutto //

Like Piṅgiya, the poets of the SNip appear to have been engaged in a practice of keeping the Buddha in their hearts and minds. Their bodies may be far from the Buddha, but they maintain constant contact by setting out on pilgrimages with their poetry. No metaphors can describe him, but they find the effort to do so worthy in its own right.

4. Summary

This study has argued that the *Aṭṭhakavagga* should be read as Buddhist poetry, rather than as an expression of Buddhist doctrine that uncovers the historical realities of the early Buddhists. Beyond the formal characteristic of being written in verse, we identified

creative and aesthetic motivations behind these poems. These 'discourses' employ the technique of composition in verse on behalf of the enhancement and refinement of Buddhist sentiment. The verses make ample use of metaphor and rely on ambiguous, open-ended expression in order to create multiple levels of meaning. They participate in the pursuit to creatively envision the perfected human being – the Buddha, the wise man (*muni*), the true monk or the Brahmin. This effort to give words to the nature of the religious adept should be seen as the defining element of this particular form of Buddhist poetry.

The interest in the nature of perfection exhibits more of a religious, rather than a doctrinal or a philosophical, inclination of the AV. Given the antiquity of this text, this understanding speaks against a still too common view regarding a degeneration of the Buddhist teaching from 'the pristine' to 'the corrupted.'[94] The 'pristine' is, ostensibly, the philosophical, the peak of which is the transcendence of philosophy in favor of an embodied realization of its truths. The 'corrupted' relates to the religious, devotional and so-called popular elements of the tradition. When we understand that the philosophical and the devotional are here one and the same – both participate in the shaping of Buddhist imagination and emotion – we realize that neither should be taken as the main feature of a supposedly original stage. The philosophical aspects appear as one particular path in the shaping of religious meaning, which cannot be isolated from the other creative venues of the tradition.

If we still harbor strong historiographical instincts, the lesson we should learn is not that the early Buddhists wandered homeless and attempted to transform their minds so that they entertain no views whatsoever. Rather, the early Buddhists participated in a collective effort to formulate the ideals of their tradition. This was done with much devotion and was inspired by many 'views.' Among these ideals were radical forms of detachment, which some poets depicted as a psychological state that leaves behind any appetite for philosophical dispute.

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[94] For an insightful critique of this position, see Gethin 1997 (esp. appendix b) and 2006: 63–68.

The poems of the AV were apparently composed by numerous authors; they form a web of Buddhist positions and perceptions. This richness should not be taken as a reflection of doctrinal tensions, but as a collective effort to crystallize the central image on which the whole of the Buddhist tradition relies – the figure of the Buddha.[95]

General abbreviations

AV	*Aṭṭhakavagga*
DS	*Dhaniyasutta*
PV	*Pārāyaṇavagga*
KN	*Khuddakanikāya*
KVS	*Khaggavisāṇasutta*
MS	*Munisutta*
SNip	*Suttanipāta*
US	*Uragasutta*

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