Pre-Doctrinal Buddhism in the Sutta-Nipāta:
A Psychological Portrait of the early Buddhist Saint[1]

Dharmacāri Nāgapriya

What are the fundamental doctrines of Buddhism? What did the Buddha actually teach? These are teasing and much disputed questions to which universally accepted answers may never emerge. In all innocence, we might readily respond with something like: the Four Noble Truths, the Noble Eightfold Path, the Three Marks of Conditioned Existence, or Conditioned Co-production (paṭicca-samuppāda). Presumably, such replies would be highly orthodox and therefore unproblematic. Probably no Buddhist would deny that all the Dharmic formulations that I have listed – and several others besides – form part of the indispensable foundation upon which the Buddhist tradition has been erected (even when they may claim that their own tradition has gone beyond these teachings). Curiously though, these doctrinal formulations are either altogether omitted from the Sutta-Nipāta or receive but scant attention. In fact, the Sutta-Nipāta – which belongs to the Khuddaka Nikāya of the Sutta Piṭaka – shows a conspicuous absence of doctrinal formulations. [2]

This observation allows several possible conclusions. First, we could simply conclude that the Sutta-Nipāta must therefore be an aberration and not really Buddhist at all. Second, we could conclude that the teachings of the Sutta-Nipāta are addressed to people too simple to comprehend the profundities of the doctrines. However, even a cursory inspection of the contents of the Sutta-Nipāta and a superficial consideration of the Buddha's wide range of interlocutors will show that this proposition is indefensible. Many of the teachings in the Sutta-Nipāta are in fact profound,[3] and a good number of the spiritual seekers introduced in the course of the texts are relatively educated and sophisticated people – such as the Vedic brahmans[4] – or even quite advanced spiritually[5] by the time they encounter the Buddha. In some cases, the Buddha simply 'tips them over the edge'. While it is clear that a good proportion of the suttas are directed towards lay practitioners[6] they all share an uncompromising purity of content, a spiritual integrity that seems to confirm their profundity.

Third, and much more plausibly, we could conjecture that the content of the Sutta-Nipāta records a period of the Buddha's ministry – and so of the development of Buddhism – before any of the well-known systematic presentations of the teachings had been developed. This is the particular thesis that interests me and which I will develop here. But there is a further possibility that interests me: perhaps the terms of the original question are mistaken. Perhaps to ask, 'What are the original doctrines of Buddhism?' is an anachronism that does not at all fit the character and flavour of early Buddhism. In short, perhaps there were no doctrines

in early Buddhism. But, if so, what was there?

Above all, there was the Buddha – the exemplar of human Enlightenment. There was what he was, his character, how he behaved, and how he communicated with people. More than any doctrine, the Buddha provided, through his very personality, an exemplification of the ideal of Enlightenment – there was no need for a sophisticated description of it. The Sutta-Nipāta, and many other texts besides, makes much of the personal impact of the Buddha on his interlocutors,[7] in particular placing considerable emphasis on seeing the Buddha as a spiritually beneficial event.[8] More than anything that he says, it is the Buddha's presence – his spiritual charisma[9] – that provides the grounds for his authority and his transformative impact on others. His teaching was himself: a living testament of the message that he proclaimed. In the Sutta-Nipāta – as indeed in many other Pāli texts – we find many examples of the Buddha giving what is in fact a very simple, straightforward teaching. On hearing such teachings, one – or sometimes more – of the Buddha's auditors gain Stream Entry. Would it were so easy! In reading the suttas, we must imagine the direct impact of the Buddha's inspired presence on his audience, a presence that was communicated through the words that he spoke but was not fully contained by them. So many centuries afterwards, we must imaginatively reconstruct the living presence of the Buddha in order to understand his impact on others.

Even if the account sketched out above were granted, it merely raises a further difficulty. If the character of early Buddhism can be best understood through the personality of the Buddha (who is no longer available), the question then arises: what was the Buddha actually like? This question, too, is fraught with difficulties. So shrouded by the mists of time, so obscured by successive generations of editorial tampering as he is, the search for the Buddha's person seems as fruitless as chasing a rainbow. The historical individual named Gotama the Buddha seems irrevocably lost. Indeed, there may even be something suspect about the pursuance of a supposedly 'historical' biography of the Buddha anyway. How much of the extant scriptures (the Pāli Canon) represent the actual teachings of the Buddha and how much is later elaboration is not at all easy to determine with any precision. However, those scriptures may offer valuable indications of, if not the Buddha himself, at least the kind of person that the early Buddhists were trying to become.

The thesis that I want to tender is this: early Buddhism was far less concerned with doctrine than with what we would call psychology and ethics. The Sutta-Nipāta is a relatively archaic Buddhist literary deposit which places emphasis on the development of an 'Enlightened psychology': abandoning a particular set of mental states – deemed to obstruct the path to Enlightenment – and adopting an alternative set that constitutes an Enlightened manner of functioning. This 'Enlightened psychology' has a strongly ethical flavour. Correlative to this, the Sutta-Nipāta emphasises the renunciation of particular kinds of behaviour and the adoption of other kinds of behaviour more in keeping with an Enlightened sensibility. Indeed, Enlightenment in the Sutta-Nipāta may be seen as nothing other than the abandonment of unskilful mental states and behaviours and the adoption in their place of skilful ones until the point at which these new habit-patterns have become irreversibly established.

Reginald Ray, in his ground-breaking study Buddhist Saints in India[10] has offered what he describes as a 'hagiographic paradigm' of the normative Buddhist saint. Ray constructs this paradigm on the basis of a detailed analysis of the Buddhacarita of Aśvaghoṣa, a much celebrated poetic retelling of the Buddha's life. Ray identifies thirty-five themes in the Buddhacarita which he argues are to be found – with moderate variations – in the hagiographies of all Buddhist saints.[11] My proposition is a little different. Building on Ray's excellent example, I aim – through an examination of the Sutta-Nipāta – to sketch a psychological-cum-behavioural portrait of the saint of early Buddhism, to bring to life what he was like: how he thought, felt, and behaved.

Structure and Content of the Sutta-Nipāta

However, before plunging into a detailed examination of the characteristics of the early saint, I will touch on some background information that will help to place the significance of the teachings found in the Sutta-Nipāta in their appropriate context. It is important, first of all, to recognise that the Sutta-Nipāta is itself an anthology of texts – a compendium, rather than any coherent unity – presented in the form of spiritual ballads. It comprises five quite miscellaneous chapters containing seventy suttas in all, most of which are no longer than a couple of pages. Very few of the suttas begin in the classic 'Thus have I heard' manner, while the whole of Chapter 5 is structured in the form of questions and answers. The collection contains many of the best-loved suttas of early Buddhism, including the Mettā, Ratana, and Mangala suttas.

While it seems reasonable to suppose that the substance of the teachings found in the Sutta-Nipāta originated with the Buddha, it is nevertheless clear that this material has been reworked for aesthetic and mnemonic reasons (to say nothing of any partisan 'editing'). It is possible that, in its present form, the Sutta-Nipāta constitutes an early ritual handbook or breviary.[12] It comprises several different textual strata not all of which share the same character but all nevertheless remain relatively archaic.[13] For example, given the greater frequency of technical terms found in Chapter 3 – which contains most of the longer suttas – it seems likely that this material belongs to a later literary deposit. In addition, it has been well-established that the Aṭṭakavagga – which now comprises Chapter 4 of the Sutta-Nipāta – was originally an independent work. In fact, a commentary on this chapter is also to be found in the Khuddaka Nikāya,[14] as well as references to it elsewhere in the canon which serve to confirm its original independence as well as its relative antiquity. For these and other reasons, it is widely believed that the Aṭṭakavagga represents the earliest stratum of extant Buddhist texts.

Chapter 5 is also believed to be very early, though perhaps not quite as early as Chapter 4. In addition, a small group of texts scattered among the other chapters of the Sutta-Nipāta share the same archaic features

that recommend the antiquity of Chapters 4 and 5. These texts include the Uraga Sutta, Dhaniya Sutta, Khaggavisā.na Sutta, and Muni Sutta. These texts may, therefore, offer particularly valuable clues as to the characteristics of the early Buddhist saint and the flavour of early Buddhism.

In support of the claim that the Sutta-Nipāta belongs to an extremely archaic period in the development of Buddhism, I will touch on a number of its stylistic and thematic features before moving on to describe the character of the early saint in some detail.

1. Relative Absence of Stock Phrases and Formulae

In relative contradistinction to some other anthologies of the Pāli Canon (such as the suttas found in the Dīgha Nikāya and Majjhima Nikāya), the Sutta-Nipāta shows a lack of formulaic stock phrases. Elsewhere in the Canon it is common to find the same teaching expressed in identical words in several different suttas spliced into spiritual dialogues where that teaching doesn't immediately seem to belong. However, there is very little use of 'ready-made' teachings or 'off-the-peg' doctrines in the Sutta-Nipāta and a notable absence of the numerical lists for which Buddhism is so famous. Pande has suggested that an increase in the number, extent, subtlety, and frequency of theological and metaphysical enumerated groups is a clear sign of lateness.[15] In fact, the dialogues of the Sutta-Nipāta have the freshness and vigour of authentic existential communication rather than the stiffness of monkish confabulation. While many of the suttas make use of a refrain as an organising principle,[16] which probably served both a mnemonic and an aesthetic function, they are free from the constant repetition of the same small group of systematised doctrines or enumerated groups so characteristic of later texts.

2. Redefinition of Terms from Existing Socio-Religious Discourse

Accepting that Siddhattha Gotama attained to a realisation that was genuinely a breakthrough, he had, nevertheless, to communicate his understanding using a vocabulary that had no words to describe it adequately – there were no Buddhist words. Like any path-finder or translator, the Buddha had to make do with the ready-made language and concepts of his surrounding socio-religious milieu – at least until such times as he was able to develop a more precise vocabulary of his own. As the inheritors of 2,500 years of Buddhism, we have access to a dictionary of Buddhist terms that did not exist for the Buddha. Consequently, we find in the Sutta-Nipāta a process of redefinition taking place. The Buddha borrows a concept or term from normal discourse but invests it with a new meaning. In many cases, he trans-values the term – that is, he invests it with a higher meaning, a meaning belonging to a completely new level of experience. For example, the Buddha took terms that had a social significance and invested them with a spiritual-existential one.

In the Vāseṭṭha Sutta (Sutta 3.9), for example, the Buddha appropriates the term brahman for his own ends.[17] Vāseṭṭha and his colleague Bhāradvāja are in dispute about the nature of the true brahman. While Vāseṭṭha believes that one is a brahman by virtue of good action and the observance of one's duties, Bhāradvāja believes that it is birth that counts:

When one is well-born on both the mother's and the father's side, and is of pure descent for seven generations, uncriticised and irreproachable with reference to birth, to such an extent one becomes a brahman.[18]

Being unable to resolve their dispute, the two young brahmans decide to approach the Buddha and question him about the matter. The Buddha's answer is succinct:

Not by birth does one become a brahman; not by birth does one become a non-brahman. By action one becomes a brahman; by action one becomes a non-brahman (Sn. stanza 650).

The Buddha rejects the socio-biological usage of the word 'brahman' and attributes to it a purely spiritual significance. In this sutta, the Buddha gives a detailed profile of the ideal brahman, outlining the various qualities that he embodies and the kinds of mental states that he dwells in. The true brahman is now considered to be the equivalent of the fully realised person and this state is to be attained

By austerity, by the holy life, by self-restraint, and self-taming, by this one becomes a brahmaṇthis is the supreme state of being a brahman. (Sn.655)

The Vasala Sutta (sutta 1.7) shows a similar process of redefinition. The Sundarikabhāradvāja Sutta (sutta 3.4) shows the Buddha redefining the meaning of religious rituals, in this case a sacrificial offering. Sundarika Bhāradvāja has just completed a fire sacrifice and is looking for someone to whom he can offer the left-overs. He spies the Buddha and approaches him. Although initially contemptuous when he discovers that the Buddha is nothing but a 'shaveling', or 'baldy' (mundaka), Sundarika nevertheless enters into conversation. He soon realises that he is talking to no ordinary beggar and asks the Buddha's advice on how to make a sacrifice truly successful. The Buddha replies that the most successful offering is one made to a fully Enlightened one. The practice of offering is removed from its quasi-magical propitiatory context (where its function was to pacify the gods and invite their blessing) and placed in a devotional one. Offering becomes the expression of reverence towards the saint and receptivity to his influence.

The Sutta-Nipāta offers many similar examples of the redefinition of terms. In these ways, the Buddha cuts away at the roots of the brahminical tradition. He repudiates the binding significance of ethnic religious

beliefs, distinctions, and practices and replaces them with universal ones. However, rather than simply rejecting ethnic religion out of hand, the Buddha skilfully uses the language of ethnic religion (in fact the only vocabulary available to him) to communicate a universal message.

3. Emphasis on Behaviour Rather than Metaphysics

Throughout the Sutta-Nipāta, the practical dimension of spiritual life is emphasised rather than any abstract or theoretical concerns. For example, in the Nālaka Sutta (sutta 3.11), Nālaka asks of the Buddha: 'What is the highest wisdom state?'(Sn.700)

Rather than offering any metaphysical explanation as to the content or object of Enlightened wisdom, the Buddha proceeds simply to describe the attitudes and behaviour of the ideal practitioner. First, he has an equanimous mind – indifferent to praise or blame – is calm, and free from pride (Sn.702). Then he has renounced desire for sensual pleasures and developed empathy for others (Sn.704–5). Consequently, he does not kill or cause to kill. He is of modest needs and without covetousness (Sn.707). Moreover, he is as sharp 'as a razor's edge'. He should neither have an inactive mind nor think too much (Sn.716). 'He should be without taints, not dependent, having holy living as his aim' (Sn.717). He should train himself in solitude (Sn.718) since 'the state of being alone is called sagehood'. He is knowingly self-restrained and speaks little (Sn.723).

Such a description is revealing. Nothing is said about the sage seeing into the Three Marks of Conditioned Existence or breaking the Ten Fetters, or realising the truth of Conditioned Co-production. Rather, the ideal practitioner is defined in terms of a particular lifestyle and a particular range of ideal qualities. The optimum lifestyle and behaviour is understood to be not only the means to develop the spiritual virtues cherished by early Buddhism but also the most suitable context for their expression. The essence of spiritual practice, of thoroughgoing personal transformation, consists in very concrete, practical steps. Such an outlook, emphasising as it does practice over theory, is one of the hallmarks of the Dharma as presented by the Sutta-Nipāta.

Lest there be any ground for confusion, however, one is not a sage merely by virtue of leading a particular lifestyle. The lifestyle is a means to the development of the spiritual virtues, without them it becomes simply an empty shell.

4. Relative Absence of Systematised Teachings

One of the most striking features of the Sutta-Nipāta is its simplicity. Absent are the cumbersome technical

lists which pad out some of the other collections of teachings and which achieved their dry-as-dust perfection in the Abhidhamma Piṭaka. In fact, very few doctrinal teachings are presented at all. There is no mention of the Eightfold Path, only a partial reference to the Four Noble Truths, and a fleeting mention of Conditioned Co-production (Sn.3.9).

The texts included in the Sutta-Nipāta give an impression of a continual struggle to communicate something new, something previously unknown, using the only vocabulary available. Regularly, different words are used to describe what seems to be essentially the same quality, and this suggests a striving after words adequate to bear the meanings that the Buddha seeks to burden them with. We must remember that, at least according to the canonical literature, the Buddha was initially reluctant to proclaim his new dispensation, since he doubted that others would be able to understand him.[19]

Rather than philosophical formulae, the Sutta-Nipāta makes copious use of metaphors and images throughout. For example, in the Uraga Sutta – the very first sutta of the anthology – we encounter the powerful image of the snake shedding its old, worn-out skin. This is like the spiritual person who casts off past habits, mental attitudes, and beliefs and becomes – in a sense – reborn, something new, glistening, more than he or she was before. This simple image provides ample evidence to rebut any criticism that the goal of Buddhism is nihilistic. It is life-affirming. Reflecting in this way on the images used in the Sutta-Nipāta may allow us to generate a more imaginative appreciation of the nature of early Buddhism than we might gain by merely analysing the various doctrines that are perhaps more familiar.

In the communication of any new realisation it seems most likely that the saint will begin with suggestive, poetic indications as to the nature of his or her new insight – which of course risk appearing vague. Later, however, as the experience itself becomes clearer and a new religious vocabulary begins to evolve, the sage will begin to make use of a more technical framework to achieve greater precision. Moreover, later disciples without experience of the original insight, will become entirely dependent upon the dogmatic formulations of its nature.

Sangharakshita has identified a correlation between the increased complexity of a body of teaching and a relative degeneration of its spiritual vitality.[20] He contends that any spiritual movement will tend to pass through three stages of development. It will begin with an intuitive and transcendental standpoint (the stage of ‘dogmatic affirmation’ or spiritual charisma), then the initial insights will be elaborated into a coherent system of ideas and teachings (philosophic stage), and finally schematised in some rational-logical form (scholasticism). Applying this schema to the Sutta-Nipāta, it is clear that it belongs to the first of these stages of elaboration, recording a chapter in the development of Buddhism when the influence of the Buddha’s spiritual charisma was felt very deeply. Indeed, as I have already suggested, it is clear that the Buddha’s interlocutors in the Sutta-Nipāta were much more profoundly transformed by what the Buddha

was than by what he taught them, which often consisted of relatively simple and straightforward instructions. His transformative influence arose from the quality of his being, not from the philosophical sophistication or complexity of his vocabulary. It is worth restating in this connection the distinction between profundity and complexity – the two are not synonymous. Philosophical sophistication is no guarantee of profundity. In the case of the Buddha, while his teachings were often intellectually quite simple, they were – at the same time – existentially profound.

General Characterisation of the Ideal of the Early Buddhist Saint

Before beginning a more detailed description of the leading characteristics of the paradigmatic saint as revealed by the Sutta-Nipāta, it is worth pausing to notice some of the more general epithets employed in the text to indicate his or her nature. In noticing these terms, we can get closer to what core values the early Buddhists aimed to inculcate in the spiritual aspirant. In fact, the Sutta-Nipāta contains a rich vocabulary of terms referring to the saint, again underlining its poetic and suggestive – rather than technical – character.[21] I will touch on some of the more common and revealing ones and also briefly discuss some of the animal similes used to refer to such a person.

First of all – and often thereafter – the Buddha is referred to as Bhagavant: the Richly Endowed One, the one with many manifold qualities (Sn.21). This epithet is used here only in relation to the Buddha but it already suggests a great deal about the nature of an enlightened person. It suggests abundance, opulence, even fecundity. A second epithet, again applied only to the Buddha himself, is Tathāgata, a word that is particularly difficult to render adequately in English but which means something like 'the one who has thus-come': the one who has become Enlightened. Next, the saint is spoken of in terms of the brahman, a term that we have already looked at. In sutta 1.12 we are introduced to the term 'muni', another term borrowed from Vedic Brahmanism, which is popularly translated as 'sage' but seems to have previously referred to someone who had taken a vow of silence, suggesting quietude and contemplation. It has also been rendered as 'inspired, moved by the spirit.'[22]

The saint is also described as cakkhumant, or 'the one with the eye' (seer), a term which suggests not only a penetrating insightful nature but even a mystical seeing of the 'spiritual world'. He is also described as the 'great hero' (mahāvīra, Sn.543), as the unconquered (aparājita, Sn.269) and 'conqueror' (jīna), the 'thoroughbred among men' (purisājañña, Sn.544), and the 'supreme among men' (purisuttama, Sn.544).

In addition, there are several epithets associated with light used of the saint. For example, he is described as the 'thruster away of darkness' (tamonuda, Sn.1133), the 'shining, brilliant one' (jutimant, Sn.1136), and as

the ‘light-maker, light-bringer’ (pabhaṃkara, Sn.1136). The Buddha in particular is referred to as the ‘kinsman of the sun’ (ādiccabandhu, Sn.1128), suggesting that, just as the sun brings light and dispels darkness in the material sphere, so the Buddha fulfils the same function in the spiritual realm. Indeed, in a stereotypical refrain which concludes many of the suttas, a disciple will exclaim that (having heard the Master’s teaching), ‘Just as … one might … bring an oil lamp into the darkness, so that those with eyes might see shapes, in the same way the Dhamma has been declared by the venerable Gotama in manifold ways.’

Along with these general epithets is a series of animal similes and metaphors that use concrete images to communicate the saint’s extraordinary qualities. There are two principal animal similes used in the Sutta-Nipāta, the first of which compares the saint with an elephant (nāga):

Like an elephant tearing a pūti creeper asunder, I shall not come to lie again in any womb. (Sn.29)

As an elephant with massive shoulders, spotted, noble, may leave the herds and live as it pleases in the forest, one should wander solitary as a rhinoceros horn. (Sn.53)

The image of the elephant conjures a sense of strength, stability, gracefulness and dignity, independence, and kingliness. The saint is a king of the Dharma, a source of stability and support for those struggling to overcome their spiritual fetters. Moreover, the elephant suggests unshakeability: the saint is not moved by praise or blame, his serene calm is not ruffled by worldly calumny or condemnation.

The second animal simile associates the saint with the lion (sīha), the king of the jungle:

Not trembling, as a lion (does not tremble) at sounds (Sn.71).

Wandering victorious, having overcome like a strong-toothed lion, the king of beasts (Sn.72).

The lion again implies leadership since it is the ‘king of the beasts’. It also suggests supreme confidence – the confidence born of Enlightened experience – since the lion exemplifies fearlessness. The Buddha’s proclamation of the truth is sometimes described as the sīhanāda or ‘lion’s roar,’ which is a proud declaration of confidence in his spiritual knowledge.

Leading Characteristics of the Paradigmatic Saint

So richly and ubiquitously are the virtues of the saint extolled in the encounters recorded by the Sutta-Nipāta that summarising them and identifying the most important ones is difficult. Probably the most fruitful means of savouring the flavour of the saint as here characterised will be through repeated reading of, and reflection on, the individual episodes. The saint of the Sutta-Nipāta is not susceptible of a neat and tidy analysis – such as being possessed of the Six Perfections or the Five Spiritual Faculties – but the text does evoke an impressionistic sense of the quality of his character which remains human and comprehensible while being at the same time sublime and inspiring. Indeed, the undeniable humanity of the saint's character does much to recommend both its authenticity and its universal relevance. The saint of the Sutta-Nipāta is not a Superman of the movies (or even Mahāyāna) variety but a human being who has developed the higher virtues to a superlative and irreversible degree. In later Buddhist characterisations, the essential humanity of the saint was to be dangerously obscured as he was characterised in an increasingly fantastic way.

Notwithstanding the richness of vocabulary and description in the Sutta-Nipāta, it is quite possible to draw together a manageable group of leading qualities which are regularly used in the text when referring to the saint. Without suggesting that it is in any way exhaustive, I will, therefore, discuss a cluster of primary Enlightened virtues or 'virtue-families'. Inevitably this is my personal selection which highlights the significance of some virtues and neglects others, but I have aimed to reflect the emphasis evident in the text.

(1) Renunciation (pabbajjā)

This virtue is exhaustively emphasised in the first sutta of the collection – Uraga Sutta – and is referred to throughout. Indeed, renunciation can be seen as the over-arching theme of the entire work. The Uraga Sutta employs the simile of the snake shedding its skin in order to describe the process of spiritual development: the renunciation of a less for a more. Renunciation is treated on several levels: (a) renunciation of material possessions (b) renunciation of unskilful behaviour (c) renunciation of unskilful mental states

(d) Renunciation of (all) views[23] (e) renunciation of preferences and partiality (likes and dislikes).

The crudest level of renunciation is simply that of material possessions. However, the practice is elevated to a much higher level than this. Attachment of any kind – whether material or mental – is viewed as an obstacle to realisation, even an inappropriate attachment to the teachings and practices of the Dharma.

The positive counterpart to this process of renunciation is the experience of contentment (santutti)[24] and self-containment. The saint needs nothing beyond himself to feel complete, he has no need of any external source of security or refuge. He is his own source of happiness and security. He is therefore 'easily supportable' (subhara) and 'of light wants' (sallahukavutti). He has renounced greed and craving of all kinds. The mature individual can find satisfaction within himself, can enjoy the experience of his own being. He is not dependent on others for his happiness.

In this connection, the term akiñcana is regularly used. [25] This is an adjective that may be translated as 'having nothing'. At least according to the values of the ordinary world, the renunciate has nothing at all. This notion perhaps has some affinity with St Francis of Assisi's practice of being 'God's pauper'. The person who has nothing is the one who has renounced any sense of worldly regard or reputation and hence is impervious to the world's daggers. He has no egoistic pride and so is immune to insult or scorn, unmoved by 'the proud man's contumely'. Moreover, he cannot be classified or labelled in any way and, for this reason, is free. He is not defined or limited by being attached to any social identity or function because he has renounced these. He has no fear of loss because he has no desire to possess, and in this lies the imperturbability of his security and contentment.

(2) Independence or Solitariness: Eka

This virtue constitutes the kernel of the second sutta of the collection – The Rhinoceros Horn. In this text, the postulant saint is exhorted to live a solitary, eremitical life, aloof from distracting influences and unwholesome companions just as the horn of the (Indian) rhinoceros is single. The sutta places great emphasis on the importance of self-reliance in the sense of not being dependent on others. The danger of having companions who are not intent on the spiritual quest is given particular emphasis (Sn.37). However, the solitariness that this sutta recommends is not a withdrawal from the world into some Timon-like misanthropy since spiritual friendship is in fact decisively encouraged (Sn.45). Physical solitude offers a material support for the development of emotional independence or, in more contemporary language, true individuality. Solitude offers the aspirant a context in which to disentangle himself from the diluting and confusing bustle of the world and its narrow concerns and values and to strengthen his reserves of self-reliance. The saint is self-sustaining, living 'as an island unto himself'.[26] He is his own source of spiritual refuge and inspiration and so is not dependent on others for inner happiness. While he may – given his frugal needs – be materially dependent on others, this dependence is in no way unhealthy. The saint does not require the company of others to fill up any personal existential lack. He is whole and complete in himself.

A further aspect of the saint's independence is his ability to withstand the 'worldly conditions' (lokadhammā):

The sage wandering alone, vigilant, not shaken in the midst of blame and praise, not trembling as a lion does not tremble at sounds, not caught up with others, as the wind is not caught up in a net, not defiled by passion, as a lotus is not defiled by water, a leader of others, not to be led by others, him indeed the wise know as a sage (Sn.213).

Important, too, is that – while being self-reliant – the saint is also a 'refuge for many' (Sn.503), a leader of others to spiritual salvation. The saint is a source of refuge and spiritual inspiration for mankind in general and he can function in this way only because he himself is not dependent on others for emotional and spiritual sustenance.

(3) Non-violence (avihiṃsa) and Universal Loving-Kindness (mettā)

The early Buddhist vocabulary includes an important class of words that, while denoting highly positive qualities, take a grammatically negative form. Avihiṃsa is a leading example of this. To translate the term as 'non-violence' doesn't reflect the positive nuance of the quality to which it refers. Notwithstanding, it is worth looking at the quality in question from both a negative and a positive point of view in order to bring its nature more clearly to light.

First of all – and in negative terms – avihiṃsa can be understood as an application of the general principle of renunciation: the saint renounces all violence whether physical, verbal, or emotional:

Whoever in this world harms a living creature, whether once-born or twice- born, whoever has no compassion for a living creature, him one should know to be an outcaste. (Sn.117)

He gives up coercion of any kind and thus abandons the 'power mode', the style of relating to others purely as objects and means of his own gratification, adopting instead the 'love mode', the appreciation of others as individual, feelingful subjects meriting sensitive consideration and respect.[27] This entails abandoning a host of negative mental states such as kodha or fury (Sn.1), kopa or ill-temper and grudge (Sn.6), upanāha or rancour/enmity (Sn.116), paccuṭṭapannā or hostility (Sn.245), usuyyā or envy (Sn.245), atipāti or violent destructiveness (Sn.248), paṭigha (Sn.148) or malicious rage, and dosa or hatred (Sn.328). One of the distinguishing features of the Sutta-Nipāta is the plethora of different nasty mental states that it identifies. This laid some of the foundations for the later work of the Abhidhamma. Again the terms used are fluid and non-technical. By considering the terms as a whole we can get a feeling for the flavour of what the saint is enjoined to abandon.

At the same time, it is important to appreciate the positive counterpart of this renunciation of violent negativity. This is expressed most sublimely in the Mettā Sutta:

Just as a mother would protect with her own life her own son, her only son, so one should cultivate an unbounded mind towards all beings, and loving-kindness towards all the world. One should cultivate an

unbounded mind, above and below and across, without obstruction, without enmity, without rivalry. (Sn.149-50)

(4) Humility/Modesty

Humility is an important spiritual quality in the Sutta-Nipāta. Indeed, several different words are used to indicate what seems to be more or less the same virtue including nivāta (Sn.265), appagabha (Sn.144), and anatimānin (Sn.143). The true meaning and value of this quality, however, seems nowadays to have been severely undermined by the prevalence of its near enemies such as cloying sycophancy, self-deprecation, and inverted pride. In the present context, the saint is one who has overcome all arrogance and egoistic pride, having renounced all notions of comparison with others. He does not evaluate his worth in relation to whether he is better or worse than, or even equal to, other people. In this lies his humility.

Whoever thinks himself equal, superior, or inferior, he would dispute on that account. But one unshaken in the three modes of self-conceit – for him there is no 'equal' or 'superior'. (Sn.842)

It is not that the saint is meek, apologetic, and retiring – a benign, inoffensive wallflower – since he may in fact be very outspoken, self-confident, even fierce when necessary (consider the Buddha's 'Lion's Roar'). The essence of the saint's humility is that he does not think primarily in terms of himself – he has lost the conceit of 'I am'. It is not that the saint thinks that he is worthless, simply that he does not evaluate his own worth in relation to the relative worth of others.

Humility is not to be developed by self-consciously adopting a submissive, self-effacing approach towards others but rather through overcoming arrogance, conceit (māna), haughtiness and condescension (thaddha), as well as all the other negative emotions associated with the assertion of the self in relation to others and the world, but, pradoxically, also through developing self-confidence and dignity.

A natural consequence of true humility is reverence (gārava, Sn.265) – even awe – and gratitude (kataññutā). While we continue to relate to the world primarily in terms of our self and its worth, true reverence is impossible; rather than feeling reverence we will tend either to feel resentment (because someone else is better than us) or dejection (because we are not as good as them). Our capacity to experience deep reverence is closely related to our ability to transcend egoistic comparison with others and hence our development of humility. Similarly, while we relate to the world in terms of 'self' it is difficult for us to feel heartfelt gratitude since we will tend to feel slightly resentful towards the giver because they have made us feel indebted to them and have shown us to be the poorer party – at least with respect to the gift.

Humility finds particular expression in holding off from disputes and asserting dogmatic views. The saint has no need or desire to assert himself and his views over and against others. This does not mean that he lamely submits to the harangues of others but that he is not driven by a desire to be seen to be right.

(5) Uprightness

The saint is morally upright (uju), even truly upright (sūju), moreover, he does not 'do any mean thing, on account of which other wise men would criticise him.'(Sn.145) In a widely used simile, he is 'as straight as a shuttle' (Sn.215) (or, in our own idiom, 'as straight as a die'). Moreover, he is straightforward in his dealings with other people, free from deceit or duplicity of any kind. He is sincere and without guile, though certainly not naive. The saint is a deeply ethical man whose conscience is so tender that it has become impossible for him to act decisively against it. It is not simply that the saint follows a set of ethical rules, more that he has imbibed the spirit of ethical sensitivity and discloses this through his every action. He has become a deeply ethical being. In this connection, he has fully developed the moral qualities indicated by the two lokapalā (guardians of the world), namely hiri (shame) and ottappa (sensitivity to moral censure by the wise).

Related to this emphasis on moral uprightness is the symbolism of purification. The saint is unsmeared or unsmirched (anūPāli tta, Sn.468). He is also 'purified (suddha), faultless (niddosa), stainless (vimala), and clear (akāca)'(Sn.476). The Buddha makes a crucial and interesting use of the language of purification. The Āmagandhasutta or 'Discourse on Stench' makes an important reappraisal of the meaning of purity. In the context of Vedic Brahmanism, purity is achieved by the performance of the correct propitiatory and sacrificial rites and practices. For the Buddha, however, purity is achieved only through moral action:

Hurting living creatures, killing, cutting, and binding, stealing, telling lies, fraud and deceptions, useless studies, intercourse with other men's wives – this is tainted fare [stench]. (Sn.242)

(6) Stillness and Calm

One of the common epithets of the saint used in the Sutta-Nipāta is santa or 'the calm one'. The goal is, in the abstract, also regularly referred to as a state of calm. It is possible that the term is etymologically connected to our term 'saint', but be that as it may it is nevertheless a revealing one. First of all, it suggests an absence of agitation – like the ocean on a windless day, unruffled, completely still, and tranquil. The saint has 'pacified senses' (santindriya), he is not at the mercy of his instinctual urges and desires. He has learned to discipline and focus his sense faculties – to 'guard the gates of the senses' – in accordance with his spiritual inclinations. However, the saint achieves much more than merely the restraint of the senses. His state of calm arises from his transcendence of craving:

For whom there exists no craving for existence or non-existence, him indifferent to sensual pleasures, I call 'calmed'. In him there are no ties; he has crossed beyond attachment. (Sn.856-7)

The saint is calm because he has overcome the agitation born of preference, of desire, of the urge to assert oneself against and above others, and of attachment to dogmatic views. The saint has abandoned all these and hence has achieved an imperturbable inner stability and tranquillity. He does not get distracted or caught up in worldly cares but remains disentangled and free.

The saint is in a state of equipoise (samāhita, Sn.465), a state of inner repose and emotional stability, of highly refined psychological integration. Such a description is reminiscent of jhāna, the superconscious states that are the saint's habitual experience.

The saint is also described as khema (Sn.454). This very rich word means not only secure – in the sense of untroubled – but also peaceful, calm, even forgiving. Moreover, in a powerful simile, the saint is described as 'cool, like the waters of a lake' (Sn.467). The fires of (worldly) passion have been blown out, the saint has been 'quenched' (nirvanized). In response to Dhaniya (sutta 1.2), the Buddha replies, 'My hut is uncovered, my fire is quenched. So rain sky-deva, if you wish.'(Sn.19) The saint has nothing to fear from the vagaries of life since he is not trying to resist them. One covers one's hut out of fear that it may rain in. Similarly, if one's fire is quenched one has no fear that the rain will extinguish it. The saint is not trying to build a fortress against the world, he is not trying to resist the inexorable play of conditionality, so he can live joyously and carefree. Importantly, though, this state of calm should not be seen as one of indolence, indifference, or bovine placidity but as a very rich, dynamic, positive state, free of anxiety (daratha) and mundane concerns.

Finally under this heading, the saint possesses khanti (Sn.266). This term is usually rendered as 'patience', which is far from adequate. Still worse, Norman woefully translates it as 'meekness', the connotations of which suggest a limp submission rather than the positive spiritual quality that khanti implies. Khanti is a patient forbearance, not in the sense of a stoic endurance, a tongue-biting self-restraint, but rather a transcendence of volatility. It can also be understood to mean forgiveness – the complete absence of any desire to punish or get one's own back, a loving renunciation of any desire for revenge. At Sn.78, the Buddha proclaims, 'I am released into a gentle balminess of spirit (sorraca).'

(7) Creative (vigatakhila)

The Sutta-Nipāta makes important use of an idiomatic Pāli phrase, vigatakhila, to describe the flavour of the beatified sensibility. Vigata is 'gone away or 'ceased'. On a literal level, the khila is the land that is

barren, that yields no crops, that is uncultivated, even uncultivable. In the Dhaniya Sutta, the Buddha has an important and powerful exchange with a rich and self-satisfied farmer who evaluates his life purely in terms of his material prosperity.

'I have boiled my rice and done my milking,' said Dhaniya the herdsman. 'I dwell with my family near the bank of the river Mahī. My hut is thatched, my fire is heaped up (with fuel).' (Sn.18)

Dhaniya sees his life, happiness, and success in material terms. The Buddha, however, shows Dhaniya that there is a higher level of values, namely spiritual development. Using an agricultural metaphor, the Buddha proclaims, 'my (mental) barrenness has gone.'(Sn.19) Now the term khila is given a more metaphorical, even symbolic meaning. It is the inner wasteland, the barren, unproductive mind and world, painfully described by T.S. Eliot,

This is the dead land

This is the cactus land

Here the stone images

Are raised, here they receive

The supplication of a dead man's hand

Uner the twinkle of a fading star.[28]

In his response to Dhaniya, the Buddha is suggesting that the true wasteland is within – it is one's own mind when not in a creative state. He is implying that the true measure of riches and success is not whether one's land is fecund and productive of swollen grains and fruits but rather whether one's mind has been cultivated and reaps the harvest of inner abundance, of imagination, of Enlightened sensibility. The use of the metaphor here is not occasional since it occurs in several other places (at Sn.477, for example) and seems to indicate what has been described as the 'creative mind':

The creative mind does not re-act. It is not dependent on, or determined by, the stimuli with which it comes into contact. On the contrary, it is active on its own account, functioning spontaneously, out of the depths of its own intrinsic nature … the creative mind is profoundly and radically optimistic … loves where there is no reason to love, is happy where there is no reason for happiness, creates where there is no possibility of creativity, and in this way 'builds a heaven in hell's despair[29]

The mind that is vigatakhila is the cultivated, disciplined mind, the mind that has been ploughed to rid it of the weeds of unskilful habit and sown with the seeds of the skilful. It is responsive to and appreciative of

beauty, it is content, agile, pliant, and radiant. It is characterised by emotional positivity, spiritual inspiration, faith, a sense of purpose, and a compassionate responsiveness to others.

(8) Well-spoken (Subhāsita)

The Sutta-Nipāta gives a good deal of attention to the importance of speech and its transformative potential for both good and ill. In the Kokālikasutta (sutta 3.10), the Buddha proclaims:

Surely in the mouth of a man, when born, an axe is born, with which a fool cuts himself, saying a badly-spoken utterance. (Sn.657)

This sutta goes on to describe in graphic detail the various hells in which the liar, slanderer, flatterer, and so on will have to suffer after their death. The Subhāsitasutta (sutta 3.3) describes four different dimensions of the saint's speech:

The good say that the well-spoken utterance is best. One should speak what is righteous, not unrighteous; that is the second. One should speak what is pleasant, not unpleasant; that is the third. One should speak what is true, not untrue; that is the fourth. (Sn.450)

This fourfold formula is especially interesting since it offers 'well-spoken' as the primary speech precept[30]. Appropriate speech is, above all, affectionate, gentle speech. It is spoken with regard to the welfare of the auditor. This suggests that it may not always be appropriate to speak out; simply because something is true does not mean that we should say it. The saint only speaks out what he believes will be of spiritual benefit to others.[31]

Conclusion

I have offered reasonable evidence to support the widely-accepted antiquity of the Sutta-Nipāta in the context of the development of Buddhist teaching. It is clear that the traditions that it embodies are as close to 'original' Buddhism as we can ever come. However, contrary to a great deal of later Buddhist teaching – and considerable contemporary opinion – there was very little emphasis on metaphysics or philosophy (in the modern sense of the term) in the early tradition as embodied in the Sutta-Nipāta. Interestingly, some English translations of the Sutta-Nipāta can give the reader a misleading impression of the relative amount of technical vocabulary and sophistication contained in the text. We need only read as far as verse five of Saddhatissa's translation to read this:

He who does not see any substantiality in forms of becoming as one does not find flowers on a fig tree, that monk gives up the cycle of existence as the snake sheds its old, decayed skin.[32]

On the face of it, this translation seems genuine, highly orthodox, and unproblematic, but the word Saddhatissa renders as 'substantiality' (a technical Buddhist term), is sāra which means pith (as in the pith of a fruit). Although it is easy to see a relationship between the later technical term and the earlier suggestive image, they do have different connotations. There are many similar examples. Saddhatissa's anachronistic 'reading in' of later Buddhist terms and ideas distorts the poetic nature of the Sutta-Nipāta, making it read as a much more technically sophisticated work than it actually is.

The overriding emphasis of the suttas collected in the Sutta-Nipāta is on the nature of the saint – on what he is like, what qualities and virtues he exemplifies. By implication, therefore, the Sutta-Nipāta shows us how we should practise through describing the spiritual qualities that we must develop in order to become a Buddhist saint. The orientation of the Sutta-Nipāta is aretaic – it is concerned primarily with the development of virtues or qualities rather than with the realisation of some abstract metaphysical truth. There is relatively little emphasis on the cognitive aspect of wisdom. Though the vocabulary of 'wisdom' and 'insight' is not uncommon in the Sutta-Nipāta, it shows great reticence in its presentation of metaphysical ideas. Indeed, it advises great caution with regard to the adoption of any views at all. Chapter 4 in particular emphasises the danger of becoming over-dependent on views, even 'right' views, and makes it clear that the saint ultimately goes beyond all views. The goal is described in primarily psychological and ethical terms rather than intellectual ones. Enlightenment is not usually described as an epistemological shift – an Archimedean 'Aha!' – as though one were previously labouring under a cognitive mistake that has now been corrected. Instead, the goal is seen in terms of a radical modification of one's mental states and behaviour away from those governed by unenlightened drives towards those which I have described in some detail above (though by no means exhaustively). The language of renunciation and purification is widely used throughout. The Sutta-Nipāta offers a vision of Enlightenment as a state of being rather than a state of knowing (though ultimately these two are inseparable). The Enlightened being is one who has developed particular kinds of qualities – and these to a superlative, irreversible degree – and who lives in a particular kind of way. Through reading and contemplating the images, epithets, virtues, and descriptions applied to the saint in the Sutta-Nipāta, we may, therefore, gain a deeper sense of the sublime nature of the Buddhist ideal and, in this way, move closer to it.

Notes

1. In principle, the saint can be of either gender and, while I have chosen for reasons of brevity and simplicity to use the

masculine pronoun, I imply the possibility of a female saint throughout.

2. The most obvious exception to this is 3.12 which, in the context of the whole anthology, seems a bit incongruous.

3. Consider, for example, the entire Aṭṭhakavagga which offers an extremely lofty and sophisticated critique of the nature of views.

4. See, for example, the brahman Aggikabhāradvāja (sutta 1.7) or the brahman Sundarikabhāradvāja (sutta 3.4).

5. See, for example, the wanderer Sabhiya (sutta 3.6).

6. For example, suttas 1.6, 2.4.

7. See, for example, sutta 3.1.

8. This practice is best known in the West as darshan (Hindi).

9. Collins: 'a special personal quality or power of an individual making him capable of influencing or inspiring large numbers of people.' I do not use the term in its modern, secular sense.

10. Reginald Ray, Buddhist Saints in India, Oxford, 1994.

11. Ibid., Chapter 2.

12. Hinuber in A Handbook of Pāli Literature, suggests this.

13. G.C. Pande, Studies in the Origins of Buddhism, Motilal Banarsidass,

1983, offers a detailed discussion of the relative antiquity of different parts of theSutta-Nipāta.

14. Niddesa.

15. See Pande, op. cit.

16. See, for example, Uraga Sutta (sutta 1.1): That bhikkhu … leaves this shore and the far shore as a snake leaves its old worn-out skin.

17. This may also be seen in suttas 1.7, 2.7, and in many other places.

18. K. R. Norman, The Rhinoceros Horn, Pāli Text Society, 1984, p.103. I have used this text as standard for translations from the Pāli Sutta-Nipāta.

19. See Ariyapariyesanā Sutta (Majjhima Nikāya i.168) and Vinaya i.4.

20. A Survey of Buddhism, Windhorse Publications, 2001, p. 333.

21. In later texts the range of general epithets seems much narrower and more scholastic.

22. See Rhys Davids and Stede, Pāli - English Dictionary, Pāli Text Society, 1979.

23. This theme is central to the content of Chapter 4.

24. See for example, Mettā Sutta (Sn.144).

25. For example, at Sn.176, 455, and 620.

26. Atta dīpā (Sn.501).

27. See Sangharakshita, The Ten Pillars of Buddhism, Windhorse Publications, 1996, pp.58–9.

28. The Hollow Men, from Selected Poems, Faber and Faber, 1963.

29. Sangharakshita, Budda Mind, Windhorse Publictions, 2001, pp. 43–4

30. More often in accounts of the fourfold formula of ethical speech, ‘truthful speech’ comes first. See, for example, Sāleyyaka Sutta (Majjhima Nikāya 41), found in Bhikkhu Nanamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi, The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha, Wisdom, 1995, p.382.

31. See, for example, Abhayarājakumāra Sutta (Majjhima Nikāya 58), ibid., pp.498–501.

32. H. Saddhatissa trans., The Sutta-Nipāta, Curzon Press, 1994.