

**Piling Up Bones and Burning Down the World.**  
**Buddhist Literary Images to Think By and Time<sup>1</sup>**

by Christoph Emmrich (University of Toronto)

1. Introduction

The exact historical (and thus temporal) place of the texts this article deals with remains very difficult to determine. Although some, if not their wording at least in their content may go back to the time to which the historical Buddha is dated by recent western scholarship, that is to the 4<sup>th</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup> century BC, the form in which they are extant today only goes as far back as the 5<sup>th</sup> century CE when, on the island of Sri Lanka, they and others were to form what Western scholarship has called a “canon” through their being collected and redacted and commented upon in a certain fashion, all in the Middle-Indic language called Pāli by Buddhaghosa, one of the patriarchs of a “textual community” alive in South and Southeast Asia till the present day, called Theravāda. The canon of the Theravādins<sup>2</sup> is known as the "Threefold Basket", the *Tipiṭaka* and the examples we are going to look at today all hail from one of the three collections, the *Suttapiṭaka*, the "Basket of [the Minutes of] the Sermons of the Buddha." Although this so-called canon is a product of that period of textual and institutional reform marked by the redactorial and commentarial activities of Buddhaghosa, a tradition

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Corinna Wessels-Mevissen for inviting me as the keynote speaker to the conference the proceedings of which my esteemed colleague and friend has brought together in this volume. I am equally indebted to the “Internationales Kolleg Morphomata,” particularly its chairs Dietrich Boschung and Günter Blumberger who supported this gathering of a magnificent round of speakers and a public without whose many thought-provoking suggestions this piece would have been much poorer.

<sup>2</sup> The implications of that term for our understanding of its textual constitution and transmission and Theravādin textual practice more generally has been an object of ongoing debate in the study of that literature (see most prominently so Collins 1990, also Allon 1997, most recently Gethin 2011).

which over time became known as Theravāda, the individual texts, we will encounter are not at all specific to that school. Rather, they form part of a layer of literature which the Buddhist schools since at least the first centuries CE seem to have shared as it contains texts whose doctrinal content is so general and nonspecific, appears as so obvious and unquestionable that they may have been handed on as literary material composed or claimed by Buddhists and as poetic forms perceived of as overall Buddhist without calling for any major doctrinal revisions. Scholastic discussion seems to have taken place elsewhere and was rather ignited by questions such as which terms to use to describe certain cognitive processes or issues surrounding the formulation of more legally binding regulations of monastic life. The motifs of the texts that this article will be dealing with, - the all too long time of the world and the all too short time of human life as part of a rhetoric of urgency, to name just two,<sup>3</sup> - seem to have played somewhat less of a role, at least in the more ardent scholastic debates. Which leads us even one step further, for the less these motifs represent opportunities for Buddhist scholastics to sharpen their profile vis-à-vis the competing schools or distinguish by demonstrating that it is they who interpret the Buddha's word better than any other, the more they are part of a common religious-literary field within which the authors and redactors of ancient and medieval South Asia may have operated. To assume such a situation requires caution in speaking of specifically Buddhist contents, motifs and images, even more so regarding a hypothetical Buddhist conception of time as older studies of time in Buddhism and Hinduism<sup>4</sup> felt self-confident enough to do and as suggested by approaches which try to hammer out conceptions

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<sup>3</sup> It is not the discussion of duration and temporal units in Buddhist cosmographical texts or in general terms of the measurement of time, including references to the human lifespan, I am referring to, which the scholastic literature is rich in (see e.g. AKBh 3,78-93 and 5, 25-27 and AKBh, Vism 472-473).

<sup>4</sup> E.g. Coomaraswamy 1947, Eliade 1952. Balslev 1983.

of time which are supposedly specific to particular religions,<sup>5</sup> not to speak of those who have made such claims regarding the Orient or the Occident. In contrast to well-articulated doctrinal texts, those with a pronouncedly weaker orthodox affiliation give us the opportunity to remain methodologically and epistemologically, historically and contextually open in various directions, to locate both con- and disjunctures, to trace processes and the powers which propel them, instead of leading us on to expect or encourage doctrines, positions, conditions or even cultures to collide with each other. More specific to the field, the interest in these texts this article pursues is to explore the literary areas which stretch out around the pockets of more technical doctrinal discussions touching on time. The well-known Buddhist doctrine of relatively late South Asian origin, called *kṣaṇikavāda*, that everything exists only for a moment, a *kṣaṇa*, a highly differentiated and in its intellectual consistency extreme formulation of the ancient Buddhist doctrine of the impermanence of the merely apparently permanent<sup>6</sup> has historically lent itself to draw clear dogmatic lines vis-à-vis the Brahmanical and Jain doctrines of the permanence of the individual or cosmic soul and has historically led to a lively debate and a rich apologetic and polemical philosophical medieval South Asian literature. In contrast, texts which highlight, to name just three topics with strong time content, the incalculable duration of the world, the ceaseless repetition of the cycle of birth and death or the dramatic brevity of human life, are found in Buddhist, Brahmanical and Jain literatures and point at a shared cosmological, eschatological and temporal knowledge, which represents the most common and basic yet least elaborated layer of literary religious articulation within the three traditions. We here operate on a level of literary articulation in which the way time is dealt with is neither specific to individual religious traditions nor even

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<sup>5</sup> Gardet et al. 1976; Dux 1989; Tiemersma & Oosterling 1994.

<sup>6</sup> For the history of its emergence see von Rospatt 1995, for its discussion in the Theravāda Abhidhamma and commentarial literature see Kim 1999.

to regional cultures without at the same time having to be termed anthropologically constant or universal. Dealing with time as incredibly long duration, with time as the relation between on the one hand the uniqueness and on the other hand the repetition of events or with time as that which runs out ever too soon, is nothing that we would expect to find only in religious texts from South Asia. It suffices to think of the Greek *aion* with its Homeric semantic field of longevity, the Avestan limitless *zruuan- akaran-*, the time of God of the Abrahamic faiths or, on the other hand, the time spent in hell, whatever its religious affiliation, the transmigration of the soul in Pythagorean thought and its Platonic and Neoplatonic echoes or the becoming flesh of God the Father, the cyclic character of the Christian and Islamic liturgical years, the Roman *memento mori* or the theology of the mortality of man as a consequence of the original sin, - to see how similar such attempts are, that deal with experiences found in literatures dating from the most diverse periods, hailing from the most diverse places, as soon as they deal with the kinds of time that preoccupy religious texts most. There are good reasons to argue that in each case we are talking about very different doctrines and to be reluctant to even suspect that the apparent communality of such motifs may go back to transcultural universal archetypes, to anthropological-existential constants which would have in independent historical instances necessarily sprung from the intellectual engagement with nature, individuality, death and hence time. On the contrary, we should perhaps rather ask whether it is the tradition and circulation of fragments of images, motifs, narratives and texts, indeed, of reading experiences which lies behind the emergence, development, resemblance and translatability of such cultural expressions. And it is probably just the loosening of religious, doctrinal and cultural specificity and the connectivity of rhetorical tone and literary motifs across sectarian and religious boundaries at very specific points in history across geographic trajectories which allows for certain particular images, motifs, puzzles, questions, problems and literary

representations to be appropriated across boundaries of language and religious affiliation. And yet again, in moments of a tightening of religious, doctrinal and cultural specificity, characteristic for redactory and commentarial projects, they find their place in larger texts and collections of texts, harnessing their literary power for purposes that make these texts and the fragments and motifs they contain specifically Buddhist.

Indeed and in line with a sceptical attitude towards quick analogies and lazy universals it may be fruitful to be hesitant to speak of “time” not only when referring to certain practices and technologies, but particularly when referring to certain texts in which the English word “time” does not even figure, because they have been written in other languages, such as the Pāli, Gāndhārī or Sanskrit of our sources, instead of the one English term “time”, feature several words which all denote various aspects of what is less specifically covered by “time”.<sup>7</sup> How adequate is it, or, to ask differently, what are we doing, what consequences does it have and, more precisely, which insights do we preclude ourselves from having when we maintain that in depictions of the *duration* of the world, the *repetition* of birth and the *brevity* of life we are consistently dealing with time. Are we not in fact dealing with duration, repetition and brevity? Does not even the English “time” hide rather than cover much more specific individual “times”, which do not necessarily demand to be brought together by the singular, which may not even be pluralized variants of a more general term, which may not even have as much in common with each other as the term suggests? May not duration have more in common with endurance or exhaustion than with time, repetition with coercion or with familiarity, brevity with dalliance or with lack. Much more in common with these domains, at least in certain texts, for a certain public, in a certain historical phase, rather than with that

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<sup>7</sup> A sceptical attitude towards the usefulness of this term regarding Chinese sources is taken by François Julien in his study “Du ‘temps’. Éléments d’une philosophie du vivre” (Julien 2001).

which may be measured by a dial, a digit or a screen or with a term, such as momentariness, that may be used to make very specific ontological and epistemological claims? And is it not the case that regarding all these individual “times”, if we may call them thus,<sup>8</sup> duration, repetition, brevity,<sup>9</sup> we pretty much know what we are talking about, while we usually start fishing in murky waters when we start talking about “time” and would rather point at our watch or get bogged down in lists featuring terms such as "subjective", "objective", "cyclical", "linear," "historic," "mythical," “social,” "physical," "calendrical" time and so forth adding ever novel binaries to the same unchanged and increasingly bloated term.<sup>10</sup> And we eventually, both eruditely and frivolously, end up referring to Saint Augustine, who in his Confessions famously confesses to only knowing what time is as long as nobody asks him to tell. One reason why we do not know to say what time is because may be the term means too many things and that that surplus, which lies buried under the weight of that very term, would be worth interrogating regarding its significance for us, - for us, the readers of texts which deal with duration, repetition and brevity, and more importantly for those individuals and communities who have composed, redacted, read, understood and commented upon them as well as the

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<sup>8</sup> In his study of early Greek poetry and the polymorphy of the temporal expressions found therein Michael Theunissen favors the term "times" (*Zeiten*) to signify the individual “temporal expressions”: “Die Signifikate dieser Ausdrücke mag man *Zeitformen* nennen. Angemessener ist wohl, sie einfachhin als *Zeiten* zu bezeichnen. Sind sie doch [...] keine bloß akzidentiellen Besonderungen einer Zeit überhaupt, unter deren Begriff sie sich restlos subsumieren ließen.” (2000, 1–2).

<sup>9</sup> Steven Collins, to whom I am deeply indebted in my engagement with Pāli literature in general and my attempts to ask and answer the questions such as those raised in this article in particular, has interrogated the same sources exploring the ways the understanding of time may be made more productive by looking at narrative, particularly when talking about the Buddha’s self-removal from the round of rebirth as conveying the “sense of an ending” and its literary representation as “textualization of time” (Collins 1992; Collins 2000: 234–281).

<sup>10</sup> I am as reluctant to use the word “temporality” which, carrying with it the phenomenological and ontological debts of Heidegger’s “*Zeitlichkeit*” and thus unable to shake off its primary and overarching interest in the futurity of time (Theunissen 1991, 343–347), is in its totalizing scope, in my eyes, not helpful for understanding either the singularity of the premodern South Asian poetic formulations dealt with in this article in particular or the scholastic Buddhist preoccupation with impermanence in general.

associated dilemmas which the listener and reader shall experience when moving from one text to the other, from one reading experience to the other and which will make them and us wonder and fear. So let us have a look at some of these wonderful and frightful sites.<sup>11</sup>

## 2. For much too long

The first part of the Threefold Basket contains a collection called that of the "Conjoined Texts" (*Samyuttanikāya*), in which individual, mostly free-standing texts are arranged thematically. One of these themes is "the unfathomable beginning", (Pā. *anamatagga*).<sup>12</sup> The texts in this group all begin uniformly with the Buddha announcing to his monastic followers, the earliest beginning of the series of births and rebirths, called "roaming" (Pā. *saṃsāra*), in which due to their ignorance and their greed all living beings transmigrate from a happy or less happy existence to the next, condemned to live on and suffer on, that the beginning of this process lies beyond our imagination, that we cannot talk about a prior beginning, about an origin as, even if there was such a thing, it would lie so far in the past that our mental powers would not suffice to go back to that source.<sup>13</sup> The texts assembled here differ in respect to the examples supposedly provided by the Buddha which are meant to make that point. The first two examples are those closest to the very idea of a sequence of births, as they challenge us such as

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<sup>11</sup> This article has emerged out of my forthcoming monograph project on "times" in Pāli literature, which branches out further and more systematically into commentarial literature and variant readings including but not limited to the texts and the kinds of texts discussed here.

<sup>12</sup> *Anamataggasamyutta*, SN II 178.1-193.8.

<sup>13</sup> "[Having] a beginning that cannot be reckoned (*anamatagga*), o *bhikkhus*, [that is] *saṃsāra*; the earlier end is not realized by the beings who run about and go about, shackled by thirst, obstructed by ignorance." (*anamataggāyaṃ bhikkhave saṃsāro pubbakoti na paññāyati avijjānīvaraṇānaṃ sattānaṃ taṇhāsaṃyojanānaṃ sandhāvataṃ samsarataṃ*, for example SN II 178,8-10).

in the first text (SN II 178,3-26) to imagine that somebody collect all (and the text says *all*) blades of grass, sticks, twigs and leaves (*tiṇakattḥasākhā palāsaṃ*) of the part of the world inhabited by humans, the continent of Jambudīpa (Skt. Jambudvīpa). Starting with the first item he would say “This is my mother”, continue with the next by saying “This is my mother’s mother” and so on. The point is driven home by the following statement which claims that he who would count thus would exhaust all the material at his disposition, grass, sticks and so on, before reaching the end of that genealogical line. A very similar exercise is carried out by the protagonist of the second text (SN II 179, 1-20) who uses up the whole earth to roll balls of mud the size of jujube seeds (*kolattḥimattaṃ mattikāgūlikāṃ*), the first for his father, the second for his grandfather and so on with an analogous outcome. The figure of the past existences of every single living being is equated with the open-ended maternal or paternal lineage, in which origin, genealogy and kinship is perverted into that which collapses into the nameless, the innumerable and the bottomless and for which the visible, graspable, measurable world is not big enough, provides not enough multiples, countables, i.e. objective, spatial material to serve as support for our imagination to fathom the temporal depths of a ceaselessly repeating event. Crucially, the persons who are here counted and who function as the measure of the incommensurable are one’s own progenitors who have their share in keeping going the process of conceiving and giving birth, of dying and outliving, who hence represent the life and afterlife of him who inherits the maternal or paternal lineage and who does not exchange the life as a householder for the celibate life of a monk or a nun. At the same time the image may appeal to filial piety which throughout the history of Buddhism has remained the other side of renunciation: even the love for one’s highly respected parents and ancestors pales in view of the numbers produces by one’s generational predecessors. The horror of a



predicament beyond imagination has its origin precisely in what one holds dearest. The horror emerges from that which is dear, and that which is dear is submerged in horror.

The two texts of the genealogical tree without roots have their counterpart in the following twin texts. Here the immeasurable shifts from the domain of one's own ancestors to that of one's own body and individuality as projected onto one's own past births. Rhetorically the anonymous authors and redactors have the Buddha ask in the following text SN II 179,21–180,26: “What is more, o monks, the stream of tears (*assupasannaṃ*), which you have shed during this long time of roaming and running around while being joined to that which is not dear and being separated from that which is, - or the water of the Four Oceans?” Analogously the subsequent text SN II 179,21–180,26 asks about the ratio ocean : milk , specifically that milk drunk from one's mother's breast (*mātuthaññaṃ pītaṃ*), or rather one's mothers' breasts' when going through all one's past lives throughout one's repeated infancies. These images are considerably more chilling. Firstly, they suggest a quantification over time of bodily processes and that which in them is excreted and consumed: how many tears does one actually shed when one cries, how much milk must a woman spill to fill, say a one-gallon bottle? Once we multiply, as this text suggests, successive human and animal existences the bizarre experiment of merely adding measurable quantities, we embark in the construction and projection of unlimited bodily resources. The second dramatic leap here is that in order to perform that projection and justify the expansion the subject's individuality and identity requires to be extended to his or her past existences. Contrary to the common view that Buddhism denies or at least remains sceptical regarding personal identity, here at least rhetorically, metaphorically, poetically, - but I would be generally careful to draw such distinctions, - the opposite point is made: all the tears which we have cried in our past existences, all the maternal milk that we have drawn produce an individual, which becomes

the measure of the incommensurable and in turn becomes itself incommensurable, ungraspable, - which in turn ends up being very doctrinally Buddhist. Finally, we should ask: why liquids? The images of bodily excretions are used in Buddhist literature since its earliest sources to represent the physical as repulsive, be it to counter the ancient Indian ideal of beauty embodied by the erotic female body, be it during the meditative description of the decomposition of corpses. The trace of a tear or the image of a suckling baby may be endearing: oceans of tears and breast milk are definitely not. To draw a rhetorical parallel: butter and milk on our breakfast table may be pleasing, - the mountains of butter and the lakes of milk evoked by the critics of EU's agro-policy are meant not to. And what this text tries regarding the past Winston Churchill may have tried for the future when announcing in his war-cabinet opening speech on May 13<sup>th</sup>, 1940: "I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears and sweat." The Buddhist images in addition, however, point out something different: now and again you may wipe away a tear or two and soldier on, but try wiping away an ocean of them. They point at the fact that we forget and try not to be aware of how many tears we have shed and that though time may heal all wounds, it also contains all their pain in it. And we can only be made aware of this, - the Buddhist authors knew this, - if we develop techniques, project literary images which allow us to connect one pain to the other, which in turn opens up corridors of time the vaster and farther the more pain they can accommodate. The breast milk, instead, points at the ambivalence regarding the female body referred to before, at the revulsion towards the female body as a literary trope, at the debt the monk and the nun feel towards their nurturing mother, and at the nurture and only temporary quenching of the infant's greed which keeps the wheel of birth and death rolling.

Interestingly, the next four texts are of an entirely different kind. They do not start with the formula of the unfathomable beginning, but close with it and elaborate that we have wandered

for many *kappas* (Skt. *kalpas*), for many hundreds of thousands of *kappas* from birth to birth. Consequentially, these texts start with a monk asking the Buddha: “O venerable one, how long is a *kappa*?”<sup>14</sup> or “O Venerable one, how many *kappas* have already passed and lapsed?”<sup>15</sup>. To this the Buddha replies that it is not useful to say that a *kappa* is so-and-so many years long, or that so-and-so many *kappas* have passed, which in turn prompts the monk to ask the Buddha to utter an *upamā*, to formulate a visual example. The first image, SN II 181,24–31, is also found in a tale recorded by the Grimm brothers<sup>16</sup> in which a king circulates a series of extremely difficult questions which only a little shepherd boy is able to answer, one of which being the question: how long is eternity? While the shepherd boy knows of a mountain in Outer Pomerania (made of diamond!) on which a bird wets its beak once every hundred years, the Buddha mentions a mighty mountain with a man swiping a piece of Benares silk against its rock once in a century.<sup>17</sup> The mountain will have been withered away before a *kappa*, or, in the more Christian-romantic poetic language of the Grimms, by the time the first second of eternity has passed. This image acquires its power from its incremental composition: extreme endurance plus extreme inadequateness of the material and its application, plus extreme temporal extension help induce a process in the mind of the reader or listener in which, while it is possible to understand the expected physical changes alluded to in the text, the challenge is to imagine the conditions under which their pace is such that their progression almost grinds to a halt. The attempt to make it possible to imagine minimal efficacy over time works thanks to a mechanism which produces two reactions in the reader or listener: to follow the unfolding of

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<sup>14</sup> *kiṃ va dīgho nu kho bhante kappoti*, e.g. SN II 182,10.

<sup>15</sup> *kiṃva bahukā nu kho bhante kappā abbatitā atikantāti*, e.g. SN II 183,3-4.

<sup>16</sup> “[...] in Hinterpommern liegt der Demantberg, der hat eine Stunde in die [73] Höhe, eine Stunde in die Breite und eine Stunde in die Tiefe; dahin kommt alle hundert Jahre ein Vögelein und wetzt sein Schnäbelein daran, und wenn der ganze Berg abgewetzt ist, dann ist die erste Sekunde der Ewigkeit vorbei.” (Grimm & Grimm 1984: 73-74).

<sup>17</sup> *tam enam puriso vassasatassa vassasatassa accayena kāsikena vatthena sakim sakim parimajjeyya*, SN II 181,27-28

the image, to try to understand it in the sense of “what is it talking about”, hence to accept the challenge to imagine what the image in its accumulative stagger is trying to suggest, hence to actually attempt to visualize what kind of time scales we are dealing with here. The second reaction is necessarily the one in which the function of the image is fulfilled: the feeling of being overstretched, of not being able to follow, of failure, and the emotional reaction expressed in a smile or in shaking one’s head, to wonder, to be speechless, maybe to admire the artfulness of the image and to understand what the image has tried to achieve, being to have us say “Now, *that* is a long time.” But what for?

The answer may be found in a text, SN II 185,6–186,2, which the redactors gave the title “Person” (*puggala*) and placed at the end of the collection and in which the three types of image which we have encountered so far, that of counting out past births, the addition of bodily secretions and the depiction of a marvel of nature, seem to converge. Instead of dealing with *kappas* here we return to fathoming the unfathomable beginning, but in truth it turns out to be something quite different from an attempt at overstressing one’s imagination. “Say”, the Buddha is made to pronounce, “a single person encumbered by ignorance and fettered with greed, roaming and wandering [on the rounds of rebirth], - and assuming a crematory collector (*samharako*) would collect (*sambhatañca*) them and they would not be destroyed (*na vinasseyya*), - leave behind a huge pile, a hill, a dump of bones (*mahā atthikañkalo atthipuñjo atthirāsi*) - it would be as high as Mount Vepulla” (SN II 185,10-13). One ought to add that Mount Vepulla stands out as the highest peak of the Magadhan Mountain Range surrounding the city of Rājagaha and would be located north of Vulture Peak, where the Buddha is giving this sermon, making it a prominent feature of a sacred landscape constructed by the narratives of the Buddha’s life and works. This image is more than a mere mind game. Basically the Buddha is saying to the monks: you see that mountain over there? Imagine it were a pile made

up of the bones of your past existences. Rather than an exercise in futility this one is an exhortation to engage in a particular meditative practice: the meditation on the impure, Pā. *asubha-kamma-ṭṭhana*, especially the Nine Cremation Ground Meditations (*sīvathikā*), which belong to the standard repertory of the mental exercises of monks and nuns. Every South- and Southeast Asian of some repute has its own “skeleton in the closet,” usually a human skeleton kept on display in a shed in order to spare one the trip to the cremation ground, in front of which the meditators may regularly take a seat. The processual nature and the temporary results of death, decay and impermanence are the experiences and the doctrinal content embodied by this object and it is always first of all one’s own death and decay, one’s own bones, oneself as corpse which marks the point of departure. This text encourages to engage in this kind of practice, only extended to the degree that it is oneself who has been reproducing death and embodying decay as long as the world is old. As soon as we read this image from the perspective of meditational practice one may realize what is supposed to hit one when being overwhelmed by one’s own speechless wonder at the previous images: an almost cosmic horror at one’s own life. A reminder of this is the line which recurs after every image of this collection discussed so far: “For such a long time, o monks, you have experienced suffering, experienced fear, experienced terror and have let the cremation grounds prosper. Such is enough, o monks, to develop regarding all composite things revulsion, equanimity and liberation”.<sup>18</sup> All images hammer home the fact that the world, that the cycle of birth and death has been around for as long as we know and of course this can be read a doxological contribution to the Buddhist scepticism towards any form of cosmology of beginnings, be it a creator god, the creation *ex nihilo* or the Big Bang. What is more important here, though, is

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<sup>18</sup> *evaṃ dīgharattam vo bhikkhave dukkham paccanubhūtam tibbam paccanubhūtaṃ vyasanaṃ paccanubhūtaṃ kaṭasi vaḍḍhitā. yāvañcidam bhikkhave alam eva sabbasaṅkhāresu nibbindituṃ alaṃ virajjituṃ alaṃ vimuccitunti*, SN II 178,24-25.

not so much that time is *very*, even unimaginably long, but that time is *too* long, “too” like in too long for us to endure, that this time is *our* time and that in it our suffering is spelt out and that we for the first time become aware of its scale, if not of its intensity then at least of its duration. We are made aware of how much such images not only overstretch our capacity to think and to imagine it, but how much our own frightfully persistent existence as humans, if viewed through the appropriate images, overstretches our own capacity for suffering. As the corpse is meant to help develop the meditator’s sensibility for his or her own death, similarly these texts are meant to extend the listeners or readers consciousness to the extent of the suffering in them and beyond their present persona, the *puggala*, surely also in order to help them gather forces by the very process of revulsion and be ready to learn techniques of distancing and control, towards which these texts already point. Even in a more pious, devotional sense comfort can be taken in the fact that the mountain of bones is located in the landscape in which the Buddha trod, preaching the *dhamma*, and, - as we shall see at the conclusion of this chapter, - it is this *dhamma*, which teaches the monks the way by which even the cosmically high can be made low.

Before that, however, we still have to continue a little while on our stroll through the Buddhist Valley of Tears and consider an image which is much more ubiquitous in Buddhist literature than the examples discussed so far. It too deals with long, excessively long time. It is the image of a blind or, depending on the reading, one-eyed turtle (*kāṇo kacchapo*): "Suppose a man, o monks, threw a one-eyed yoke into the ocean and the eastern wind makes it drift to the west, the western wind to the east, the northern wind to the south, the southern wind to the north, and suppose there was a blind turtle that surfaces once every 100 years (so *vassasatassa accayena sakiṃ ummujjeyya*). What do you think, o monks, would she [ever] stick her neck into that one-eyed yoke? " [The monks reply:] 'If at all, Blessed One, then only after a very long

time (*yadi nūna bhante kadāci karahaci dīghassa addhuno accayenāti*). "[Then the Buddha said:] 'Yes, sooner (*khippantaram*) would a blind turtle stick her neck through that one-eyed yoke, than fool, o monks, be reborn as a human.'" (MN III 169,9- 22).<sup>19</sup> The reader of the Gospels may feel reminded of Matthew 19:23-24 stating that: "Rather would a camel to go through an eye of a needle than for a rich man enter the kingdom of God,"<sup>20</sup> an image which, with variations, is shared with the Talmud and the Q'uran.<sup>21</sup> As we would expect anyway by now, the Buddhist image is much meaner, so to speak: a turtle's head fits easily through a yoke hole and we might have to think of the large wither yokes still used in South and Southeast Asia today which are fixed to the neck of zebu cattle or water buffalo with cords and staves. But the devil lies in the details of the much tougher conditions, unpredictable winds, the vastness of the ocean, the size of a yoke with only one hole, not even two, the rarity in which the two movables meet on the same spatial level, and a turtle with, just in case eyesight would have encouraged her to engage in some very un-turtle-like behaviour such as that of domesticated bovines, heavily impaired vision. Similarly as with the man with his Benares silk cloth and even more similarly to the bird on that mountain in Outer Pomerania aggravating circumstances are added, which are less about delaying the process merely in quantitative terms, but keep it highly unlikely to ever happen. The mountain will, following the image's own logic and granted a copious supply of the Banarsi textile industry, have withered away at some point, if not in this *kappa*, in those to come. But a turtle with a yoke collar may be more and more likely the closer we approach infinity, - yet it will never be certain. Even more than about duration, constructed by using the movement of bodies in space, plus duration in years, plus frustration, this image is about the

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<sup>19</sup> Variants can be found in SN V 455,23-456,26 and in SN V 456,27-457,16. For a discussion of the allegory, see Norman 1970-71, 331-335 as well as Upadhye 1972-73, 323-326. For the Gāndhārī version see more recently Allon 1997.

<sup>20</sup> Parallels in Mark 10:24-25 and Luke 18:24-25.

<sup>21</sup> Berakhot 55b; Sura 7, Al-Araf, 007.040.

unlikely. Here excessively long time is the relation between the conditions for a certain event to take place and its probability. Doctrinally this text is not meant to demonstrate how long we have been around suffering, but how wildly improbable it is that we will ever be reborn as humans again. It is crucial to know here that *nibbāna* (Skt. *nirvāṇa*) or escape out of the cycle of birth and rebirth, is only possible for humans, as only humans can both listen to, understand and, crucially, comprehensively follow the Buddha's teachings. Hence this image in its negativity an exhortation to realize the opportunity that this existence offers, to listen to the word of the Buddha, to worship him, to internalize the Five Precepts (*pañcasīla*) and, optimally, to ordain, to forsake lay life and follow the Buddha's example, - and, in addition, to start with this as soon as possible, because death and the next birth will arrive not a moment too late. The image of the blind turtle shows us that excessively long, bad time may, if rarely, turn into something else and that is opportunity, good time, time which is good-for.<sup>22</sup> But it is in this good time as life as a human that the excessively long time of not being born as human not only turns into the all-to-seldom, but collapses into the all-too-short. Because the life as human is too short to waste time.

### 3. All too short a date

Curiously, one of the most poetic formulations of the brevity of human life included in the canon of the Theravādins is made by a teacher, who is not otherwise known as a Buddhist. The anonymous authors and redactors in a text fittingly called the *Arakasutta* have the Buddha extensively quote a *tirthāṅkara* with an impressive following named Araka preaching to a

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<sup>22</sup> Such as the constellation of conditions favourable to the *dhmma* having salvific consequences depicted in the *Akkhaṇāsutta* of the *Aṭṭhakanipāta* (AN IV 225,22-228,14).



brahman (AN IV 136.17-139.27) by the redactors: "Insignificant (*appakaṃ*), brahman, is the life of humans, a remnant (*parittaṃ*), scarce (*lahukaṃ*), full of great suffering (*dukkha*), full of great concern." (AN IV 136.17). This conclusion follows a series of images representing the length of the life of man: "Just as, brahman, at the rising of the sun a drop of dew (*ussāva-bindu*) on a grass tip evaporates (*paṭivigacchati*) very fast (*khippaṃ yeva*) [and] does not last long (*na hoti ciraṭṭhikaṃ*), [...] [j]ust as, if the [rain] god lets rain down big rain drops onto the water the water bubble (*udaka-bubbulaṃ*) is soon to burst [and] does not last long, [...] [j]ust as, brahman, a line [drawn] with a stick (*danda-rāji*) on water (*udake*) is quickly dissipated [and] does not last long, [...] [j]ust as, brahman, a mountain stream (*nadi pabbateyya*), widely flowing, fast running (*sīghasota*), constantly tearing away (*hārahārini*), rests (*āramati*) not for a moment, [a *khana* or *laya* or *muhutta*], but moves (*gacchati*), proceeds (*vattati*), flows (*savati*) all the time, [...] [j]ust as, brahman, a vigorous man could, having collected it on the tip of [his] tongue, with little effort eject (*vameyya*) a blob of saliva (*khela-piṇḍaṃ*), [...] [j]ust as, brahman, a piece of meat (*maṃsapesī*) thrown in to an iron pot that has been heated for an entire day (*divasa-santatta*) fizzes away in no long time, [...] a cow which is to be slaughtered, is led to the slaughter place whichever hoof she raises, gets [increasingly] close to being slaughtered [and thus] to dying, just as, brahman, a cow which is to be slaughtered so is the life of humans, a remnant (*parittaṃ*), scarce (*lahukaṃ*), full of great suffering (*dukkha*), full of great concern" And this list (AN IV 137.2-138.9), as every single image in it, closes with the words: "Through [these] teachings (*mantāya*) take insight, do good, live chastely (*caritabbaṃ brahmacariya*)." The first four images are variations of water: dewdrop, water bubble, a line drawn on water, a mountain stream, of which dew and bubble visualize the smallest, most fleeting, almost unnoticeable, but also manifold, repetitive, the other extreme of mountain and ocean. The watery trace includes the human agent, but the focus rests on the futility to obtain something lasting, on

evanescence as status quo. The mountain stream is a more complex image: the brevity of duration attributed to the other phenomena is reduced further, as the stream does not even stop for an instant, a *khana* or a *muhutta*, the smallest known temporal units in South Asian literatures, and furthermore, dives violently downhill. With saliva and meat the imagery enters the domain of the living and the body, uses motifs of powerful disgust and violent destruction. The image of man as piece of steak on the barbeque of life is as uncompromising as it is striking. The combination of cooking, food, consumption and death, as we will see further on, is not unusual in Pāli Buddhist literature: “*Kāla* devours all,” is a verse found in the collection of canonized Buddhist birth stories, the *Jātaka*, where the event of death, ending and destruction in its powerful, temporal and more particularly momentary form (*kāla*) is also called “the cook of beings”.<sup>23</sup> The other image, that of powerful expectoration, here and in Buddhist literature more generally, as in North American baseball culture rather a sign of pronounced masculinity rather than of bad manners, is frequently used in less existential contexts to help imagine instances of teleportation involving practically no time, such as when the Buddha, so to speak, beams himself across rivers or into various heavens. In such contexts other images are equally popular such as “as fast as a strong man can bend and stretch his arm”,<sup>24</sup> or “like a strong man may snap his fingers”.<sup>25</sup> Compare the transculturally shared gesture of snapping one’s fingers to express “in no time”, “just like that”, or the German expressions such as “im Augenblick” (literally, in a gaze) or “im Handumdrehen” (lit. in the

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<sup>23</sup> “*Kāla* devours all beings and even itself, / Yet who devours *kāla*, he cooks the cook of beings.” (*kālo ghasati* [the Burmese ms. reads *yapati*, for *yapeti*, “propels”?] *bhūtāni sabbān’eva sah’attanā / yo ca kālaghaso* [the alternative Copenhagen mss both read *kāloghaso*] *bhūto sa bhūtapacaniṃ pacī ti // Jā II 260,20–21*). The commentary on this passage found in MN-a I 58,13–27 takes the punch out of these dramatic lines by claiming that it is the times of the day that “devour” each other by each limiting the duration of the preceding one.

<sup>24</sup> *seyyathā pi nama balavā puriso sammīñjitaṃ baham pasāreyya va, va pasāritaṃ baham sammīñjeyya*, e.g. AN II 20.31-21.4.

<sup>25</sup> *pi seyyathā ānanda balavā puriso appakasirena accharikaṃ pahareyya*, e.g. MN III 299,25-26.

turning of a hand) or the Italian “in un battimano” (lit. in a clap of the hand) to express the same, - examples of the subtle ways in which the visual and the body are preserved in the linguistic representation of temporal experience and practice and, while appearing formal, frozen and arrested, keeping alive that which remains unsolved about the modalities of talking about time. Returning to the text, most of the images transcend the boundaries of either Buddhist faith or texts and are equally found in the epics and in courtly poetry: whatever Araka may have intended in his appeal to the brahman, the Buddhist editors see this as a very clear formulation of the human condition on the one hand, as an illustration of impermanence (*anicca*), one of three main features of the world, in relation to human existence, besides suffering (*dukkha*) and the intangibility of a stable personal substrate (*anatta*), on the other hand as an appeal to follow the Buddha’s advice as soon as possible, as even soon may be too late. The pictures of Araka are shorter, less arithmetic than poetic, less overwhelming than melancholic. As in the other thought images, however, they provoke surprise, and the surprise lies in the poetic transfer which the reader or listener is expected to perform when the text demands to equate the irrelevance or drama of the natural event with the image of the human life.

### 3 Less and less time

A picture I have left uncommented so far is that of the cow, and consciously so, as it opens up a completely different type of development and representation of time. So far, one could summarize, we have encountered two different, opposing literary techniques of producing time before our mental eye. The images from the collection of the unfathomable beginning, including the turtle, constructed excessively long time as if stretching through the addition of

elements our sense of time on a mental Procrustean bed until the joints would crack. With the blind turtle the technique of adding parts was supplemented by that of subtracting occasions. In all cases, the target was maximum strain. Instead the images in Araka's sermon construct short, excessively short time by equating the human lifespan with processes which happen under conditions of extreme acceleration and which terminate abruptly. They are very different from the earlier images as they do not help initiate extended mental processes and do not unfold as the text proceeds. On the contrary, the time of the human lifespan conceived of as duration is compressed to an image that merely flares up, shocks and is followed by the next. This compression happens in an attempt to think at once the disparate, say lifespan and water bubble, and to let both be replaced by an equally extreme identification. The lack of mediation between the one and the other manages to startle with fewer means and equally calls for a strategy, a technique that promises the reader or listener to react adequately. The inclusion of a hint at a possible exit strategy can only be accomplished by another kind of image, of which that of the cow may give us an idea.

As we have seen according to AN IV 138, 4-7 of the *Arakasutta* human life is like "a cow which is to be slaughtered (*gavi vajjhā*), is led to the slaughter place (*āghātanam*) with every hoof (*yañ ñad eva pādam*) she raises, gets [increasingly] close to being slaughtered (*vadhassa santike*) [and thus] to dying (*marañassa*)".<sup>26</sup> What is striking is that it is not the extreme brevity of life the image articulates, because the trip to the slaughterhouse cannot compete in brevity with dew drops and bubbles. The dominant theme seems to be the theme of change or in this case

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<sup>26</sup> Turnour's Sinhalese ms reads *vajjham*, "place of slaughter". The Burmese ms from Mandalay and that of Phayre both read *vaddhassa*, "rope", instead of *vadhassa*, which would suggest the image of a cow being lead to the place of slaughter on a rope, reminding one of the noose (*pāśa*) of Yama, the King of the Dead. F.L. Woodward translates in accordance with the Pali Text Society's edition *vadhassa* as "nearer to destruction" (AN transl. Woodward & Hare IV 92), and interprets the image as a progression. Nyānatiloka translates *vadha* more freely as "very near the edge of death" (AN transl. Nyānatiloka III 278).

movement in space irrevocably poised towards and in dramatic proximity to the event of annihilation as with the mountain stream or the piece of meat. And yet, the point of the image seems to lie in the statement that "whichever hoof" (*yañ ñad eva pādaṃ*) or "with every hoof" she raises she is in the ever increasing proximity to death. As the brevity in the mountain stream is found in the fact that it does not stop even for a *khana*, so in this case brevity lies in the cow's individual paces, so that her last walk can be reduced to the steps she makes. The fact that her movement leads her nowhere else than to her death is obvious, for she is led, the way to the slaughter is the way to the slaughter and actually, as the ritualized cry of the officer in US-American death rows "Dead man walking" goes, or as the German slang expression "der Tod auf Latschen" (lit. Death in slippers) has it, referring to someone who is not looking as well as usually would, in a sense the cow is already dead. Hence, business as usual. Sure: the human being as dead man walking, that would suffice for a strong Buddhist image conducive to the mindfulness of death (*maraṇasati*). The surprising and the horrific about this image, however, is contained in the series of steps: the tension between the direction of that walk and the unobtrusiveness of each little step. Even something so short, small, harmless and still so decisive as a step carries death within it. Death, so the possible analogy to human beings, is not acknowledged because one dies one step at a time while deluding oneself that it is only one step and possibly only a small and only one or maybe two. The literary technique at work here is the breaking-down of an extended process, the walk, into its constituents, its steps, to make us understand its processuality, yet, even more so to show us that the result is intrinsic to every single part without us being aware of the fact that the creature that walks is contributing to the result right now and throughout. What remains unexpressed in this image is that we may not be able to influence the process at large, the process as predicament, but

that we can influence our small, daily steps and that, should we exert that influence, we would have the chance to influence the overall outcome as well.

The inconspicuousness of death becomes even more uncanny when further on in the *Arakasutta*, the teacher Araka applies this kind of literary device much more concretely and devastatingly so to the human lifespan. After pointing out that in spite of the fact that the life expectancy of humans was much higher in the ages prior to the present day and that he would still have dinned into them the brevity of human life, and that by implication how much more urgent his message would be for present-day humans, he proceeds to analyze in AN IV 138,24–139,24 what the present day human lifespan actually comes down to. He takes “100 years or a little more” (*vassasatam appamā vā bhiiyo*) as the traditional South Asian upper limit, mentions the three seasons (*utu*) conventionally known in South Asia, the dry season, the rainy season and winter, and reckons that we, to our shock and horror, our life is only 300 seasons long, 100 dry seasons, 100 rainy seasons and 100 winters. Assuming 4 months (*māsa*) per season he calculates 400 months per season in one lifetime equating our life to a total of 1200 months. He does the same for the fortnights (*addhamāsa*) and once he arrives on level of days and nights (counted as “nights”, *ratti*) he counts 12 000 days of dry season, 12 000 days of rainy season and 12 000 days of winter, making a total of 36,000 days. Araka pushes it even further breaking down the days to the daily meals (*bhatta*): three a day makes 24 000 meals in the dry season, 24 000 meals in rainy season and 24 000 meals in winter, making a total of 72 000 meals per life. And that is, at least according to the text’s rhetoric generously calculated, for, Araka adds, it includes being breastfed by one’s mother (although, at least to contemporary breastfeeding standards, this should happen 8-12 times a day) and the meals missed because of emotive distress, religious observance or simply lack of food, remembering that Araka’s estimate of 100 years for one life was on the generous side too. Now, 72 000 is not necessarily a

low number. The intention and effect, however, are evident and obviously rhetorical: the mere idea that life has an end and that one is likely to die the closer one moves toward a hundred, is not likely to impress or scare anyone very much. The expression “end of life” and the figure of a hundred years are so abstract and in South Asian literature habitually associated with the term death that it may be taken as a package and ignored as it is not associated with literary experiences of impermanence and decay and cannot be thought of. What causes the first shock is that it is possible to say how many summers we may experience and each step produces a further discomfort until we are able to quantify even that activity which we would associate the least with dying because they are as much part of life, unreflected and taken for granted as placing one foot in front of the other. Suddenly, life, the richness of seasons, the constantly renewed days and the hot meal are countable, comprehensively viewable, limited. And although the figures rise constantly, what is being counted is increasingly that which nobody would think of counting, which we would refuse to count as it would bring our eyes the scarcity of that which keeps us alive and lets us forget that we will die one day.<sup>27</sup> It is remarkable that the author of this exercise (whether this is still an image is something that might be worth debating: to which extent do we visualize seasons and mealtimes?) chooses mealtimes as the ultimate building block of human lifespan, as it recalls not only nourishment and livelihood, but also the dietary regulations of the monastic schedule,<sup>28</sup> which allows for only two daily meals and none between noon and the morning of the following day. Does this suggest that those who have opted for a monastic life would escape the slaughterhouse as they direct their steps, resist to walk the walk by reducing the number of meals? Or rather does the

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<sup>27</sup> In his encyclopaedic *Visuddhimagga* the commentator Buddhaghosa includes the whole collection of images attributed to Araka in his elaboration of *maraṇasati* (Vism 337) and ends by quoting AN XIII 73 which directly links the awareness of mealtimes with death right down to the singular morsel of food and to breathing .

<sup>28</sup> See *pācittiyās* 31-40 of the Theravādin Vinaya’s Pātimokkha section.

increased awareness of the temporal regulation of food in monastic practice and the development of a literary image that merges sustenance and finitude imply a greater consciousness of the fact that we lose our life one meal at a time?

#### 4. The World in Fast Motion, or Nothing Too Big to Fail

That this could be indicative not so much of life in the monastery, but of the ways this specific text could have been read is suggested by the last two images which center once more on mountains. For the first image we return to the Collection of the Unfathomable Beginning. In line with the formulaic nature of the collection the text called *Vepullapabbatam* (SN II 190,21–193,8) begins and ends with the reference to the length of the cycle of birth and death. In the variable part of the text, however, the Buddha points once more at Mount Vepulla and explains that in the past during the time of the buddha Kakusandha this famous mountain had a different name, *Pācīnavam̐sa* (“Eastern Ridge”), was more than four times the size and that the people living at its foot were not called the Magadhans, but Tivarans. These in contrast to the contemporary Magadhans who, if they are lucky, reach the age of 100 years, lived till the impressive age of 40,000 years. The Buddha then reviews two more phases in the history of the mountain and with every new phase the mountain, the buddha and his two main disciples bear different names, as do people dwelling at the mountain foot, one having a shorter life expectancy than the following. Maybe not surprisingly the mountain’s height, measured by the time it takes to climb up and back down,<sup>29</sup> dwindles dramatically too over time. The Buddha mentions the current familiar and unimpressive conditions and announces that in

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<sup>29</sup> Interestingly the shepherd boy’s Outer Pomeranian mountain’s size too is measured by the time units (Grimm & Grimm 1984: 74).



future the mountain will lose its name altogether (*pabbatassa samaññā antaradhāyissati*), possibly implying that it will no longer deserve to be called a mountain, that the people living there will perish and he himself will enter *nibbāna*. Contrary to the case of the towering ossuary or the almost-silk-cloth-resistant mountain here we are dealing with a mountain that noticeably shrinks and will have been briefly called Vepulla before disappearing entirely. Obviously the image draws from shared South Asian narratives of cosmic decay: dramatically falling lifespan rates are the most prominent sign of the fact that the world is going down the Buddhist drain, or should one say mountain stream. On the other hand we find that which is usually present in other Buddhist narratives of decline missing: the moral degeneration of man and community. Change, more crucially disintegration of that which appears most permanent can only be articulated within the framework of long time: so long is the timeframe constructed here that even the most permanent has the time to wither away. Not only does that require time to be compressed and developments fast-forwarded: simultaneously, condensed time has to be decompressed, so that not only impermanence and the relative brevity of the most durable may be represented, but also the length of time, as what this images intends to show is after all that even there where everything takes ages, impermanence and decay rule. To show this the stages of decay have to be followed one after the other, and just as the units which constitute our lifespan become smaller and smaller, thus the decay of the world can be reckoned by the mountain's decreasing height. We may not believe that, may wish to assume that the most durable such as powerful people, giant mountains and hallowed names are not subjected to change and destruction and find consolation in that. In truth we are mistaken regarding the mountain as we are regarding our daily mealtimes: death and destruction lie at the heart both of the domestic and of the cosmic. The thematic frame of this collection aligns this text with those that depict the horrors of excessively long time. The

image itself however, just as the analysis of the human lifespan, seems to perform something else: here we are taught not to expand our awareness of long duration following the model of the duration of the world, or to reduce the limits that keep us from understanding very short time even further, but rather something third: to divide every process, even those which, due to the extremely long time frames it takes to observe them, remain undetectable, into smaller sections and to show that they too are ruled by the same laws that govern a water bubble. But what does that have to do with human beings? Both excessively long and excessively short time highlight their suffering and the fragmentation of their lifespan achieves that particularly effectively. But the analysis of the decay of a mountain? And are not all those images merely meant to scare, variants of *memento mori* intended at terrorising monks into remaining ordained and to motivate the few laypeople who might be exposed to these texts to be devout Buddhists? As a matter of fact, they are something much more important.

For that we come to the last picture: the collapse of the super-mountain, so to speak. In a text called *Suriyaṃ* or “the Sun” (AN IV 100,1-103,22), which reads like a continuation of the story of the disintegration of Mt. Vepulla, the Buddha is made to speak about the future. The Buddha starts with a variation of the standard closing formula of the short texts of the Collection on Unfathomable Beginning reminding the listeners of the evanescent and disappointing nature of all composite things regarding which they better relinquish all attachment and then, as if in contrast, proceeds to describe the majestic proportions of the cosmic mountain, Sineru, better known as Meru in Sanskrit. With that picture in front of everyone’s eyes the Buddha predicts: “There will come, o monks, a time (*hoti kho so ... samayo*) in which for many years (*bahūni vassāni*), many centuries (*vassatāni*), many thousands of years (*vassasahassāni*), many hundreds of thousands of years (*vassatasahassāni*) the [rain] God does not let it rain, and as he does not let rain, seeds and plants, herbs, grasses and trees of the forest wither, dry up and die. [And he

continues:] There will be, monks, a period in which sooner or later (*kadāci karahāci*) after the passing of a long time (*dīghassa addhuno accayena*) a second sun appears. With the appearance of the second sun, monks, all the small rivers [and] ponds will evaporate [and] disappear” (AN IV 100,13-101,1). Subsequently, a third, a fourth and a fifth appear leading to a global environmental meltdown: the Gaṅgā, the Yamunā and all the great rivers evaporate, then the lakes from which they flowed, and finally ocean water start to fall, one mile after another, down a palm length, then height of a human body, then to the length of a finger, and still falling, one joint at a time. Finally the only water left on the ocean floor is the amount held by hoof prints which a cow may leave here and there (*tattha tattha gopadesu udakāni ṭhitāni*). With the sixth sun the earth and the world mountain begin to smoke like a South Asian kiln, smoke billowing from between the bricks, and with the rise of the seventh they both burst into flames, making the sparks fly up into the highest heaven, the world of Brahma until everything has burnt down just like an oil lamp leaving no residues, not even ashes or dust. The inferno sketched here, just as the history of decline referred to before, is a trope of South Asian cosmology, the inevitable fiery end of the world, called *pralaya*, at the end of every cosmic cycle. Images of the dancing Śiva Nāṭaraja in a corona of flames are read as an enactment of this event. But here the god does not dance, indeed the sparks reaching right up to Brahma’s world indicates the precariousness of the divine. This text differs from the scenarios depicting the cycle of birth and death with their tendency towards seriality, open-endedness and transcendence: no cycle, at least not for this text, only destruction. Another key difference lies in the fact that while the previous constructions emerged in their processural structure, reversely here a spatially conceptualized field is posited which begins to break apart and dissolves into nothing. Klingsor’s words from Wagner’s *Parsifal* appear as if reversed: here space becomes time. In the end, in a way, there is not even time left. Certainly, everything we

said about the Mount Vepulla image applies here too, only in a more radical, universalized way. Not only a mountain, the whole earth centred around the cosmic mountain is altered by the powers of destruction and the readers and listeners can follow that process as if we were not part of this world, but witnessing from beyond. And exactly this achievement, that the reader and listener who are part of this world *can* and *ought* to follow this process seems to me the most remarkable fact about this text. Interestingly not only humans but the entire animated world, the human lifespan in its length or brevity, all issues connected to the position of the human between the exceedingly long and the exceedingly brief, even the relation marked by suffering between the dynamic of the image and its recipient seem to be absent from this image. Indeed, the dissolution of the world is described with such precision and detachment which differentiates this text from all the previous ones, as if the place of the human should not be located within the image but somewhere else. It is the commentary dating from the fifth century which give us the clue:<sup>30</sup> it explains that this text was taught by the Buddha to a group of 500 monks as an exercise in meditation on impermanence. Whether the text was actually composed with that intention or not, the tradition within which it was redacted and included into the canonical edifice has understood it in this fashion and there is much in the text which lends its support to this.<sup>31</sup> Particularly, this statement opens up the possibility for understanding all the other texts discussed above as probably being part of a comparable practice, as having emerged out of or at least referencing it. It becomes clear that what most explicitly the texts featuring Mount Vepulla, the meals of a lifetime and the cows

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<sup>30</sup> AN-a IV 50.12-15; cp. Vism 414.34- 417.4. For a more detailed discussion of the connections between meditation and cosmic dissolution in canon and commentary see Gethin 1997: 195-204.

<sup>31</sup> Biardeau 1981 points out the function of *pralaya* in the initiation rituals of the *śamṇyāsins* as well as in the meditation of the *yogi*, who in the process of the description withdraws his sensory perception into himself. On the conjuncture between cosmological events and soteriology see Wessler 1995, 293: “*Pralaya* ist daher strukturell der gemeinsame Bezugspunkt zwischen den Vorgängen am Ende des *yuga* und der individuellen Befreiung von Zwang der Wiedergeburt [...]” For comparable forms in early Buddhist meditation practices, see Vetter 1988.

last stroll, but to a certain degree all the texts here presented, achieve, is that they do not primarily illustrate certain conditions, but primarily produce them literarily and supply the techniques for their reproduction. It is the reproducibility of processes, - and that may be one of the basic principles of meditation, - that presents them as subject to control, creativity and generally human agency, that makes them human. If one understands these texts thus, then they not only evoke pious horror, but function as a literary models for spiritual development and ultimately liberation. They are not only a sophisticated appeal to make a decision in favour of the Buddhist path of liberation, but model how on this path how less the mind rather than one's linguistic experience can be developed and how the time of life and the time of death can be won in constant engagement with these kinds of text. In this sense these texts, - and Buddhaghosa's commentary supports that, - no mere instructions, no meditation manuals, but they have, being the word of the Buddha, of the highest urgency, of the highest efficacy, but also of the highest beauty, for, as the canonical texts repeat, all that has been said by the Tathāgata is well-said and the *dhamma*, in another standard phrase, is auspicious in the beginning, in the middle and in the end. The word of the Buddha is not only instruction. These texts in their artifice are proof of that: the word of the Buddha is also and maybe primarily literature. And to make us think about the power of language through the creation of images is one of the guiding principles of South Asian poetics. Another principle is that of the good quote, the novel processing and variation of an accepted and time-honoured motif which is why the texts discussed all touch upon each other somewhere, reproduce and vary each other. This is no dialogue with meditational practice or figurative art. Meditation manuals, particularly those within local Theravāda traditions know images, but very different ones: the colourful depiction of decomposing corpses or the monochrome, usually plate-sized meditational devices called *kaṣiṇas*. South Asian Buddhist art has moved along other paths in

processing temporal motifs as the history of the Wheel of Becoming, the *bhavacakra*,<sup>32</sup> has shown. On the contrary, with the images discussed here these texts seem to be involved in a conversation with themselves orchestrated by their learned redactors, in which anonymous authors tried to outshine each other in the mastery of combining verse, dialogue, cosmography and narrative prose to recreate the beauty and the poignancy of the Buddha's voice and word. Insofar we can here understand time only from the word that the Buddha is made to have spoken to his monastic interlocutors, are we encouraged by these texts to take part in this lesson, in these acrobatic performances, to stretch time while compressing it, to both make time and to kill time, yet first of all to discover that the many contradictory and conflicting, surprising and terrifying experiences, which we claim to cover by the term time, lie in the silence before, after and between the words. The language of these texts may, as different from our own, not have that *one* word for time. Yet, what these texts can do for us today is that they, just as the Buddha did through the words of Araka when reminding us of the seasons, months, days and nights and mealtimes lived and unlived, help us see what worlds, what details and what rays of hope await us behind the mostly pale and exhausted word called time.

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<sup>32</sup> See most recently and comprehensively Teiser 2006.

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