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David Gordon White

*Dakkhiṇa*

AND

*Agnicayana*:

AN EXTENDED

APPLICATION OF

PAUL MUS'S TYPOLOGY

The *petas*<sup>1</sup> of Buddhism have generally been assigned the colorfully descriptive yet inexact English translation of “hungry ghosts.” Perhaps it is in part due to this misnomer that studies on the *petas* have been mostly of the ethnographic or folkloric sort, with little regard for their place as part of the Buddhist “whole,” which would encompass doctrine, metaphysics, myth, and sociology. Two recent works by John Holt<sup>2</sup> and Jean-Michel Agasse<sup>3</sup> have, in fact, given the subject such a treatment, but within a somewhat limited scope. Holt concentrates on the socioreligious side of the veneration of the dead in Hinduism and Buddhism, and Agasse treats the beginnings of the Buddhist concept of merit transfer.

These enlarged studies still do not do justice to the place of the *petas* in the world of the Buddhist *homo religiosus*. If we turn to Clifford Geertz’s well-known characterization of religion, we are reminded that

<sup>1</sup> *Peta* is derived from the Sanskrit *preta*, a nominalized form of the past passive participle of *pra + i*, “to go forth”; thus, “(the) departed.”

<sup>2</sup> John Holt, “Assisting the Dead by Venerating the Living,” *Numen* 28, no. 1 (1981): 1–28.

<sup>3</sup> Jean-Michel Agasse, “Le transfert de mérite dans le Bouddhisme Pāli classique,” *Journal Asiatique* 266 (1978): 311–32.

the “*system* of symbols” that comprises a religion “formulate[s] a *general* order of existence” (italics are my own).<sup>4</sup> It follows, then, that to extract a given particular aspect of that order without discussing its place in the symbolic whole is to shortchange the tradition in question and deny the (ideally) holistic nature of religious man’s understanding of meaning in being. It is of course true that no treatment of any tradition can ever be complete and that partial or topical treatments of particular elements certainly have a place in the history of religions’ endeavor as a whole. The problem lies in finding a complex of patterns or types in a given tradition through which one may describe an optimum number of phenomena in the same way, with the assumption (or hope) that the tested patterns or types recognized by the historian of religions correspond to those implicit in the tradition in question or even to a cross-cultural “morphology of the sacred,” if that is possible. This is, moreover, the crux of any sort of theory formation: the ideal is to arrive at a descriptive device that is elegant yet, at the same time, “covers all the bases.”

In the case of the study of Buddhism, a typology, developed by Paul Mus and which appears to answer these exigencies very well, is that of the Brahmanic fire altar (*agnicayana*), for it points to a whole complex of Indian religious symbols.<sup>5</sup> It is through Mus’s brilliant insights in this regard, as well as through the recent and valuable reinterpretation by John Strong,<sup>6</sup> that I shall attempt to offer a schematic statement on the location of *petas* in the broad scope of Buddhist religion.

My schema can be summarized as follows: (1) a sketch of central aspects of Mus’s thesis on the symbolism of the fire altar; (2) Strong’s clarification of Mus’s typologies; (3) a primary organization of these typologies in the form of a table; (4) a brief overview of Hindu veneration of the ancestors (*śrāddha*) as they apply to Mus’s typologies; (5) an extended view of the Buddhist concept of *petas* and related practices and institutions, emphasizing the Buddhist concepts of karma, *dakkhiṇa*, and *pattidāna*, and the doctrinal and social role of the (*bhikkhu*)saṅgha, particularly the saṅgha’s connection with *petas* and its relationship of “parent” to the Buddhist laity; (6) Strong’s discussion of the symbolism of acts of *avadāna*, which may serve as a model for the symbolism of *dakkhiṇa*; and (7) a final synthesis, using Mus’s typology. It should be emphasized at the outset that this is to be

<sup>4</sup> Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), p. 90.

<sup>5</sup> Paul Mus, *Barabudur* (Hanoi: Imprimerie d’Extreme Orient, 1935), foreword.

<sup>6</sup> John Strong, “Merit Making in the *Aśokāvadāna*: A Study of Buddhist Acts of Offering in the Post-Parinirvāṇa Age” (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 1977).

a treatment of a Hinayana understanding of petas and the way they fit into a Hinayana “whole” and is thus almost solely based upon texts of the later Pāli canon.<sup>7</sup>

## I

More than one Western commentator has, while placing the peta stories of the *Petavatthu* and doctrinal statements regarding petas at the latter end of the Pāli canon, dismissed her subject matter as little more than a mass of folk accretions having little in common with the proper Buddhist doctrines of that period.<sup>8</sup> Having thus amputated a vital member from the living body of Buddhism, scholars have been content to apply Frazerian or Tylorian categories to the petas, deforming them further.

It is against just such reductionist missionary views that Paul Mus militates in his numinous foreword to *Barabudur*.<sup>9</sup> Buddhism, he argues, is not a pristine metaphysics conceived in a sixth century B.C.E. cultural void only to be subsequently contaminated by ignorant savages who, because they did not employ dialectical principles of logic in day-to-day life, were only Buddhists in some nominal, superficial sense. Buddhism began as, and often remains, an Indian religion in its form and content. Therefore, if one is to understand its doctrinal, mythic, institutional, and other facets, as they constitute interrelated modalities of an organic whole, Buddhism’s Indian context must be taken into account.

For Mus, the key Indian symbol system from which early Buddhism (and much of Hinduism) took its inspiration was that manifested in the Brahmanic fire altar and sacrifice. This altar and its associated ritual were seen to be recreations of the (self-)sacrifice of the original cosmic man (Puruṣa, in RV 10.90; Prajāpati, in many sacrificial contexts) from whose body the universe, both phenomenal and invisible, came into being. Through the ritual reenactment of this cosmogonic event, the sacrificer maintained the order of the universe and himself became, according to the symbolic understanding of this tradition, homologized with the primal sacrificed sacrificer, who is Puruṣa.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>7</sup> The *Petavatthu*, which is the most important Pāli text on the subject of petas, is quite late, perhaps of the first century B.C.E. This study will treat of both the *Petavatthu* and its “frame stories,” which are introduced in Dhammapāla’s fifth-century C.E. commentary. See n. 53 below.

<sup>8</sup> This is the gist of Caroline A. F. Rhys Davids’ introduction to the *Khuddaka Pāṭha*, Sacred Books of the Buddhists, vol. 7 (London: Oxford University Press, 1931), pp. lxiii–lxiv, and of H. S. Gehman’s introduction to the *Petavatthu*, Sacred Books of the Buddhists, vol. 12 (London: Luzac & Co., 1942), p. 138.

<sup>9</sup> Mus, p. 50.

<sup>10</sup> Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa 6.2.2.21: “This performance [of the *agnicayana*] assuredly belongs to Prajāpati, for it is Prajāpati he undertakes (to construct) by this perform-

Mus's treatment of the entire spectrum of Buddhist cultural symbols and structures as they arose and changed through history focused on a description of the ritual transformations that, for those acting within this sacrificial complex, pointed to and revealed an ultimate reality. I will now look at Mus's understandings of these symbols and structures in some detail, for they are essential to the theses I wish to develop here.

Three concepts are of primary importance. First, the symbolism of the Brahmanic fire altar and sacrifice is one of "projection" or of "presence at a distance." There is no fusion of different levels of being (like the "emanation and participation" of the Upaniṣads) but a paradoxical breakthrough from one level to another through the transforming template of the sacrifice. The "magical" basis for this lies in the ritual practice by which a pot broken in this world appears as a whole pot in another world: its material destruction in this world is the necessary precondition for a "magical" reconstruction in a sacred world of essential reality.<sup>11</sup>

Second, the body of the cosmos is ritually constructed in architectonic fashion (since the cosmic Prajāpati, being "wholly other," cannot be seen to be represented iconically) through the aggregation of some 10,800 bricks. Yet another parallel is recognized here that proves to be of utmost importance to an understanding of Buddhism. In the Brahmanic context, the 10,800 bricks of the fire altar are manifestations of the 10,800 *pañktis* (stanzas) of the Veda. The universe is thus composed of sound and created through sacred utterances. This verbal body of the supreme god, composed of sacred meters, makes possible that god's presence at a distance, and this without compromising its absolute transcendence. In Buddhism, this understanding would be employed in the doctrine of the dharmakāya, of the Buddha's transcendent body, which is "present at a distance" in the phenomenal world in the body of teachings uttered through the mouth of the historical Gautama to his disciples. In this sense, the Buddha is made out to be a *divine* "creator" god after the projective model of Prajāpati, with both his own body and the stuff of creation being composed of *mesocosmic* sacred words first uttered through the mouth of the *profane* Gautama.<sup>12</sup>

ance." See also Eggeling's introduction to *Sacred Books of the East*, 43: xv–xviii in Jules Eggeling, *Satapatha Brāhmaṇa*, *Sacred Books of the East*, vols. 12, 26, 41, 43, 44 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1897; Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1963, 1966).

<sup>11</sup> Mus, pp. 53, 59, 203–4.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 57–58. Also important is the equation of the dharmakāya with brahmakāya, drawing on the Hindu concept of brahman as the divine logos that is the source and stuff of the sacred universe.

Finally, implicit in the symbolism of the fire altar and sacrifice in the Brāhmaṇas is a notion of an alternation of generations, or transfer of personality<sup>13</sup> between fathers and sons. In the sacrifice, the sacrificer, after whose proportions the fire altar is modeled, is homologized with the self-sacrificing creator god Prajāpati. In constructing the altar, the dispersed (profane) body of Prajāpati is reconstructed (on a divine level), while the identity of the “person” of the sacrificer with that of Prajāpati is established. This identity is only possible, however, through the ritual interposition of Agni, in the form of the *agnicayana* and the fire (*agni*) of the sacrifice (mesocosm) itself.<sup>14</sup> This ritual identification derives from the myth of Prajāpati, who is dispersed into the four quarters: Agni equates himself to the four quarters and, having once absorbed them, suddenly finds himself to be Prajāpati.<sup>15</sup> At the same

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 120.

<sup>14</sup> The *agnicayana* (the piling of the fire altar), the most complex of all *śrauta* sacrifices, is most fully discussed in books 6–10 of the Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa. This is a year-long ritual construction of a five-layered altar built from 10,800 bricks. It begins with a sacrifice of five creatures (a man, horse, bull, ram, and he-goat [ŚB 6.4.1.15]), the trunks of which are mixed with the water and earth from which the clay bricks are to be fashioned. The heads of these creatures are later built into the altar itself. Next begin the explicitly parallel practices of forming and baking the bricks of the altar (*vedi*) and the shaping and baking of the fire pan (*ukhā*), through which an identity of the fire of the sacrifice and the altar itself is established. Fourteen days after the sacrifice of the five creatures, the sacrificer fashions the *ukhā* (ŚB 6.5.1.1 ff.) while the first brick (*aṣāḍha* [ŚB 6.5.3.1 ff.]) of the altar is prepared, according to the measure of the sacrificer’s foot, by the sacrificer’s wife from the same clay. All of the 10,800 bricks of the altar are made after this measure, with mantras pronounced over every one. A week after the preparation of the *ukhā*, the sacrificer is given a series of initiations (*dikṣā*), which includes the kindling of the *ukhā*, from which time he begins a daily ritual of carrying the *ukhā* that will continue for the entire year of this sacrifice. This same *ukhā*—which is the “womb” in which Agni is nurtured during this period—will also serve to bake the altar bricks. On the final day of the sacrificer’s *dikṣā*, the plot on which the *vedi* is to be constructed is measured (after the sacrificer’s proportions), plowed, and planted. After a year of cultivation of this ground, during which all of the bricks have been prepared, the five-layered altar is built. Both the altar itself and the fire pan are homologized with the entire universe, in all its diverse spatial and temporal orderings. In the bottom layer of the altar is placed a golden statuette of a man (*hiranyapurūṣa*), who at once represents Agni, Prajāpati, and the sacrificer (ŚB 7.4.1.15 ff.). The completed altar may be in the shape of a trough (*drona*), hawk (*śyena*), heron (*kaṅka*), or eagle (*suparna*), with bricks of diverse shapes and sizes employed in intricate configurations to produce such variations. In the fire pan placed on the completed altar is established the oblatory fire into which a host of offerings (generally in the context of the *Somayāga* sacrifice) are made, wherein the *agnicayana* is concluded. (Compare Eggeling, pp. xiv–xxvi; and Arthur Berriedale Keith, *Philosophy and Religion in the Vedas and Upanishads* [Cambridge, Mass., 1925; Delhi, 1976], pp. 354–56). For a more detailed and up-to-date study of the *agnicayana*, see Frits Staal’s magnum opus, *The Vedic Ritual of the Fire Altar*, 2 vols. (Berkeley: Asian Humanities Press, 1983).

<sup>15</sup> Jan Gonda, *Change and Continuity in Indian Religion* (The Hague: Mouton, 1965), pp. 17–18: “The performer of the rite, i.e., the yajamāna or ‘sacrificer’, is identified with Prajāpati, and it is here that the psychological and soteriological aspects of the rite become manifest. That is to say, if the sacrificer follows, in his mind, the construction of

time, Prajāpati, who has lost himself in his dispersion, is able to retrieve himself in the “person” of Agni.<sup>16</sup> In the myth, it is the schematized four quarters, with which Agni and Prajāpati successively yet simultaneously identify themselves, that serves as the template for the transfer of the “supreme personality” between their two “persons.” In ritual, the template is the altar, through which the sacrificer as Prajāpati dispersed recovers himself as Prajāpati completed through Agni/fire.

The key to the whole of this symbolic structure, however, must be understood as resonating with the parental relationship of Prajāpati to Agni:<sup>17</sup>

Prajāpati is the father of Agni. Their common legend thus illustrates the idea that a man is doomed to death, that he must lose himself, if he does not engender a son; that the son . . . is to become as another form of his father; and that the father, for this very reason, seemingly recovers himself in his son. A son is the saved form of his father. Nothing could be clearer or better conceived than the obscure mythology of the *agnicayana*, once we approach it in this light. The wonderful adventure of Agni and Prajāpati is nothing other than a figuration of the theory of inheritance that has remained classical in India.

The father thus gives himself wholly (*saṃpradāna*, in the Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad) into his son; there is a total transfer of personality. At the moment of the father’s death, he becomes the son; at the same time, he is no longer of this world. His “trace” remains in this world in the person of his son; yet he is wholly of another world. In the same way, the *agnicayana* is the “trace” in this world of the person of Prajāpati, who is wholly transcendent vis-à-vis this world, yet whose personality is recovered by the sacrificer through the ritual template of the altar. The son is a mystical reconstruction of his father, as is the altar of the divine; the son is himself and his father, just as Agni is himself and Prajāpati.<sup>18</sup>

In this context, then, one does not inherit from one’s father; rather, one *inherits his father*. In the Buddhist case, these same concepts are operative in the understanding of the Buddha’s dharmakāya. The Buddha’s disciples inherited the body of his teachings, which are in fact identical to his transcendent body, which is utterly unthinkable and

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the fire-place in the ritually correct way, he undergoes a modification of his status, a renewal of his personality, a spiritual rebirth.”

<sup>16</sup> Mus (n. 5 above), p. 118. Compare ŚB 7.1.2.1–10.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., pp. 119, 145 ff., 182. Compare ŚB 6.1.2.26 (trans. Eggeling): “Now that father [Prajāpati] is [also] the son: inasmuch as he created Agni, thereby he is Agni’s father; and inasmuch as Agni restored him, thereby Agni is his [Prajāpati’s] father.”

<sup>18</sup> Mus, p. 120.



unattainable in this world.<sup>19</sup> The dharmakāya is wholly transcendent, yet it exists in the world in the teachings that the historical Gautama bequeathed to his spiritual sons; and it is the transmission of this heritage from teacher to disciple that legitimates the saṅgha's sacerdotal role as the repository of those teachings. The saṅgha thus exists only inasmuch as it is a projection of a series of sacred utterances. In this way, neither dharmakāya nor saṅgha (nor the nirmāṇakāya of the historical Gautama) are reified into some essence of being. Both only "exist" as modalities of a continuous transfer of a "supreme personality," a body of utterances, and arise and dissipate in a relationship of codependence, like that which exists between father and son in the transfer of personality.

Having established this symbolic model, Mus plugs it into a wide array of Buddhist doctrines, rituals, art forms, myths, and socio-political structures. Especially important to our interests is his development of Buddhist understandings of karma, anattā, and *pratīyasamutpāda* through this model. In the same way that the fire altar is composed of an aggregate of bricks, so the individual is composed of an aggregate of acts.<sup>20</sup> Just as the fire altar is an aggregate of bricks and nothing more (no "transcendent whole"), so the individual is an aggregate of acts (karma) and nothing more (there is no ātman).<sup>21</sup> Just as personality passes back and forth between father and son, the "reality" of whom is only conceivable in terms of the impersonal personality that defines them in a relationship of codependence, so beings "transmigrate within themselves" from one moment to another,<sup>22</sup> being defined at each moment by the series of past events that preceded the aggregate of acts that presently constitutes them, and so on.<sup>23</sup>

The triadic relationships among saṃsāra, bhikkhusaṅgha, and nirvāṇa and laity, bhikkhusaṅgha, and dharmakāya follow these same patterns. To best discuss this point, however, we must first look at Strong's clarification of Mus's terminology.

## II

Strong's treatment of Mus's terminology mainly consists of a fleshing out of Mus's mesocosm.<sup>24</sup> Strong argues quite rightly that Mus is not always consistent in his use of terms; and even when he is, he

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 124.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 149.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 181.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 283.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 204. See n. 80 below.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 100; and Strong (n. 6 above), p. 83 ff.

sometimes remains ambiguous. He then introduces the terms *protocosm* (for Mus's "profane"), *mesocosm* (for Mus's "mesocosm," "sacred reality"), and *metacosm* (for Mus's "divine," "essence").<sup>25</sup> Protocosm is the profane object in the world, previous to any signification other than that it exists. Metacosm is the ineffable "realm" of the Buddha after death in nirvāṇa, or the ground for all manifestations of the sacred. The manifestations themselves, the Eliadian hierophanies, constitute the mesocosm. It is in the mesocosm that mystic participation occurs. It thus bears the double signification of the hierophany itself and the wholly transcendent "essence" to which it points. Thus, "the Buddha image or body is itself and at the same time it is something other than itself . . . in other words, the mesocosm is both the mesocosm, and at the same time the metacosm."<sup>26</sup> For our purposes, then, the concept of protocosm will be taken as resonating with *nirmānakāya*, laity, and *saṃsāra*; mesocosm, with *sambhogakāya* and *bhikkhusaṅgha*; and metacosm, with *dharmakāya* and *nirvāṇa*. We will illustrate these and the other ideas we have so far described with Appendix A.

### III

Having blocked out this model, we may now turn to the issue of *petas per se*. Before approaching the Buddhist tradition, it will be useful to first survey the Hindu *preta* tradition, in which correspondences to the symbolism of the fire altar are generally more explicit. In the Vedas, in which the distinction between *pitṛs* (fathers) and *pretas* did not exist,<sup>27</sup> the fire of the funeral pyre was conceived as carrying the "spirit" of the cremated person to the world of the fathers in *Yamaloka* or *Pitṛloka*,<sup>28</sup> which was as auspicious a place as the world of the gods (*Devaloka*). Indeed, human relations with the *pitṛs* were identical to those with the *devas*, with fire offerings made to both<sup>29</sup> in order to accede to the power of the metacosm. The original understanding was that the fathers were nourished by *Yama*, the first of the dead, in *Yamaloka*. The first evidence for a change—toward a view that the living descendants of the departed were responsible for the latter's sustenance—

<sup>25</sup> Strong, pp. 84–85. From the Vedic period onward, Hindu India had its own terms for these three levels. These were *adhyātman* ("protocosm"), *adhiyajñam* ("mesocosm"), and *adhidaivatam* ("metacosm").

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 88.

<sup>27</sup> Bimala Churn Law, *The Buddhist Concept of Spirits* (London: Luzac & Co., 1936), p. 3.

<sup>28</sup> P. V. Kane, *History of Dharmasāstra* (Poona, 1953; reprint BORI, 1973), 4:342.

<sup>29</sup> Holt (n. 2 above), p. 4.

appears in the Athārva Veda.<sup>30</sup> With this came the notion that the offerings made to the departed also served, in addition to nourishing them, as the means for conveying them on the path (*pitṛāyana*) to Yamaloka and actually providing them with an intermediate body between that consumed on the funeral pyre and the new divine body they would come to possess.<sup>31</sup>

The rites for the departed became fleshed out in the literature of the sūtras and śāstras under the rubric of śrāddha (from Sanskrit *śrad* + *dhā*, to have faith, confidence in, following Upaniṣadic speculation on the place of the departed in transmigration. The intermediate state following death came to be seen as *dangerous*, both to the departed and to his surviving descendents; and a distinction was formulated between “completed” pitṛs and “liminal” pretas. If the śrāddha rites were not accomplished, the departed would never become a completed pitṛ and would remain in the preta state indefinitely. Once doomed to this miserable state, the preta would return to his old haunts to wreak havoc on those unfaithful descendents living there, especially by ruining their sacrifices. Furthermore, those who failed to offer proper śrāddha would themselves suffer karmically for their negligence.

Ritual offerings were to extend through the twelfth day after death, at which time the departed one’s completion into a pitṛ would have been accomplished,<sup>32</sup> and the dangerous period of liminality passed. The principal śrāddha rite to accomplish this end was from very early times called *sapiṇḍikāraṇa* (making [rice] balls, making a body with) or *piṇḍadāna* (giving [rice] balls, giving a body), in which the *piṇḍa* was to be offered to brahmins and eventually placed in a *tīrtha*. It is important here to note that *piṇḍa* at once signifies both “ball” and “body,” hence the double significance of the two terms.<sup>33</sup>

The nourishment of the departed with rice balls or cakes goes back to the Yajur Veda.<sup>34</sup> According to certain commentators, there are three parts to śrāddha, however. These are *homa* (fire oblation), *piṇḍadāna*, and the gratification of brahmins.<sup>35</sup> In this case, the departed enter into the bodies of the invited brahmins so that whatever

<sup>30</sup> W. Crooke, “Ancestor Worship (Indian),” in *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1909–26), 1:454.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 450.

<sup>32</sup> Holt, p. 5.

<sup>33</sup> Another offering to pitṛs, this a fire sacrifice, was the *Mahāpitṛ-yajña*, a part of the Sākamedha, described in Kane 2:1101–03. A *tīrtha* (“ford,” from *tī*, “to cross over”) is a watered pilgrimage site at which an individual may, through ritual or devotional acts, improve his or her karma as a means of crossing over the “ocean of saṃsāra” to an unconditioned, liberated state.

<sup>34</sup> For a history of the early brahmanical literature on this subject, see Kane, 4:346–50.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 335. An excellent treatment of Vedic and Buddhist parallels on this subject is Boris Oguibenine, “La dakṣiṇā dans le Rgveda et le transfert de mérite dans le

the brahmins eat is enjoyed by the departed.<sup>36</sup> According to the *Āpastamba Dharmasūtra*,<sup>37</sup> in śrāddha rites, the pitṛs are the devas,<sup>38</sup> and the brahmins who are fed take the place of the *ahavanīya* (oblatory) fire.

It is quite obvious here, especially in the last citation, that the model of the fire sacrifice as developed above plays an important part in the Hindu concept of śrāddha. Furthermore, in *sapinḍikāraṇa*, the idea of the transfer of personality between father and son is quite apparent. In this regard, it must be noted that the necessity of these rites for the departed came to constitute a primary reason for having sons. Without a son, a man was doomed to eternal liminality, absent from any level of existence, with no hope of ever reaching Yamaloka (or mokṣa, in later Hinduism). In a congruent sense, the śrāddha rites became a prime expression of filial piety, which ultimately improved the future lot of the son.<sup>39</sup> Śrāddha thus came to encompass the ideas of sacrifice, the relationship between generations, the transfer of substance, and, ultimately, karma. We may now turn to the ways in which these ideas came to be fleshed out in Buddhist understandings of petas.

#### IV

In the Buddhist tradition, petas suffer the fate of those of the Hindu departed whose descendents perform no śrāddha rites: they exist in a state of perpetual misery and liminality. This is, unlike the Hindu case, a *transmigratory* state of relatively limited duration (the figure of 55 or 550 years is often given),<sup>40</sup> after which they often further descend into hell or are rescued from their fate through *dakkhiṇa* offerings, as will be discussed below. In Buddhist cosmology, petas have a world of their own—Petaloka—which is located between hell and the world of animals.<sup>41</sup> This world is unique in the Buddhist cosmos in that it is the

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bouddhisme," *Indological and Buddhist Studies*, volume in honor of Prof. J. W. de Jong on his sixtieth birthday, ed. L. A. Hercus et al. (Canberra: Faculty of Asian Studies, 1982), pp. 319–414.

<sup>36</sup> *Manu Smṛti* 3.189, cited in Kane, 4:340.

<sup>37</sup> *Āpastamba Dharmasūtra* 2.7.6.3, reproduced in Kane, 4:349.

<sup>38</sup> The pitṛs were taken to be devas in the sense that they were nearly as effective a source of power through sacrifice as were the gods.

<sup>39</sup> *Manu Smṛti* 9.138 gives the "folk etymology" of *putra* ("son") as he who saves (*trai*) his father from a hell called "Put." In the Purāṇas, śrāddha came to be seen as a means to liberation (cf. Holt [n. 2 above], p. 22).

<sup>40</sup> *Petavatthu (Pv)* 2.7, 2.12. See nn. 8, 42, and 53 above and below.

<sup>41</sup> Other sources locate the petas directly below the worlds of various demigods, such as *piśācas*, *yakṣas*, and *nāgas* (cf. *Pañcagatidīpana*, cited in Edward J. Thomas, "State of the Dead [Buddhist]," *ERE* 11 [1921]: 832). This concept becomes important in the context of the sorts of *devatās* into which most petas were transformed in *Petavatthu* accounts.

only world whose inhabitants are not able to find their own nourishment, but are wholly dependent on offerings made to them by their descendents or friends in the world of men:<sup>42</sup> “For there is no cultivation there, nor is there . . . any cattle-rearing known; nor are there such things as trading and buying and selling with gold—the petas, those who have passed on, are there sustained by what is given here.” Then follows the Buddhist expression of supply-side economics:<sup>43</sup> “As water rained on the uplands flows down to the lowlands, even so what is given from here benefits the petas. Just as swollen streams swell the ocean, even so does what is given here benefit the petas.” Yet such offerings are rare in coming, if we are to believe the testimony of most textual references in their regard: the English translation of “hungry ghost” is a descriptively apt one here, and this “hungriness” befits the karma that brought it on:<sup>44</sup>

The reason why individuals rise as petas is by and large because they neglected to show charity to the almsworthy Sāvaka-saṅgha, the new seat of the sacrifice and, in a sense, the new Agni. For just as pouring a sacrificial oblation into Agni, the sacrificial fire, resulted in that offering being transferred, through the medium of Agni, to the world of the devas, so similarly does the placing of food in the Sāvaka-saṅgha result in the appearance of that food, or its divine counterpart, in the world beyond for one’s use after death. Failure to give such alms . . . results in one arising on the divine plane after death but with no store laid up for one’s sustenance.

Furthermore, the effects of karma cause the relatives of the petas to forget them: a vicious circle indeed.<sup>45</sup>

Petaloka is iconographically represented in the southwestern quarter of the Buddhist *bhāvacaakra*: that is, it is often conceived as a location in space.<sup>46</sup> It seems more useful, however, to “locate” petas in the context of the codependent succession of their karmic acts, rather than in a particular spatial domain, for two primary reasons. First, all “beings” are “located” in a karmic relationship, according to Buddhist

<sup>42</sup> *Khuddaka Pāṭha* 7.6, reproduced in Dhammapala’s commentary on the *Petavatthu* in *Petavatthu: Elucidation of the Intrinsic Meaning so Named the Commentaries on the “Peta Stories” by Dhammapala*, trans. U Ba Kyau, ed. Peter Masefield, Sacred Books of the Buddhists, vol. 34 (London: Pali Text Society, 1980), p. 26 (Rhys Davids [n. 8 above] gives the Pāli and an inferior translation of the *Khuddaka Pāṭha* 7 on facing pages).

<sup>43</sup> *Khuddaka Pāṭha* 7.7–8 in Masefield, p. 26.

<sup>44</sup> Introduction to Masefield (n. 42 above), p. vii. Further references to the *Petavatthu* are to this edition and translation.

<sup>45</sup> *Khuddaka Pāṭha* 7.2 in Masefield, p. 26.

<sup>46</sup> *Dīgha Nikāya* 3.197–98, cited in Law (n. 27 above), p. 7.

metaphysics.<sup>47</sup> Second, in most of the accounts of petas that we find in textual sources, they live “among” men; but being of a different “substance” than men, they are generally invisible (though often audible) to them. In essence, they are very much like the western idea of ghosts, who on occasion flit in and out of human sight, that of their descendents in particular. Thus petas live among men but on a different karmic plane. When they become visible, however, their liminal state only becomes more apparent, as in the classical *Khuddaka pāṭha* description of them: “They stand outside the walls and at junctions and road-forks; they go to their own houses and stand at the door-posts.” They are hounded by the same dogs of Yama—Śyāma and Śabala—that haunt the limbo paths of the liminal Hindu pretas.<sup>48</sup>

Petas may attempt to eat or drink of the food and water that exist in the world of men, but whatever touches their lips is invariably transformed into blood, pus, worms, excrement or some other equally disagreeable substance. For many, even the consumption of these dregs is impossible, owing to petas’ unique and karmically just physiology: “Though their bodies are big, their mouths are the size of a needle’s eye, and their throats are constricted, so that, although they are always eating, they are never satisfied.”<sup>49</sup> All of these aspects of the petas’ sorry state, including their tantalizingly close juxtaposition to the world of men, point to the metaphysical dilemma in which they are trapped: because they did not live ethically when that was possible, they are doomed in their peta state to passively realize the fruits of their previous and others’ present nonactions; and they cannot initiate works of their own accord.<sup>50</sup> Primary among the shortcomings that lead to peta-hood are disrespect of parents or of the saṅgha.

Early Buddhism greatly reduced the emphasis that Hinduism had given to its gods and pitṛs, subsuming them, along with all other beings, under the laws of karmic retribution<sup>51</sup> in the context of *pratīyasamutpāda*. This was not to remain the case, however, and for an obvious reason: just as the Buddhism of Gautama grew out of that Indian matrix that valorized the symbolism of the fire sacrifice, so other concepts and practices would continue to well up from the same matrix to constantly enrich (later Buddhist understanding of) the original teachings; but these new elements would always be “Buddhicized” as they were incorporated into the canon. The Indian phenomenon

<sup>47</sup> Mus (n. 5 above), p. 283–84.

<sup>48</sup> *Jātaka* 544, cited in Law, p. 7.

<sup>49</sup> *Mahāvastu* 28, trans. by J. J. Jones, Sacred Books of the Buddhists, vol. 16 (London: Luzac & Co., 1949), p. 22.

<sup>50</sup> *Anguttara Nikāya* 4.152, cited in Holt (n. 2 above), p. 9.

<sup>51</sup> Holt, p. 8.

of ancestor worship, which resonated with the same fire altar symbol system as the ground of early Buddhism, was undoubtedly always present in the awareness of the early Buddhists, and its entry into the canon was only a matter of time. Once again, it must be stressed that the peta tradition was not a late corruption of an originally pristine metaphysics; indeed, one might even argue that its “exclusion” from the early Pāli canon might be best ascribed to the fact that it was accepted implicitly from the outset.

In fact, the appearance of the peta tradition in the Pāli canon, beginning at some time near the third or fourth century B.C.E., might well have been effected for *missionary* purposes.<sup>52</sup> It would have served at least two purposes: as a means for making Buddhism more attractive to non-Buddhist populations in India and for legitimating the Buddhist saṅgha as the proper recipient of *dakkhiṇa* offerings to be made to one’s suffering peta ancestors, relatives, or friends. It is in the context of these late texts of the Pāli canon—the *Khuddaka Pāṭha*, *Kathāvatthu*, and especially the *Petavatthu*—that nearly all that we know of petas in early Hinayana Buddhism is to be found. And, as will be shown, offering alms to members of the (bhikkhu)saṅgha is the central theme of the great majority of these texts.

The *Khuddaka Pāṭha* (chap. 7, see nn. 42, 43, and 45 above) is the core of Hinayana dogmatic descriptions of petas, and the text in which its doctrines and descriptions are most fully enlarged in a narrative form is the *Petavatthu*,<sup>53</sup> which may be classified as literature of the *exempla* genre (like *avadāna* literature) devoted to the relationship between petas, humans, the saṅgha, and the Buddha.

The *Petavatthu* is a collection of fifty-one peta stories. Their structure is quite similar to that of the *Jātakas*. At the core of each story is a series of verses, either spoken by petas or illustrious members of the bhikkhusaṅga, on the plight of petas and (sometimes) on the means by which they might be released from their unhappy state. These core verses are preceded by an introductory story, narrated by Gautama Buddha, that provides the context in which the introductory verses

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 11, 23.

<sup>53</sup> According to Dhammapāla, in the introduction to his commentary (1.7) on the *Petavatthu*, these stories are expansions of verses found in the *Khuddaka Nikāya*. Regarding the chronology of the *Petavatthu* and Dhammapāla’s commentary, Gehman states in his introduction (p. 135 [n. 8 above]) that “the frame stories are not in the Canon, but are a part of the commentary . . . the language of the latter is sometimes later than that of the verses. . . . This does not imply that the contents of the frame stories are late.” Editions of the *Petavatthu* other than those referred to in nn. 8 and 44 are N. A. Jayawickrama, ed., *Vimanavatthu and Petavatthu*, Pali Text Society, Text Series no. 168 (London: Pali Text Society, 1977); and E. Hardy, ed., *Dhammapāla’s Paramattha-Dīpanī, Part Three, Being the Commentary on the Peta-Vatthu*, Pali Text Society Publications, no. 33 (London: Pali Text Society, 1894).

were spoken.<sup>54</sup> This prelude is usually composed of a description of the workings of karmic retribution by which men or women fell into the peta state. The conclusion that follows the core verses often describes the means by which the peta or petī (female) is caused to accede to a higher level of transmigratory existence.

The plot of these stories may be generalized very easily without referring to any single story, as all are quite similar. An individual who has shown a lack of respect toward members of his or her own family or to members of the saṅgha dies shortly after a particularly detestable act and generally arises *immediately* as an adult peta or petī.<sup>55</sup> The forms that the petas' sufferings take are directly analogous to their own evil acts: perhaps because of their insubstantial nature, theirs is always a case of "instant karma." Thus a weaver's wife, who criticizes her husband for his generosity toward monks with the curse that his food might become blood, pus, and excrement and that his clothing become hot metal sheets in his next existence, arises as a petī suffering that very cursed state of existence (*Petavatthu* [Pv]1.9). A barren wife, jealous of her husband's second wife, dumps rubbish on the second wife's head. She arises as a petī whose head is perpetually covered with dust (*Pv* 2.3). A "backbiter" arises, on the night after lying about *uposatha* rites he had in fact not performed, as a peta who feeds on the skin of his own back, which he flays with his fingernail, for "he who is a backbiter will have to devour himself" (*Pv* 3.9).

At this point, the stories generally follow either or both of two scenarios. In one case, the suffering peta meets a member of the saṅgha and describes his fall and the reasons for it. The saṅgha member reports his meeting and conversation to Gautama, always conveniently close at hand, who uses the report to illustrate a teaching on the *dhamma*, generally on the fruition of acts of past lives in present existence. These teachings "give rise to agitation"<sup>56</sup> on the part of those who hear them and move them to give alms to or enter into the saṅgha.

The other case is that in which some member of the suffering peta's family or circle of acquaintances meets and converses with a peta. Moved to compassion by the peta's tale of woe, this person sometimes attempts to feed and clothe the peta (who is naked or in filthy rags, in addition to being hungry). This proves abortive in every case, with the direct gift turning to indescribable filth as soon as the food touches the peta's mouth—if it can be swallowed at all<sup>57</sup>—or to stinking rags when clothes touch the peta's body. The donor thus learns, either from the

<sup>54</sup> Masefield (n. 44 above), p. 4.

<sup>55</sup> Holt, p. 19; *Petavatthu* 3.1 and throughout.

<sup>56</sup> Dhammapāla's introduction, 1.6 (cf. Masefield, p. 3).

<sup>57</sup> *Petavatthu*, 2.7.



peta or from a bhikkhu, that the only way the peta may properly enjoy offered food or clothing is if it be first given to a member of the saṅgha. This citation, from *Pv* 1.10 (verses 3–5) is illustrative: “[A trader says:] ‘Here, I will give you my cloak—put on this garment . . .’ [The peṭī responds:] ‘What is given by your hand into my hand is of no benefit to me. But this layfollower here has faith and is a sāvaka of the Perfect Buddha; having clothed him, assign that donation to me. Then I will be happy and richly endowed with all I desire.’”

The donor then offers to a member of the saṅgha, and the peta or peṭī enjoys the *transformed* offering (*dakkhiṇa*), which is analogous to, but not identical with, that which was given to the saṅgha member, and *immediately* arises to a higher level of existence, generally that of a *devatā*. Of the fifty-one stories of the *Petavatthu*, fifteen involve just this sort of instantaneous karmic retribution.<sup>58</sup>

Having described the general form and content of these stories, we may now turn to the explicit and implicit statements of doctrine found in them regarding the relationship between petas, their human acquaintances and families, the saṅgha, and the Buddha. Such explicit statements are found in the core verses of the stories themselves, in Dhammapāla’s later commentary on them, and in scattered references to be found in other texts of the Pāli canon. The key doctrinal strands to be found in these texts deal with three main concepts: the ripening of the fruits of one’s acts (karma), the saṅgha as merit field, and the correlative concept of the transfer of merit through offerings to the saṅgha.

The first of these points has already been discussed to some extent above. What must be stressed at this point is the Buddhist idea of karmic retribution emphasized in these stories, as it relates to Hindu understandings of karma and its fruits in śrāddha. The understanding of karma inherent to the śrāddha rites is very much a Brahmanical one: karma is constituted by the *sacrificial act*. A complete and proper sacrifice on the part of the son of the departed limits the latter’s stay in the liminal preta state to twelve days, after which he automatically becomes an exalted and happy pitṛ. Improper or incomplete sacrifice leaves the departed in the preta state, afflicting both the departed and the unfaithful son or descendent. In the Buddhist tradition, the peta state is not an automatic period of passage between one existence and

<sup>58</sup> *Petavatthu* 1.1, 1.5, 1.6, 1.9, 1.10, 2.1, 2.2, 2.3, 2.4, 2.8, 2.10, 3.2, 3.6, 4.1, 4.5 (n. 44 above). Most often the transformed peta becomes a tree *devatā*, who is in every respect like a *yakkha*, while the peṭī becomes a water *devatā*, analogous to an *āpsarasā* or *yakkhini*. An apt comparison may be found in Catholic conceptions of purgatory, as far as the predicament and mechanics for the salvation of petas is concerned in the Hinayana tradition.

another but a state of barely substantial suffering existence born of one's previously unsubstantial moral acts and dispositions. It is karma in the sense of the failure to perform *moral acts* that lands the faithless Buddhist in a *peta* existence:<sup>59</sup> "In the past, we were wicked-natured . . . though merit offerings were at hand we made no refuge for ourselves. Though there was abundant food and drink . . . we gave none to those who had reached the summit, to those gone forth. Desirous of doing what ought not to be done, lazy, desirous of sweet things and gluttonous, we were givers of morsels and lumps and abused the recipients."

Thus, while the sacrificial model as a mechanism for the workings of karma is intact in both traditions, the cleavage between the two betrays their differing views on the nature of karma, which are couched in various other underlying metaphysical and doctrinal divergences. In Hindu thought, this world is *māyā*, a divine artifice. Reality exists in a divine world that is accessible through sacrifice and other techniques, but that is in some way always "out there." In the Buddhism of this period, it is the condition of suffering in *saṃsāra* that is "real," and this may only be alleviated through the power of the *saṅgha*, which is the embodiment of the Buddha's teachings *in this world*. It is this difference that underlies the Buddhist emphasis on karma as moral action, as epitomized in offering or donating to the *saṅgha*, versus the Brahmanical notion of karma as sacrificial activity to open a "magic" channel to a real world not found on the earthly plane of existence. In other words, the mesocosm exists in the world in the *saṅgha* for Hinayana Buddhists, while it exists in the transforming fire of the sacrifice for the Brahmanical Hindus. But whereas the Hindu emphasis is on the divine metacosm that lies behind the sacrificial mesocosm, in Buddhism, the mesocosm is all there "is," as the metacosm—the Buddha "in *nirvāṇa*"—is altogether inaccessible and unthinkable when one is in *saṃsāra*.

Seen in this light, the differences alluded to become self-evident. The *pitṛs* are a nearly divine source of power in the Brahmanic tradition. Thus, offerings made to convey the departed to "completed" *pitṛ* status are means to an ultimate end of realizing a channel to metacosmic power in them. The food they receive is given through the projective mesocosm of the fire sacrifice or water offering. The unhappy state of the Hindu *preta* is due to a failure on the part of his descendents to use the mesocosmic sacrifice properly, the main upshot of this being that those descendents lose the use of this channel to the metacosm. There is no *pitṛ* "out there" to help them, and the *preta* that exists somewhere

<sup>59</sup> *Petavatthu* 3.1.9–11.

near to this world has the malevolent power to close any other channels to the metacosm by upsetting any sacrifice its descendents might direct to the gods. In Buddhism, the *peta* is in his unhappy state because of his own flaunting of the moral laws of karma, most importantly those regarding the all-important mesocosmic saṅgha. In this context, then, his descendents do not offer on his behalf in order to gain an ally in the metacosm but out of compassion for him—out of a proper intention to do what is morally right in the world. Furthermore, the departed has no metacosmic status whatsoever in Buddhism: all that is important is the mesocosm that exists in the saṅgha. The saṅgha *is* the end in this world, and all else is worked out through the mechanism of karmic retribution. The alleviation of suffering through karmic acts and dispositions can only take place in this world of suffering, and the mesocosmic saṅgha plays a great central role in such endeavors. Once again, we can see the same sacrificial mechanism or model operating in both cases, but with the center of gravity shifted from the metacosm to the mesocosm in the Buddhist case.

There are several ways to understand the basis for the saṅgha's charismatic status as the "location" of the mesocosm in the world. There is, of course, the conception of the saṅgha as the earthly repository of the Buddha's teachings, the dharmakāya, but this was still a fledgling notion in the Hinayana tradition of the time of the *Petavatthu*. A more "concrete" basis for this understanding of the (bhikkhu)saṅgha's role, especially vis-à-vis *petas* and *dakkhiṇa*, may be described in terms of the replacement of the saṅgha for Hindu *pitṛs* as an object of veneration in Hinayana Buddhism.

The bhikkhu, by "going forth" (*pabbajā*), becomes "dead to the world" and thus apart from the world of the laity. As such, he symbolizes the presence of the dead in the world: the bhikkhusaṅgha thus replaces the extended Brahmanical family, in the soteriological sense and becomes an object of veneration for the living. The *sapiṇḍikāraṇa* of śrāddha rites is translated in this context into *piṇḍapāta*,<sup>60</sup> which has the double sense of "the casting of the rice ball" (i.e., almsgiving) and "the falling of the body" (i.e., death). The *piṇḍa* given as alms sustains the bhikkhu, thus shifting the reciprocal relationship between "father" and "son" from one between the dead and the living (metacosm and protocosm) to one between the living (mesocosm and protocosm).<sup>61</sup> The saṅgha's power in the world, analo-

<sup>60</sup> Holt (n. 2 above), pp. 18–20.

<sup>61</sup> When the saṅgha is *piṇḍālaya* (cf. Strong [n. 6 above], pp. 223–34), *piṇḍapāta* takes on the sense of "sowing," and when this is viewed in the perspective of *dakkhiṇa* (with the resonating concept of *sapiṇḍikāraṇa* and *sampradāna* [see Sec. I above]), one finds

gous to that of the Hindu pitṛs in Pitṛloka, lies in the fact that it constitutes a merit field. It is this that makes merit transfer (see below) to petas (who are also fathers, but who lack in any soteriological importance) through *dakkhiṇa* possible. *Dakkhiṇa* is nevertheless an act of filial piety, but now in a *double* sense, as one is offering to and through a spiritual father to a departed biological father (when the departed is one's father).

This double sense is understandable in terms of almsgiving as a combination of the moralistic notion of gift and the rationalistic notion of sacrifice. Alms are not really given to the poor but to deities and spirits who allow oblations given to them to be given to the poor or to beggars.<sup>62</sup> The offerings given through the bhikkhu (= "beggar") saṅgha are thus offered to them both in their traditional role as beggars and their charismatic role in which they stand for their founder, the Buddha. The peta beneficiary is truly a beggar, but he also is the "founder" of the donor's biological existence (when he is his father).

Correlative to this shift in emphasis from pitṛs to the saṅgha is also a shift in the means by which the transformation of the departed to pitṛ or *devatā* is effected in the two respective traditions. In Hinduism, it is the efficacy of the sacrificial act itself (even if brahmins are fed) that is emphasized in śrāddha. In Buddhism, it is the body of the saṅgha that serves as a template for the peta's transformation. In this context, the saṅgha is described as a field of merit:

The arhants are indeed the world's unsurpassed merit field [*puñṇakkhettam*]; even the slightest service done for them brings it about that beings arise as devas.

Like a field [*khettūpamā*] are the arhants, like cultivators those who give; like seed the merit offering [*bījūpamam deyyadhammaṃ*]; from these fruit is produced [*etto nibbattate phalaṃ*].

This seed, field and cultivation [are desirable] for the petas and for the one who gives; the petas make use of this, while the donor through merit grows.

Having done right here what is skilled, and honored the petas, having done that auspicious deed, he goes to that heavenly place.<sup>63</sup>

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oneself in the presence of an alternation of generations or transfer of personality as metaphysical substance on the order of that developed by Mus. Furthermore, the saṅgha, as "sons" of the Buddha, are also inheritors of his "alimentary body" (*amiśakāya*), and recompense their enjoyment of food (*amiśasambhoga*) with the enjoyment of dharma (*dharmasambhoga*) or liberation, which they give in their teachings—or transmission of the dharmakāya—to the lay donors who have fed them (cf. Mus [n. 5 above], pp. 289–90).

<sup>62</sup> Marcel Mauss, "Essai sur le don," in *Sociologie et anthropologie* (Paris: Presses Universitaires, 1950), p. 241, cited in Strong, p. 7.

<sup>63</sup> *Petavatthu* 1.1.1–3 (the first verse is in the text of the frame story immediately preceding these three verses).

This offering [*dakkhiṇa*] that has been made and firmly planted in the saṅgha will serve, with immediate effect, their [the petas'] long-term benefit.<sup>64</sup>

This understanding is also implicit in the verses of the *Khuddaka Pāṭha* (7.7–8) cited above and is analogous, but now in an agricultural metaphor, to the idea of the *Sāvaka-saṅgha* as the new seat of Agni (see above in this section). The use of agricultural symbolism to depict the ripening of acts through the saṅgha is a natural one here.

At this point we come to the sometimes thorny problem of merit transfer (*pattidāna*) in this tradition. Indeed, it is in the context of offerings to the departed that the possibility of merit (*puñña*)<sup>65</sup> transfer is first broached in the Pāli canon.<sup>66</sup> In *Kathāvatthu* 7.6,<sup>67</sup> in which the controverted point is “that which is given here sustains elsewhere,” the main evidence given to support the transfer of merit is from the *Khuddaka Pāṭha* 7.7–8. Reference is also made to the *Anguttara Nikāya*<sup>68</sup> passage “He will dedicate the merit of his offerings to those [of his relatives] who are dead and who are in the peta state” as the last of the five reasons for which one should have sons, a reflection of Hindu attitudes toward śrāddha. The controverted point is upheld, with the proviso that “the merit of the gift avails to bless petas, although the material gift itself will not nourish them.”

It must be recognized, then, that the concept of merit transfer, although quite rare in the Pāli canon, is almost totally bound up in the discussion of petas. By far the greatest number of Pāli canon references to merit transfer are found in the *Petavatthu*. The key terms in this case are *pattidāna*, *dakkhiṇa* (“offering of alms to a member of the saṅgha on behalf of petas”), *dānam* (“gift”) and *disati* (“to dedicate a gift”). In nearly every case in which a peta or petī supplicates a human to make an offering on his or her behalf, this vocabulary is used: “Mama dakkhiṇam ādisa,” “Dānaṃ dattvā uddisāhi me,” “Mahayaṃ pattidānam dehi,” and so on.<sup>69</sup>

We may now look at the precise mechanics of merit transfer, as they appear in the *Petavatthu*. The process begins when (1) a peta makes a

<sup>64</sup> *Petavatthu* 1.4.4.

<sup>65</sup> Rhys Davids (n. 8 above), p. xxxi.

<sup>66</sup> F. L. Woodward in “The Buddhist Doctrine of Reversible Merit,” *Buddhist Review* 1 (1914): 38–39, cites the earliest mention of merit transfer as occurring in the *Upasampāda-kammavaca* (ordination by a chapter of monks), in which the candidate for ordination says to the ordaining monk, “May the merits gained by me be shared by your Reverence. It is fitting also to allow me to share the merits gained by your Reverence” (cited in Agasse [n. 3 above], pp. 314–15).

<sup>67</sup> *Kathāvatthu*, trans. by Shwe Zan Aung and Caroline A. F. Rhys Davids, Pali Text Society Translator Series, vol. 5 (London: Oxford University Press, 1915), p. 203.

<sup>68</sup> *Anguttara Nikāya* 3.43, cited in Shwe and Rhys Davids, p. 204.

<sup>69</sup> Agasse, pp. 314–15.

request to a descendent, relation, or friend that an offering (*dakkhiṇa*) be made to a member of the saṅgha on his behalf, (2) the human donor offers food and clothing to the member of the saṅgha in the presence of the (sometimes invisible) peta, designating the peta as beneficiary of the offering, (3) the peta expresses appreciation for the offering being given on his behalf, (4) directly after the saṅgha member accepts the gift, the peta enjoys (*paribhuñjati*) the *transformed* food and clothing and is released (*parimucchati*) from hunger and peta-hood into a higher plane of existence, (5) the peta rejoices (*anumodati*) in his now visible and radiant new (usually *devatā*) form, and (6) in cases in which a sermon by the Buddha follows, its hearers, which always include the donor, are filled with agitation (*sañjātasamvega*)<sup>70</sup> and are given to meritorious deeds, such as giving greater alms to the saṅgha (*dānasīlādikusalahāmmābhirato ahoṣi*).<sup>71</sup> This is in exchange for the *gift of teaching* on the part of the Buddha (*Bhagavata . . . dhamma desesi*)<sup>72</sup> as representative of the saṅgha. In some cases, the donor, having raised an issue (*tam atthaṃ ārocesi*)<sup>73</sup> regarding his or her dharmalogical realization (*dhammābhisamaya*)<sup>74</sup> following the teaching, becomes established as a stream winner (*sotāpattiphale patiṭṭhahi*)<sup>75</sup> or eventually even as an arhant (*arhattaṃ pāpuṇi*).<sup>76</sup>

In *dakkhiṇa*, then, all three of the participants in the *pattidāna*—the donor, recipient (saṅgha member), and beneficiary (peta)—are bettered, with the *dakkhiṇa* itself usually serving as the “catalyst” for the transfer:<sup>77</sup> “Now this, the duty to one’s relatives, has been pointed out and the highest honor has been paid to the petas; strength has been furnished to the monks and not trifling the meritorious deed pursued by you (the donor).”

Yet Dhammapāla in his commentary, and Holt and Agasse in their recent articles (nn. 2, 3 above), are careful to point out that it is not the offering itself that catalyzes the transfer but the *intention* of the donor, recipient, and beneficiary that is all important. This is made explicit in Dhammapāla’s commentary on *Petavatthu* 1.1.1–4 (quoted above):

By their generosity . . . those who give away are those who cut out greed . . . from their own hearts. . . . The one who gives also obtain[s] excellent and abundant

<sup>70</sup> *Petavatthu* 1.1, 2.3, 2.12, 3.1, 3.2, 3.10, 4.1, 4.7, 4.11, 4.12, 4.16, and Dhammapāla’s introduction 1.6 (see n. 42 above).

<sup>71</sup> *Petavatthu* 1.4, 2.3, 2.7, 2.10, 2.11, 3.2, 3.3, 4.10, 4.11, 4.16.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.4, 1.11, 1.12, 2.12, 3.3, 4.5, 4.7, 4.11, 4.13, 4.14, 4.16.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.1, 1.2, 1.3, 1.6, 1.7, 1.9, 2.1, 2.2, 2.4, 2.7, 2.8, 2.11, 3.2, 3.4, 3.6, 3.7, 4.1, 4.3, 4.5, 4.8, 4.10, 4.11, 4.12, 4.13, 4.16.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.1, 1.11, 2.9, 3.1, 3.10, 4.1, 4.12, 4.14, 4.15.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.8, 1.12, 2.6, 2.13, 4.1, 4.7, 4.12, 4.14, 4.15.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.11, 3.2, 4.1.

<sup>77</sup> *Khuddaka Pāṭha* 7.12.

fruit from his gift if he is serious in service to, and in his generosity as regards his merit-offerings for, the arhants. From [the conjunction of] the one who gives, the recipient and the giving away of the merit-offering the fruit of the gift is produced, arises and continues to exist by way of their being conjoined for quite a long time. In this connection, since the nature of things such as food and drink . . . is none other than to be prepared with the intention of giving them away, therefore, “like seed the merit-offering” is how the merit offering is taken to be. . . . It is indeed this [intention] and not the merit-offering as such, that produces the fruit [that consists in] various sorts of rebirth.<sup>78</sup>

Once again, however, we may ascribe this qualification to the Buddhist concepts of karma and *pratiṅgyasamutpāda*. Very important in this regard is an understanding of how the laws of karma distinguish between a gift (*dāna*) and an offering (*dakkhiṇa*) made to a member of the saṅgha. A gift is given by a donor, received by a bhikkhu, and then returned; an offering is also received and then returned, but not by its receiver. It is returned “by the abstract workings of karmic retribution. The return still takes place, but the *obligation* to return a gift has been replaced by a doctrine of the automaticity of its return.”<sup>79</sup> This understanding is an important one for relating *dakkhiṇa* to *agnicayana*, as will be shown.

## V

It should now be possible for us to go to the heart of *dakkhiṇa*, analyze its component parts, and show how they “line up” with the other examples we have given of protocosm, mesocosm, and metacosm,<sup>80</sup> starting from Mus’s treatment of the symbolism of the *agnicayana*. Strong’s powerful analysis of the *Avadānaśataka*, of which the fifth decade parallels *Petavatthu* texts,<sup>81</sup> will serve as our source and model here.

Strong argues convincingly that there are two dimensions to merit transfer. The first is karmalogical and is evinced in a transformation of the *nāma* and *rūpa* of the donor. I must point out here that in the case

<sup>78</sup> Dhammapāla’s commentary on *Pv* 1.1.1–4 (see Masfield, pp. 9–10).

<sup>79</sup> Strong (n. 6 above), p. 7.

<sup>80</sup> Other Buddhist phenomena that “line up” with Mus’s typologies are the light-emitting smile of the Buddha, the clothing of a defective Buddha image at Bodhi Gaya, and the myth of Piṅḍola Bharadvāja, as discussed in Paul Mus, “Où finit Puruṣa?” in *Mélanges d’Indianisme à la mémoire de Louis Renou*, Publications de l’Institut de Civilisation Indienne, vol. 28 (Paris: E. de Boccard, 1968), pp. 539–63; and Strong, pp. 75–89, 223–34.

<sup>81</sup> The *Avadānaśataka* is probably a text from the second century C.E. According to Gehman (p. 138 [see n. 8 above]), if it did not borrow directly from the *Petavatthu*, the fifth decade of the *Avadānaśataka* may have been drawn from the same source.

of the *Petavatthu* stories—where the petas are not donors but beneficiaries of *dakkhiṇa*—it is not the donor but the peta for whom he offers that is immediately transformed. This shift, however, does not upset our model but rather reinforces it, as the transfer takes place through three (rather than two) distinct persons (i.e., the donor and the member of the saṅgha). The second dimension is dharmalogical, manifested in a doctrinal realization on the part of the donor, following a teaching on the *dhamma* by the member of the saṅgha, which makes the donor ready for arhantship.<sup>82</sup> This is not as heavily emphasized in our source as it is in the *Aśokavādana*, but it is mentioned at the end of several stories.

In both cases, we are in the presence of a *miraculous transformation* (Sanskrit *pratihārya*) of the gift, the beneficiary and the donor. This transformation, which is bound up in the merit transfer, grows out of merit often originating from the *dakkhiṇa* itself, which, passing through the merit field of the saṅgha, manifests itself in a form and a “place” that are wholly other than those of the original offering:<sup>83</sup> “The new settings which result from the simple gift . . . constitute an immediate sign of the effectiveness of karma when directed towards the field of merit. Not only is the simple gift accepted by the field of merit, it transforms that field by creating a new relationship between the giver and the object of his devotion.”

This is precisely the situation in the *Petavatthu* stories: it is not the food and clothing offered by the donor that the peta enjoys but food and clothing that have been *miraculously transformed* through the template of the merit field so as to be effective in another level of existence. But, more than this, the power of the merit transferred successively yet spontaneously (as with Prajāpati and Agni, Sec. I above) transforms the karmic being of the peta and the world in which it exists. The peta becomes a shining *devatā*, and its new setting a *spatial mesocosm* of sorts.<sup>84</sup> The *devatā*'s radiant aura is itself evidence of that being's changed karmalogical *nāma* and *rūpa*, and ultimately its dharmalogical intentions.<sup>85</sup>

In essence, the transformation of the offering through the merit field lifts the beneficiary peta from a protocosmic to a mesocosmic situation and brings a dharmalogical realization on the part of the donor regarding the mesocosmic power of the saṅgha, which, when properly

<sup>82</sup> Strong, pp. 73–74. For parallels in the *Petavatthu*, see Sec. IV and nn. 73, 74, 75, and 76 above.

<sup>83</sup> Strong, pp. 76–77.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 106.

<sup>85</sup> Holt (n. 2 above), p. 16.



understood, constitutes a realization in the world of the nature of the metacosm, allowing the donor to proceed toward arhantship.<sup>86</sup>

At this point, the correspondences between *dakkhina*, beneficiary, donor and recipient on the one hand, and fire altar, Prajapati, and Agni on the other should be apparent. My conclusion is thus accompanied by Appendix B, which reproduces the information in Appendix A and offers a schematized reproduction of the foregoing discussion of the saṅgha's role in *dakkhina*.

## VI

It seems safe to say on the basis of this schematic overview that *dakkhina* for the benefit of petas through the saṅgha does in fact follow the patterns developed through Mus's typology of *agnicayana* symbolism and is an integrated and integral part of the worldview and ethos of the Buddhism of its time.<sup>87</sup> The power born from the Brahmanic sacrifice itself, transferred through the mesocosmic template of (the) Agni (cayana) permits the protocosmic Prajāpati to realize himself again in the mesocosmic Agni and permits the sacrificer to identify himself with the metacosmic Prajāpati who lies behind Agni. The merit born from the *dakkhina* offering itself, transferred through the mesocosmic template of the (bhikkhu)saṅgha, permits the protocosmic peta to accede to a spatial and karmalogical mesocosm and affords the donor an insight into, and thus the potential attainment of, the metacosm that lies beyond the saṅgha.

While the structure and dynamic of the parts of the *agnicayana*, the relationship of the Buddha to the saṅgha and of the saṅgha to the laity, and the alternating generations of the dead and the living may be seen as paralleling one another in Brahmanical Hinduism and Hinayana Buddhism, there remain important divergences that, moreover, serve to differentiate these two Indian traditions. The mechanistic workings of the sacrificial act in the Hindu context are ethicized in Buddhism so that the *moral* acts and the donor's *intention* in *dakkhina* become all important. The circularity of the sacrificial offering is nonetheless maintained throughout in this ethicized Buddhist context, as the offering of food (with proper intent) is transformed into a reciprocal gift of teaching of the *dhamma*, from which the donor arrives at a new *dharmalogical* insight that is a sort of moral rebirth (while the peta is

<sup>86</sup> Strong, p. 106 ff.

<sup>87</sup> Mus's typology is, of course, paralleled in a much more universal sense in Eliade's work on the sacred and profane, hierophanies, etc. in the religious phenomena of a broad range of traditions. In this case, Mus's typology, being more "Indian," "Buddhist," etc., seems to be more appropriate.

“reborn” through the transformed food offering into a higher karmalogical station).<sup>88</sup> It was in part this emphasis on compassion and moral duty to one’s fellow creatures in the face of suffering that made Buddhism attractive to the people of India in the period under study here. Hinduism, too, would come to emphasize intention over mechanistic acts in the Upaniṣads and eventually “internalize” the sacrifice in yoga and enshrine the ideal of compassion in the myriad forms of bhakti that arose in this period and in following centuries. The symbolism of the *agnicayana*, however, remains implicit to these and many other strata in the sedimented traditions of Indian religions.

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<sup>88</sup> The replacement of the sacrificial with an agricultural metaphor further facilitates the this-worldly emphasis of the Buddhist message, as all the transformations take place on the worldly plane through proper “planting,” “cultivation,” and “fruition,” etc., in and through the saṅgha as merit “field.” See Sec. IV above and nn. 63 and 64 above.

## APPENDIX A

	fire altar	Buddha	generation
protocosm (samsāra, laity)	sacrificer/dispersed Prajāpati = 10,800 bricks that have yet to be assembled	Gautama, who has yet to transmit body of teachings to potential saṅgha = utterances that have yet to be transmitted	father, doomed to death if he does not engender son = son, who has yet to be engendered
mesocosm (bhikkhusaṅgha, sambhogakāya)	Agni = constructed altar = fire, through which Prajāpati recovers himself	body of teachings in world that legitimate, constitute saṅgha = saṅgha through which dharmakāya is reconstructed in world	son = "saved" form of father in world, through whom father is reconstructed, recovers himself in world
metacosm (nirvāṇa)	reconstructed "divine" Prajāpati = constructed altar, through Agni (fire), which is "trace" of Prajāpati	dharmakāya of Buddha, which exists in world through sacred teachings that constitute saṅgha	father in "other world," who exists in this world through the "trace" that is his son

APPENDIX B

protocosm (samsāra, laity)	fire altar sacrificer/dispersed Prajāpati = 10,800 bricks that have yet to be assembled	Buddha Gautama, who has yet to transmit body of teachings to potential sangha = utterances that have yet to be transmitted	generation father, doomed to death if he does not engender = son, who has yet to be engendered	saṅgha/generation bhikkhu as <i>pabbajā</i> , dead to world; pres- ence of dead in world: must be nour- ished by alms of lay sons to exist in world	<i>dakkhiṇa</i> unsubstantial peta; nonexistent karmic intention, fruitless relationship between laity and saṅgha, which needs alms to exist in world
mesocosm (bhikkusangha, sambhogakāya)	Agni = constructed altar = fire, through which Prajāpati recovers himself	body of teachings in world which legiti- mate, constitute saṅgha = saṅgha through which dharmakāya recon- structed in world	son = "saved" form of father in world, through whom father reconstructed, recovers himself in world	lay donors sustain saṅgha in world; saṅgha = body of teachings through which founder/ father Buddha exists in world	nourished saṅgha = merit field through which peta recovers karmic efficacy as <i>devatā</i> ; teaching of saṅgha member through which donor recognizes dharmā essence of saṅgha to become future arhant
metacosm (nirvāṇa)	reconstructed "divine" Prajāpati = constructed altar, through Agni (fire) which is "trace" of Prajāpati	Dharmakāya of Buddha, which exists in world through sacred teachings that constitute saṅgha	father in "other world," who exists in world through the "trace" that is his son	dharmakāya of founder/father Buddha exists in world through body of sons in saṅgha	dharmakāya that donor recognizes as essence of saṅgha = saṅgha as manifesta- tion of dharmakāya in its teachings