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## The Blind Arhat and the Old Baby: Liberation by Wisdom, the Dry-Insight Practitioner, and the Pairing of Calm and Insight

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# **The Blind Arhat and the Old Baby: Liberation by Wisdom, the Dry-Insight Practitioner, and the Pairing of Calm and Insight**

David V. Fiordalis \*

## **Introduction: Charting a Path through the Manifold Dichotomies**

In a series of articles published nearly a century ago, Louis de La Vallée Poussin (1929, 1937a, 1937b) drew attention to what he considered to be two distinct and opposing “tendencies” or “theories” in classical Buddhism about how to achieve the ultimate goal of the path, one primarily through an “intellectual” or “rational” apprehension of a certain body of truths, and the other through “ascetic” or what he also called “ecstatic” or “mystical” practices. He sketched the former broadly as including an emphasis on “wisdom” (P: *paññā*; Skt: *prajñā*), “insight” (*vipassanā/vipaśyanā*), “seeing the truths” (*satyadarśana*), and “application of the Dhamma” (*dhammayoga*). The latter he saw as emphasizing “concentration” (*samādhi*), “calm abiding” (*samatha/samatha*), “absorption” (*jhāna/dhyāna*), “meditative attainment” (*samāpatti*), “extraordinary knowledge and powers” (*abhiññā/abhijñā*), and other “meditative” achievements. In this way, he sought to map a general dichotomy onto classical Buddhism. He also thought this basic dichotomy manifested itself in a number of different tensions that he saw as dividing the Buddhist tradition, mainly between (theoretical or textual or rational or intellectual) *study* (or insight) and *practice* (mainly of meditation, but also asceticism). He

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surmised that these tendencies or theories also represented opposing conceptions of the ultimate goal itself, and that perhaps they even led to the development of rival factions or “schools” within the Buddhist tradition, and he drew a number of other conclusions Luis Gómez (1999 : 693) has described as “unsubstantiated” and “at best questionable.”

In many ways, the distinction between calm (*śamatha*) and insight (*vipaśyanā*) has shaped contemporary descriptions of (and prescriptions for) Buddhist practice, including meditation practice, and the ostensibly related dichotomies continue to influence modern scholarly understandings of Buddhist doctrine, theory, and history. For example, building on La Vallée Poussin (1937a) and even including a translation into English of the first few paragraphs of his essay, Richard Gombrich (1996 : 96) published an article exploring what he calls “the idea that Enlightenment can be attained without meditation, by a process of intellectual analysis (technically known as *paññā*, insight) alone.” But is it really accurate to say that any Buddhists have maintained at any time that “Enlightenment can be attained without meditation”? Is this what the Pāli Buddhist sources mean by “liberation through wisdom” (*paññāvimutti*)? For one practitioner’s viewpoint, albeit representing a different Buddhist tradition from the one mainly discussed by Gombrich, no less significant a contemporary Buddhist voice than the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso (1994: 114), says at the start of his brief comments on the ninth chapter of the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* (on *prajñā*): “In order to realize emptiness, we do not actually need the first five pāramitās, and they are not even essential for developing clear insight for vipashyanā.” Now, the Dalai Lama does not explicitly say here that “Enlightenment can be attained without meditation,” but he does suggest that one need not perfect the virtue of meditation (or the other perfect virtues) in order to “develop clear insight” or “realize emptiness.” What does this mean?

It seems that the nature of the distinction between calm and insight, how these concepts relate to one other, the broader implications of this distinction for Buddhist understandings of meditation and its place on the path, and how this distinction relates to other paired concepts that have been connected to it, such as the theory/practice dichotomy, the dichotomy between textual study and meditation practice, the dichotomy between “forest

monk” (the virtuoso ascetic) and the “town monk” (the ordinary ritualist),<sup>1</sup> and other dichotomies: all these remain open questions that continue to interest both scholars and practitioners alike. The list of scholars to follow in La Vallée Poussin’s footsteps is long and includes many prominent voices in the history of Buddhist and Indian Studies.<sup>2</sup> Some scholars, such as Gombrich or Paul Griffiths, have supported or extended La Vallée Poussin’s conclusions; other scholars like Gómez have disagreed, but still affirmed the value of investigating these issues.<sup>3</sup> I offer this essay as a contribution to this ongoing conversation.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> On this distinction between monks of the forest and those of the town, see, for instance, Strong 2015: 210-212. The terms given in parentheses here are used by Collins 1998: 37.

<sup>2</sup> In lieu of providing such a list here myself, I would note that Wen 2009 includes a useful review of some prior scholarship. Though by no means comprehensive, he helpfully classifies scholarly views into several groups, but strangely (to my mind) lumps together all those who, he says, see calm and insight as representing “separate” or “contradictory” soteriological “approaches,” without really engaging their specific arguments (11-15). After completing the final draft of this essay, I became aware of Anālayo 2018 and Wynne 2018, which contain many more references to arguments on both sides of this debate, and bring the discussion up to a more current period. As will be apparent, my essay discusses some of the same primary sources the proper interpretation of which has been an issue of long-standing debate.

<sup>3</sup> Building upon La Vallée Poussin’s earlier position, Griffiths 1981 published an article describing concentration and insight as diametrically opposed styles of meditation practice, one culminating in emptying the mind and the other aiming to suffuse it with a particular vision of reality. To my mind, this is drawing the distinction too sharply, when oftentimes the meditative practices being prescribed entail doing both styles of practice more or less at the same time; the cognitive tasks actually seem to support one other. See Kaur 2016 for a recent evaluation and use of Griffiths. Not citing Griffiths, but the earlier position of La Vallée Poussin, Gómez 1999 argues that while *śamatha* and *vipaśyanā* may reflect different temperaments and cognitive styles, these concepts or the practices to which they refer should nonetheless be seen on a continuum of related styles of meditation practiced within communities of like-minded practitioners.

<sup>4</sup> I completed the first draft of this essay soon after Luis Gómez passed away in early September 2017. Then I flew to Shanghai, China, and presented it at an international workshop at Fudan University. I am grateful to the organizers (especially Zhen Liu and Bertram Dscho) and the sponsors of the workshop for inviting me to participate and making it possible, financially, for me to do so. For one thing, it gave me an opportunity to be among

In order to enter into the conversation a bit more deeply, I want to begin by asking a couple of relatively straightforward yes/no questions. First, is it possible for one to become an arhat (a “liberated” being) *through insight alone*, that is, without achieving any degree of meditative concentration whatsoever? The consensus on this question, at least in the classical, mainstream Buddhist literature, appears to be negative, despite what some scholars and (perhaps) practitioners have, at times, suggested. It matters what one means by insight and meditative concentration, but the consensus seems rather to be that *insight meditation* (defined non-technically), or the *cultivation* of insight, either includes within itself or presupposes some degree of meditative concentration, or that concentration and insight work together somehow. So, here is another question: is it possible to become “liberated” *through insight meditation alone*, that is, through the *cultivation* of wisdom or insight through specific “meditative” practices – the cultivation of “mindfulness” (*sati/smṛti*), for example – without having achieved certain specified levels of meditative concentration, sometimes identified as the four “absorptions” (*jhāna; dhyāna*), but more commonly the eight “liberations” (*vimokkha/vimoṣṣa*), including “the attainment of cessation” (*nirodha-samāpatti*)? The consensus on this question seems more affirmative: yes, at least some Buddhist practitioners have held this view, and many Buddhist meditation teachers do so today, in Burma, for instance.<sup>5</sup> This view does not necessarily conflict with the consensus position on the previous question, however, and it may even be consistent with (though not identical to) what the Dalai Lama suggests in the quote cited above. It also carries certain implications: for instance, it implies the possibility of becoming “liberated” without having cultivated or achieved certain types of extraordinary powers.

Disagreement remains about when such an understanding was first formulated and expressed in Buddhist texts, and whether the earliest Buddhist scriptures imply or support it, but on a

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colleagues and make new friends at a time when I was still mourning one of my chief mentors in the academic life.

<sup>5</sup> On these points, see Wen 2009, but also Dhammajoti 2015 for an interesting study of classical Sarvāstivāda Abhidharma texts on this issue. The fact that “mindfulness” has come to be classified, anachronistically (and incorrectly) according to Gethin (2011: 273), as an exclusively “insight meditation” practice further underlines the point.

theoretical or practical level, if it is agreed that some degree of meditative concentration is necessary for, or part of, the effective practice of insight *meditation* (again, non-technically conceived), then much of the debate seems to boil down to the question of how much concentration is sufficient for the cultivation of insight to bring about its intended effect: paradigmatically, the achievement of awakening and complete cessation at the end of the present life. This is a theoretical question, and maybe it is also a practical question. It is certainly of interest to practitioners and scholars. Such a question (or the like, e.g., *how* calm and insight work together to achieve their intended effect) will undoubtedly prompt further investigations of Buddhist doctrinal, theoretical, and exegetical literature, and other forms of Buddhist discourse about meditation and the path. But in lieu of new data, historical or otherwise, or an alternative method of approaching old data, which would enable me to articulate a new perspective on such a question, I have sought a different way to approach the topic of the relationship between calm and insight. Going back to some of the open questions prompted by the investigations of La Vallée Poussin, Griffiths, Gombrich, Gómez, and others, I have tried to ask, more specifically, how particular Buddhist *narratives* depict specific individuals who are described as either “liberated by wisdom” or a “dry-insight practitioner,” and how particular Buddhist *narratives* connect calm and insight meditation.<sup>6</sup> Seeking

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<sup>6</sup> These questions assume both a specific taxonomy of the (textual) data and a method of analysis, and I have clearly laid out neither here. I hope that a sense for both will emerge over the course of the essay, but at minimum I am assuming a definition of narrative as distinct from the paradigmatic mode of discourse – see, e.g., Collins 1998: 121-122 – in my view, these two modes can be seen as occupying the poles of a discursive spectrum with dialogue somewhere in the middle. So, while La Vallée Poussin marshalled a range of textual evidence to support his claims, and several of these texts have served as a basis for continuing scholarly investigations, much of this textual evidence is doctrinal, systematic, or theoretical in nature. A few scholars, like John Strong, have drawn attention to other types of sources, including some narrative passages that place meditation and ascetic practice at one end of an opposition with the preservation and mastery of Buddhist texts on the other. See, for example, the passages given in Strong 2002, under “Divisional Issues: Practice vs. Study,” section 6.3.1, pages 223-226, about which more will be said below. It would also be interesting to look more closely at the genre of practice manuals. In any case, my argument here assumes that the analysis of narratives requires a method sensitive to the fact that narratives are the object of analysis. It is also possible to look at

answers to these questions may enable us to bridge a divide that has often been maintained between narrative and doctrine, and approach the topic in a new way.

Guided by these latter questions, this essay will review a few pertinent passages and dialogues in Pāli, but its main focus will be on two narratives, one in Pāli and the other in Sanskrit, neither of which has received much, if any, previous attention from scholars interested in the topic. One is the story of Cakkhupāla from the Pāli *Dhammapada* commentary, which features a rare example of a specific person who is actually described in the story as a “dry-insight practitioner.” I place this story within the context of other named individuals in other Buddhist dialogues and stories who are described as being “liberated by wisdom,” and then compare these examples with a second narrative, the story of Sthavira from the Sanskrit *Avadānaśataka*, and also with a few more dialogues in Pāli. As we will see, this second story and these latter examples present calm and insight as going together somehow, perhaps even in a combined practice. The evidence from all these dialogues and stories does not show a clear opposition between calm and insight as distinctive forms of life or practice, meditation or otherwise; instead, the stories either point to their combination under a generalized notion of practice, or alternatively suggest that the practice of “insight meditation” itself could stand for what we might broadly call “Buddhist asceticism.” Both stories tie a generalized notion of practice, including meditation practice, to an overarching ascetic or monastic lifestyle, practiced intensively and over a short period of time, and in this way, they may also connect the discussion to another important tension that has occupied both scholars and practitioners of Buddhism, the one between longer (or more gradual) and quicker (or more sudden) paths to awakening. Consequently, we begin to see that there is more at stake in these narratives than simply providing a clear answer to a doctrinal or practical question. For one thing, they project meaningful worlds of human motivation and action, and invite us, the readers or audience, to consider what it would mean to see the narrative worlds they project as our world of lived experience.

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texts typically read as expressions of doctrine or philosophy from the perspective that they are narratives, but that is not my primary focus here.

### The Arhat Liberated by Wisdom and the Dry-Insight Practitioner

In a few passages from canonical Buddhist literature, we encounter the mysterious figure of the arhat who is described as being “liberated by wisdom” (P. *paññāvimutta*; Skt. *Prajñāvimukta*). Who is this person? What is his provenance? What is meant by wisdom in the contexts where this figure appears? What is meant by being liberated in these contexts? And what do these texts tell us about the means of achieving such liberation? In the commentaries and in some Buddhist narratives and systematic works, we meet this figure again. He (or ostensibly she, though I am unaware of any female persons who are specifically described this way in Buddhist texts or stories) is sometimes identified with another figure, the so-called “dry-insight practitioner” (P. *sukkhavipassaka*, from Skt. *śuṣka*, meaning dried, parched, or withered).<sup>7</sup> In the context of Buddhist literature, these two figures, the one liberated by wisdom and the dry-insight practitioner, appear emblematic of a certain type of special being or person. In that sense, both terms convey a certain recognized social or institutional status within an imagined (and possibly an actual) Buddhist community, whatever the ontological claims of the tradition about the reality of the states described or implied by the terms.

Now, classical Buddhist literature does not contain many examples of specifically named individuals who are described as either liberated by wisdom or a dry-insight practitioner, and the latter term seems to be limited entirely to the commentarial literature. The *Susīma-sutta* from the *Samyutta-nikāya* (and its commentary) is probably the best-known example,<sup>8</sup> and along with a few other texts, this dialogue has probably received the most attention from scholars since La Vallée Poussin’s times.<sup>9</sup> But it is

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<sup>7</sup> By extension, the Sanskrit term can sometimes carry negative connotations in certain contexts, where it can mean feigned, emptied, useless, or offensive.

<sup>8</sup> For an English translation of this dialogue, see Bodhi 2000: 612-618. This may be cross-referenced against the page numbering of the Pali Text Society (PTS) edition of the original Pāli. In what follows, I have generally used the Chatṭha Saṅgāyana (CS) edition of the Pāli. Only in certain instances have I checked it against the PTS edition.

<sup>9</sup> Gombrich 1996 discusses the Pāli and the Chinese versions of the dialogue, but in my view, he seems to mischaracterize the latter; Wen 2009 includes



rather bare of detail, and thus it has given rise to confusion as well as much speculation. As we will see, it is only in the Pāli commentary and maybe also in the Chinese version that *Susīma* is clearly considered to be an arhat liberated by wisdom, at all, and only the Pāli commentary uses the key term, dry-insight practitioner, in this context. However, I also know of two other narrative exemplars, both of which have so far received less attention from scholars. One is the story of *Cakkhupāla*, the opening story of the Pāli Commentary on the *Dhammapada* (*Dhammapadaṭṭhakathā*), which as stated above features a monk named *Cakkhupāla* who is explicitly described as a dry-insight practitioner.<sup>10</sup> The other is found in an episode from a story in the *Divyāvadāna*, where a monk named *Pūrṇa Kuṇḍopadhānīyaka* is described as being liberated by wisdom.<sup>11</sup> As we will see, both of these examples provide more narrative context than does the *Susīma-sutta*. So, analyzing them can help us to gain a fuller picture of what the texts might have in mind when they say that someone is liberated by wisdom or a dry-insight practitioner, thus providing an understanding that may then be used to reconsider better-known texts like the *Susīma-sutta* and its commentary.

Apart from these three examples, the other occurrences in the classical literature of the concept of being liberated by wisdom are more abstract and theoretical. They do not concern specifically named individuals. Rather, they are found in lists of different types of persons and their attributes. This is true, for instance, in the *Puggalapaññatti* and the *Kīṭāgiri-sutta*.<sup>12</sup> No specific persons are explicitly mentioned there. This is also true for the *Kosambī-sutta*, which features the well-known dialogue with *Musīla* and *Nārada*, which provided *La Vallée Poussin* with the title of his famous

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an English translation of the Chinese, which helps one to see how this might be so.

<sup>10</sup> Again, I have used the CS edition as my main source for this story, but in this case, I have also compared it against the PTS edition in Norman 1906: 3-24; for an English translation of the PTS edition, see Burlingame 1921: 146ff.

<sup>11</sup> For the principal Sanskrit edition, see Cowell and Neil 1886; for an English translation, see Rotman 2008. On this episode, see also Strong 1992: 141ff.

<sup>12</sup> The *Kīṭāgiri-sutta* is dialogue 70 of the *Majjhima-nikāya* (MN). For an English translation, see Nāṇamoli and Bodhi 1995: 577-584; for the PTS edition, see vol. 1, 473-481. For the PTS edition of the *Puggalapaññatti*, see Morris 1883; and for an English translation, see Law 1924.

essay.<sup>13</sup> As Gómez (1999) has pointed out, neither the Chinese nor the Pāli portrays Musīla as unambiguously claiming to be an arhat in the first place, much less one liberated by wisdom or the like; so for the remainder of this section, I want to return briefly to the *Susīma-sutta*, which occurs in very close proximity to the *Kosambī-sutta* in the Pāli Buddhist canonical discourses, and use it to establish a working framework for thinking about the other two narrative examples, which I will discuss in the next section.

As the dialogue opens, an ascetic named Susīma decides to become ordained as a Buddhist monk, because he witnesses the material support the Buddha’s monks have been receiving from the lay community. After becoming a Buddhist monk, Susīma hears about a number of monks who assert that they are arhats. He is curious and goes to speak with them, and he asks them whether they also possess five types of “extraordinary knowledge and powers” (*abhiññā*), including “superhuman powers” (*iddhi*) and so forth. In each case, they say they do not. Then Susīma asks them whether they “have known and seen those calm liberations that transcend material form and are immaterial, or have touched them with the body” (*janantā evaṃ passantā ye te santā vimokkhā atikkamma rūpe āruppā te kāyena phusitvā viharatha*). Again, they say they have not. Susīma doesn’t understand how one could be an arhat and not possess these qualities or powers. The monks then explain that they are “liberated by wisdom” (*paññāvimutta*).

Susīma still doesn’t understand what they are saying, and so he goes to see the Buddha and conveys the entire conversation to him. The Buddha then explains: “Susīma, at first there is knowledge of the stability of the Dhamma (*dhammaṭṭhitiñāna*),<sup>14</sup> and afterwards there is knowledge of cessation.” Since the Buddha’s explanation here is quite terse and unclear, the discourse seems to want to explain what he means with an analogy. The Buddha likens Susīma’s own understanding of basic principles of the Dhamma to that of the monks “liberated by wisdom,” but it is unclear, at least from the Pāli version, that Susīma actually is an arhat at this point. In fact, this never becomes clear in the Pāli

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<sup>13</sup> For an English translation of this short dialogue, see Bodhi 2000, 609-611; it is found in the PTS edition, vol. 2, 115-118.

<sup>14</sup> See Bodhi 2000, 785, n. 211, for the commentary’s explanation of this odd phrase.

version, and thus the analogy between Susīma and the arhats liberated by wisdom remains uncertain. In the version found in the Chinese āgamas, however, Susīma gains a “dust-free, stainless, purified vision of the Dhamma” as a result of his discussion with the Buddha, and this seems to be equivalent to gaining knowledge of the stability of the Dhamma. Then, at the end of the dialogue, the Chinese version states very clearly that Susīma becomes an arhat.

Now, it seems to me that the *Susīma-sutta* as currently extant in both Pāli and Chinese tries to address two distinct questions, though both of these more specific questions could be contained within the general question: what does it mean to say that someone is liberated by wisdom? One of the more specific questions relates to the qualities or powers that an arhat liberated by wisdom possesses, or rather does not possess: in short, what does an arhat liberated by wisdom know or do? The second distinct, more specific question addressed in the discourse concerns how one becomes liberated by wisdom. In response to this second question, the discourse suggests stages or some sort of process whereby becoming established or stabilized in one’s knowledge of the Dhamma leads to liberation, but it may also suggest that engaging in a dialogue with the Buddha can itself be liberating.

As it stands in the extant Pāli and Chinese texts of the *Susīma-sutta*, the different answers to these two questions sit uneasily together, though the Chinese version tries to smooth over the transitions and close the gaps in the narrative. So, too, do the Pāli commentaries, which explicitly draw the parallel between Susīma and the arhats liberated by wisdom, and also make the explicit connection between the arhat liberated by wisdom and the dry-insight practitioner. Consider the following passage from the Pāli commentary:

For what reason does he [the Buddha] begin by saying “And do you, also, Susīma...”? The purpose is to make clear that the monks are dry-insight practitioners (*sukkhavipassaka*) who have not achieved absorption (*nijjhānaka*). Indeed, this is the intention here: “It isn’t that you [Susīma], solely, are a dry-insight practitioner who has not achieved absorption. These monks are the same, too.”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Following the CS edition: *Api pana tvam susīmāti idaṃ kasmā ārabhi? Nijjhānakānaṃ sukkhavipassakabhikkhūnaṃ pākatakaranaṭṭhaṃ.*

So, it looks like an attempt is being made here in the commentary to establish a series of connections that are not at all made clear in the extant text, either in the Pāli or the Chinese version. For one thing, the commentary attempts to establish a parallel between the unnamed monks who call themselves “liberated by wisdom,” and Susīma, who makes no such claim. It also attempts to establish an equivalency between being liberated by wisdom and being a dry-insight practitioner, without the latter term being used in the discourse itself.

Quite significantly, the Pāli commentary also glosses the expression “liberated by wisdom” (*paññāvimutta*), used in the discourse by the unnamed monks to describe themselves, with the following explanation: “‘Friend, we are liberated by wisdom,’ means ‘friend, we are dry-insight practitioners who have not achieved absorption and are liberated *by wisdom alone*’.”<sup>16</sup> Also significantly, the commentary glosses the rather opaque phrase, “knowledge of the stability of the Dhamma,” as “knowledge through insight (meditation)” (*vipassanāñāna*). The commentary thus places a great deal of emphasis on the cultivation of *vipassanā* as the means by which one becomes an arhat liberated by wisdom, its practice being one of the distinguishing characteristics of this type of person, according to the commentary.<sup>17</sup> But while it is fairly clear that the *Susīma-sutta* does conceive of such a person in general terms, and provides some general characteristics of such a person, such as the fact that such persons have not experienced certain states of meditative absorption and do not possess certain extraordinary powers, it is not entirely clear that the discourse itself names Susīma as being one such specific individual, or that it clarifies the means by which he (or anyone else) becomes one, whatever the commentary may say.

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*Ayañhettha adhippāyo – na kevalaṃ tvameva nijjhānako sukkhavipassako etepi bhikkhū evarūpāyevāti.*

<sup>16</sup> *Paññāvimuttā kho mayam, āvusoti, āvuso, mayam nijjhānakā sukkhavipassakā paññāmatteneva vimuttāti dasseti.* The italicized phrase above is an attempt to convey the double emphasis in the original, *paññāmatteneva*, “precisely (or only) through wisdom alone.”

<sup>17</sup> The commentary maybe also indicates that *vipassanā* and the knowledge arising from it belongs on a continuum of practices and types of knowledge that arise over time, when it comments: *Nibbāne ñāṇanti vipassanāya cīṇṇante pavattamaggañānaṃ tam pacchā uppajjati.*

### **The Blind Arhat as Dry-Insight Practitioner, and a Monk who is Liberated by Wisdom**

In the previous section, I attempted to establish a basic framework for thinking about how some Pāli canonical sources discuss the nature of the arhat liberated by wisdom, and how the Pāli commentary establishes a connection between this type of person, the practice of insight, and the so-called dry-insight practitioner. In particular, we saw that the *Susīma-sutta*, which scholars have identified as one of the key texts for establishing these connections, is less clear than one might wish, especially for the purposes of supporting such an important claim as “Enlightenment can be attained without meditation, by a process of intellectual analysis alone.” We saw that several of the basic terms, definitions, and connections are found only in the commentary, and even in the commentary, the practice of insight does not entail mere intellectual analysis. With the *Susīma-sutta*, we are confronted with a hybrid text, one that has given rise to several layers of exegesis, and it is difficult to pull apart the various strands and see how they are woven together. This is where the next story may aid us. Since it is a relatively complete narrative, it can be treated more holistically, and it features a specific character that the story itself describes as a dry-insight practitioner.

This narrative is also found in a commentary, but perhaps a different level or kind of commentary: it comes from the Pāli commentary on the *Dhammapada*, where it features as the first story of the collection. Over time, the commentary on the *Dhammapada* became a large storehouse of Buddhist narrative literature. The introductory verses claim that it is a translation into Pāli of a commentary in Sinhalese dialect that had been handed down by tradition. While the precise relationship between this commentary on the *Dhammapada* and the commentaries on the four main Nikāyas remains unclear, this particular story may help us to shed some further light on the concept of the “dry-insight practitioner” and the type of practices that were associated with such a person. In this way, we can learn more about what some Buddhists may have thought it meant to “practice insight meditation” or achieve liberation “through wisdom alone.”

The story features someone named Pāla or Mahāpāla, “Big Pāla,” the eldest son of a wealthy householder in the city of Sāvatti during the time of the Buddha. He is named Pāla,

“Protector,” because he was born only after his father built an enclosure protecting a large tree he believed to be inhabited by a powerful *yakkha* or tree spirit. The householder eventually has two sons, whom he calls Big Pāla and Little Pāla. Both sons are married, and then some time later the parents die, leaving everything to the two sons. At this point in the story, the Buddha is said to be residing in the Jetavana Monastery; one day, Big Pāla sees a large group of laypeople going to see the Buddha and hear him preach the Dharma. He accompanies them, and after hearing the Buddha’s sermon, he decides to become a monk. He seeks the Buddha’s permission, and the Buddha requires him to ask his younger brother first. The younger brother tries to dissuade him, making various arguments, including one that Big Pāla is still a young man, and that he should wait and become a monk when he is old, but Big Pāla remains adamant that he will join the monastic order immediately, and he is allowed to do so. According to the story, he then spends nearly five years as a monk, after which point he goes to see the Buddha.

Here the story becomes quite interesting for the present discussion. Big Pāla begins by asking the Buddha a question: “Respected one,” he asks, “how many responsibilities (*dhura*) are there in this teaching?” The Buddha responds, “Monks have only two responsibilities, namely, the responsibility to learn the texts (*ganthadhura*) and the responsibility to practice insight meditation (*vipassanādhura*).” Big Pāla then asks the Buddha to explain what these two responsibilities entail. The Buddha describes the responsibility of learning texts as follows:

In accordance with one’s own wisdom/discernment (*paññā*), one learns the Word of the Buddha (*buddhavacana*), either one or two nikāyas, or indeed the whole Tripiṭaka, and one holds it in mind, recites it, and teaches it.<sup>18</sup>

The Buddha then describes the responsibility for practicing insight meditation in this way:

One lives simply; and indeed, one finds happiness in having one’s seat and bed in a secluded location; becoming well-established in the viewpoint that one’s whole person is

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<sup>18</sup> *Attano paññānurūpena ekaṃ vā dve vā nikāye sakalaṃ vā pana teṭṭakambuddhavacanaṃ uggāhītvā tassa dhāraṇaṃ kathanāṃ vācananti...*

subject to decay and destruction, one dwells persistently practicing insight meditation, and one becomes an arhat.<sup>19</sup>

Although we find here some kind of opposition or dichotomy between textual study and meditation practice, the latter also involving a high degree of asceticism, at the same time these two “responsibilities” are not presented as a clear opposition between two different paths to the same goal, nor between two different goals or conceptions of the ultimate. Even though the responsibility to practice insight meditation is explicitly said to lead one to become an arhat, the ultimate goal of the responsibility to study texts is not made clear. Ostensibly, the immediate goal is the ability to recite and teach the Dhamma, but the precise relationship between the two responsibilities, whether they are mutually exclusive, how they should be balanced, who should do what, when, and so forth: none of this is explored any further in the story.

Instead, upon hearing about these two responsibilities, Big Pāla says: “Respected one, since I have become a monk when I am an old man, it is not possible for me to fulfill the responsibility of learning the texts, but I can fulfill the responsibility of practicing insight meditation. Therefore, please teach me a meditation practice (*kammaṭṭhāna*).” This statement is a bit odd, since Big Pāla’s younger brother had previously argued unsuccessfully that Big Pāla wait until he was an old man to become a monk, but no mention is made of this discrepancy. The Buddha simply gives him what the story describes as a meditation practice that will lead him to become an arhat, and we are left to consider Big Pāla’s motivations for choosing insight meditation practice over learning the texts. Can it really be that he considers the practice of insight meditation to be more doable than learning texts, or are his motivations actually more direct and extreme in their focus?

No more specific description of the Buddha’s meditation instructions to Big Pāla is found in the story, but as it proceeds, Big Pāla gathers a group of sixty like-minded monks, and together they search for a place to practice during the three months of the monsoon retreat. They travel a long distance until they reach a large town said to be in the border regions. There they develop a

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<sup>19</sup> *Sallahukavuttino pana pantasenāsanābhiratassa attabhāve khayavayaṃ  
paṭṭhapetvā sātaccakiriyavasena vipassanaṃ vavvhetvā  
arahattaggahaṇanti...*

positive relationship with the local community, who build them a monastery and supply them with food and other material support. As they settle into their practice, the monks discuss their plans for the retreat, and while the other monks decide that they will spend time “in all four postures” (standing, sitting, walking, and lying down), Big Pāla makes a vow that he will not lie down during the entire rains retreat. So, while the details of the meditation practice remain vague, the story emphasizes the theme of Big Pāla’s asceticism.

Indeed, Big Pāla’s perseverance and effort, his brute asceticism, is extremely intense. His vow not to lie down results in his eyes beginning to burn and weep. Although a local doctor treats him for the condition, the doctor tells him he must lie down for the treatment to work. Big Pāla refuses to do this, for it would break his vow, and the doctor eventually abandons him to his own devices. The monk perseveres with his practices, and as a result he loses his eyesight at the same time that he becomes an arhat. This is apparently what earns him the rather ironic nickname, Cakkhupāla, “Protector of the Eyes.” The doctor/patient relationship depicted in the story would be interesting to consider further, but for our purposes the moment he loses his eyesight and becomes an arhat is the most significant one in the story, because here the story explicitly describes him as a “dry-insight practitioner” (*sukkhavipassaka*).

It is worth emphasizing again that this is the only instance I have found in which a specifically named individual is described with this term within an actual story itself. Recall that it is only in the Pāli commentary that Susīma is described in this way; the Chinese translation of the discourse maybe implies that he is an arhat liberated by wisdom, but the Pāli version of the *Susīma-sutta* arguably ascribes this description only to a general type of person or to a group of unnamed individuals who are contrasted with Susīma. This conclusion has for support no less an authority than Dhammapāla himself, who says almost exactly the same thing in a comment from the *Theragāthā* commentary. Writing about the dry-insight practitioner as a type of arhat, he says, “And this classification is stated after having investigated the general nature



of the disciples. Here, in the ‘Pāli canonical texts’ (*Pāliya*), we do not encounter any dry-insight practitioners at all.”<sup>20</sup>

Apart from Tzungkuen Wen in his 2009 dissertation, I am aware of no other scholar who has drawn attention to the Cakkhupāla story in discussions of the topic of the arhat liberated by wisdom or the dry-insight practitioner. This is surprising given how much has been written on this topic. It is even more surprising given that La Vallée Poussin himself is credited with co-translating the Cakkhupāla story into French with Godefroy de Blonay in 1892. In their translation, however, the key phrase has not been translated for some reason. The pertinent portion reads only, “He became an Arhat, entered into his cell, and sat down” (*Il devint un Arhat, entra dans sa cellule et s’assit*).<sup>21</sup> A possible reason for the general neglect may be the fact that Burlingame seems to have mistranslated the key phrase as “dwelling in the bliss of Spiritual Insight” in his influential translation of the *Dhammapada* commentary.<sup>22</sup> However, Wen’s careful method of searching the Chaṭṭha Saṅgāyana edition for all occurrences of the term,

<sup>20</sup> *Dhammapāla, Paramatthadīpanī*, Vol. 3, p. 209: *Ayañca vibhāgo sāvakanāṃ sādharānabhāvaṃ upaparikkhitvā vutto. Idha pāliyaṃ āgatā nattheva*. See also Wen 2009: 196. The *Theragāthā* commentary contains a parallel version of the Cakkhupāla story, and in that telling as well, Cakkhupāla is called a dry-insight practitioner and arhat, as Wen (2009: 195) also notes. By *pāliya* here, I take it that *Dhammapāla* means “the canonical literature,” and thus he seems to exclude the commentaries, where we find the Cakkhupāla story in its full form. Cakkhupāla is not described as a dry-insight practitioner in the *Theragāthā* itself. And it is noteworthy that *Dhammapāla* does not mention *Susīma* here either.

<sup>21</sup> La Vallée Poussin and Blonay 1892: 186.

<sup>22</sup> Burlingame 1921, vol. 1, 152. In fact, the PTS edition of the *Dhammapada* commentary reads *sukhavipassaka*, Norman 1906: 12, without any indication of emendation, rather than *sukkhavipassaka*, which is what one finds in the Chaṭṭha Saṅgāyana edition of the *Dhammapada* commentary and in the parallel story in the *Theragāthā* commentary in both the PTS and CS editions. Alternatively, even if one takes the phrase here to read *sudha-* or maybe *suddha-vipassaka*, then still in that case Burlingame’s translation would seem to be incorrect. It should then be something like “pure insight practitioner,” carrying much the same meaning as “dry insight practitioner.” See Wen 2009: 8, 91, 145ff, and 189 for some passages in which we find *suddhavipassaka* used as an alternate term and even as alternative reading for *sukkhavipassaka*, for instance, in the commentary on the *Itivuttaka* (189). Both these terms are also found a few times and seemingly synonymously in the *Visuddhimagga* and its commentary (Wen 2009: 145ff).

*sukkhavipassaka*, uncovered this story as well. Perhaps there is another, still more basic, reason for the neglect of this story in modern academic discussions of insight meditation practice: the general neglect of narrative literature in discussions of Buddhist intellectual history, including the history of the theory of practice.

So, what does this story reveal about the commentarial understanding of the arhat liberated by wisdom and his style of practice? For one thing, it actually muddles the image by upsetting whatever clean parallel we might have drawn between concentration and insight, on the one hand, and “meditation practice” and “the vocation of (textual) study,” on the other. In this story, no contrast is ever explicitly found between two or more styles of meditation, such as calm and insight. Instead, the monks devoted to *vipassanā* or the *kammaṭṭhāna* practice would actually seem to parallel those “practitioners of the *jhānas*” (*jhāyin*) in the well-known *Mahācunda-sutta* in the *Aṅguttara-nikāya*, where such “meditators” are famously contrasted with the so-called “specialists in the Dhamma” (*dhammayoga*).<sup>23</sup> Drawing the full parallel, however, would require that we identify the monks responsible for learning the texts (*ganthadhura*) of this story with the specialists in the Dhamma (*dhammayoga*) of that discourse, and that may well be inappropriate, especially if Gómez (1999) is correct in his understanding of the latter as itself a form of meditation practice.

Perhaps there is actually a clearer dichotomy articulated in the Cakkhupāla story between the vocations of textual study and meditation practice than there is in the *Mahācunda-sutta*, but while the meditation practice is presented as efficient insofar as it does enable Big Pāla to become an arhat, his practice is not described in any detail and it is explicitly tied to an entire ascetic lifestyle, which Big Pāla embodies and the Buddha initially describes as part of the responsibility of practicing insight meditation. The story of Cakkhupāla also emphasizes these ascetic practices, since only he makes the vow not to lie down during the retreat, and only he goes blind. The story thus distinguishes between different levels of asceticism, and not between different types of meditation.

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<sup>23</sup> For an English translation of this discourse, see Bodhi 2012: 917-919. In the PTS edition of the Pāli, this discourse is found in vol. 3, p. 355-356. See also Gombrich 1996, Gómez 1999, and La Vallée Poussin 1937a.

Certain echoes of this story also indicate that it was understood more in terms of its emphasis on asceticism than on what we might commonly consider the practice of insight meditation. In his well-known anthology of sources, *The Experience of Buddhism*, John Strong (2002: 223-224) translates a portion of the *Pamsukūlānisamsa* (a Pāli text he calls “late”), which contains the key paragraph from the *Dhammapada* commentary, describing the two responsibilities of the monk, but changes other details of the narrative. Strong frames the passage using a number of the same dichotomies we have been discussing, primarily emphasizing the difference between textual study and meditation practice. Returning to the same set of passages later in *Buddhisms: An Introduction*, Strong points out that these two responsibilities were not necessarily seen as mutually exclusive, though they were sometimes in tension.<sup>24</sup>

In the *Pamsukūlānisamsa*, the description of the vocation of study is identical to what is found in the *Dhammapada* commentary, but the vocation of meditation is described rather differently. Initially, it is defined using some of the same terms as the *Dhammapada* commentary: “A monk cultivates insight into destruction and aging, and thereby achieves the state of an arhat.”<sup>25</sup> However, after Kassapa, who is the Buddha’s interlocutor here, gives a response that is the same as what Cakkhupāla says in the *Dhammapada* commentary about choosing the vocation of insight meditation because he is an old man, the *Pamsukūlānisamsa* adds: “Speaking about the vocation of insight, the Blessed One said, ‘Kassapa, buddhas praise the thirteen ascetic practices (*dhutāṅga*)...’” and the text goes on to discuss the technical issue of the monk’s robes in more detail.<sup>26</sup> In this way, this “late” Buddhist text also connects the vocation of insight meditation to the broader ascetic lifestyle.

If the concentration/insight dichotomy does not always or necessarily parallel the dichotomy between meditation practice and textual study, how then should we understand the figure of the

<sup>24</sup> Strong 2015: 208-209. In this respect, he seems to rely mainly on his prior textual evidence, but also points to other scholastic formulations.

<sup>25</sup> Gisette Martini 1973: *eko bhikkhu khayavayavipassanaṃ vavhetvā yavā arahattaṃ patvā...* (68).

<sup>26</sup> Martini 1973: *bhagavā vipassanādhuram kathesi «kassapa terasadhutaṅgāni buddhā pasamsanti...* (68).

arhat liberated by wisdom or the dry insight practitioner? Such a figure seems most clearly defined as an arhat who has not achieved the eight “liberations,” including the attainment of cessation, or an arhat who does not possess the five types of extraordinary knowledge and powers, or an arhat who does not possess some combination of these attainments.<sup>27</sup> This is what the *Susīma-sutta* says, and it is also clear from the Cakkhupāla story that the blind arhat does not possess any extraordinary powers or attainments besides, of course, being an arhat. While the display of superhuman powers is not a major theme in the story, it does emphasize Cakkhupāla’s blindness, which is not miraculously healed by the gods or the Buddha or an act of truth; the story is about the power of past actions to condition and impose limitations even upon the nature and abilities of the arhat. Such attainments and abilities would also include certain states of meditative absorption above the realm of the material, the sensual, and the conceptual, and they would include certain types of “mundane” knowledge and powers that are considered somehow extraordinary or superhuman, being some of the same types of powers and knowledge possessed by gods, wheel-turning kings, and other divine or semi-divine beings.

This lack of superhuman powers is also the key characteristic distinguishing the arhat liberated by wisdom in the final narrative episode I want to discuss in this section. This example comes from the story of Pūrṇa in the *Dīvyāvadāna*. In the story, a layman named Pūrṇa, who lives in the city of Sūrparaka on the western coast of India, invites the Buddha and his community of monks to travel there for a meal. Meanwhile the Buddha is staying in the north in the city of Śrāvastī. He nonetheless perceives the layman’s invitation, which takes on wondrous proportions through the Buddha’s power, and consents to go. The Buddha and many of the elders take meal tickets, and the Buddha tells Ānanda to inform the other monks that whoever else wishes to go for the meal should take a meal ticket.

Ānanda goes to the assembly, makes the announcement, and begins to hand out meal tickets. There is another monk in attendance, also named Pūrṇa or the One Who Uses His Water Pot for a Pillow (*Kuṣvopadhānīyaka*); he also wishes to go, and

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<sup>27</sup> This statement also accords with the most recent findings of Wen 2009 and Dhammajoti 2015 with respect to the Sarvāstivāda canonical and scholastic materials preserved in Chinese.

reaches for a meal ticket. However, Pūrṇa or “Little Pūrṇa” (Pūrṇaka), as he is called in the story, is said to be “liberated by wisdom” (*prajñāvimukta*). So, when he reaches for a meal ticket, Ānanda says to him in verse:

Venerable one, this is not an invitation to eat in the home of  
the King of Kośala;  
Nor in the palace of Sudatta [i.e., Anathāpiṇvika]; nor in the  
mansion of Mrgāra.

The city of Sūrpāraka is more than a hundred leagues from  
here;  
One must go there with superhuman powers. So, you be  
quiet, little Pūrṇa.<sup>28</sup>

The narrator of the story then explains: “He [Pūrṇa] was liberated by wisdom. Therefore, he had not acquired superhuman powers (*sa prajñāvimuktaḥ tena ṛddhir notpādītā*.)” This makes the equation quite clear: liberation by wisdom equals no superhuman powers. However, the matter does not end there. Pūrṇa reflects, “Even though I have vomited out, spit out, thrown away, and driven away the whole mass of afflictions, I do not possess the superhuman powers that are shared in common with the rival ascetics.” So, he “practices vigor” (*vīryam āsthāya*) and acquires superhuman powers so quickly that he stretches out his arm like the trunk of an elephant and takes one before Ānanda can give a meal ticket to a third elder. Then Pūrṇa utters the following verses:

Not by having a wonderful body, nor by learning (*śruta*), nor  
by virtue of using force, O Gautama; not even by using  
powerful words or wishes, does one acquire the six kinds of  
extraordinary knowledge and power here in this world.

Indeed, for someone like me, whose youth has truly been  
crushed by old age, the six kinds of extraordinary knowledge  
and power are essayed through the powers of meditation

<sup>28</sup> Cowell and Neal 1886: *Naitad bhoktavyam āyusman kośalādhipater gr̥he | agāre vā sudattasya* [em.; Cowell and Neal: *sujātasya*; Tib: *rab sbyin*] *mṛgārabhavane 'thavā || sādhiḥkaṃ yojanaśataṃ Sūrpārakam itaḥ puram | ṛddhibhir yatra gantavyaṃ tūṣṇī tvaṃ bhava Pūrṇaketi* (44). See also Rotman 2008: 99 and 409, n. 313.

(*dhyāna*), and through the various powers of calm (*śama*), moral virtue (*śīla*), and insight meditation (*vipaśyanā*).<sup>29</sup>

The Buddha then praises Pūrṇa as greatest among his monks for taking meal tickets. In the story, the whole episode forms a kind of preface to the Buddha's own wondrous display, whereby (in part) he and the monks all fly to Sūrparaka on different types of marvelous creatures and flying vehicles. Pūrṇa's verses also briefly indicate how one does (and does not) acquire such extraordinary knowledge and superhuman power. It is noteworthy that insight meditation is listed here alongside the cultivation of calming meditation and moral virtue as the means by which one does acquire such knowledge and powers. By the same token, the lack of extraordinary knowledge and superhuman power is what distinguishes Pūrṇa as one liberated by wisdom from the other elders, though the episode sheds no additional light on how one becomes liberated by wisdom. Still, the relative ease with which Pūrṇa develops the powers, and his explanation of the means to achieve them, suggests that calm and insight meditation belong on a continuum of meditative practices on the path rather than in strict opposition as competing forms of life or practice.

### The Story of Old Baby and the Pairing of Calm and Insight Meditation

There are many passages among the Pāli canonical texts in which calm and insight meditation appear in tandem or as a pair. Sometimes, arguably, they also appear to be in some kind of tension. One such passage is found in the *Āṅguttara-nikāya*; the Buddha is speaking:

Monks, these two factors (*dhamma*) lead to knowledge (*vijjā*). What are the two? Calm (*samatha*) and insight (*vipassanā*). Monks, when calm is cultivated, what effect does it have? One cultivates the mind. When the mind is cultivated, what effect does it have? Desire vanishes. Monks, when insight is cultivated, what effect does it have? One cultivates wisdom. When wisdom is cultivated, what effect

<sup>29</sup> Cowell and Neil 1886: *Na vapuṣmattayā śrutena vā na balātkāraguṇaiś ca Gautama | prabalair api vānmanorathaiḥ śavabhijñatvam ihādhigamyate || śamaśīlavipaśyanābalair vividhair dhyānabalaiḥ parīkṣitāḥ | jarayā hi nipīvitayauvanāḥ śavabhijñā hi bhavanti madvidhā iti || (44).*

does it have? Ignorance vanishes. Monks, a mind that is stained by desire is not liberated, while wisdom that is stained by ignorance is not cultivated. Therefore, monks, the disappearance of desire is liberation of the mind, and the disappearance of ignorance is liberation by wisdom.<sup>30</sup>

Here, we find a number of paired concepts aligned with one another: “liberation of (or by) mind” (*cetovimutti*) and “liberation by (or of) wisdom” (*paññāvimutti*), passion and ignorance, and calm and insight. Gombrich connects this passage to the end of the *Mahāmālunkya-putta-sutta* of the *Majjhima-nikāya*, wherein Ānanda asks the Buddha to explain how some monks can be liberated of/by mind (*cetovimutta*), while some other monks can be liberated by/of wisdom (*paññāvimutta*). In that context, the Buddha responds, quite tersely as Gombrich notes, that “this is due to a difference in their faculties” (*ettha kho tesāhaṃ ānanda indriyavemattataṃ vadāmi*).<sup>31</sup> Gombrich says this passage “strongly suggests that there are two...qualitatively different experiences of release.”<sup>32</sup> In the *Aṅguttara-nikāya* passage translated above, however, there do not appear to be two different goals, but only one: knowledge (*vijjā*), which seems tantamount to awakening, liberation, or cessation of suffering.

<sup>30</sup> The CS edition reads: *Dve me, bhikkhave, dhammā vijjābhāgiyā. Katame dve? Samatho ca vipassanā ca. Samatho, bhikkhave, bhāvito kamattha [kīmattha (syā. kaṃ.), katamattha (ka.)] manubhoti? Cittaṃ bhāvīyati. Cittaṃ bhāvitaṃ kamatthamanubhoti? Yo rāgo so pahīyati. Vipassanā, bhikkhave, bhāvītā kamatthamanubhoti? Paññā bhāvīyati. Paññā bhāvītā kamatthamanubhoti? Yā avijjā sā pahīyati. Rāgupakkiliṭṭhaṃ vā, bhikkhave, cittaṃ na vimuccati, avijjupakkiliṭṭhā vā paññā bhāvīyati. Iti kho, bhikkhave, rāgavirāgā cetovimutti, avijjāvirāgā paññāvimutti ti.* In the PTS edition, it is in vol. 1, p. 61. Alternative translations may be found in Bodhi 2012: 152-153, and Gombrich 1996: 113.

<sup>31</sup> For a translation of this discourse, see Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi 1995: 537-551. The relevant passage is found on page 451, and in the PTS edition is found on vol. 1, p. 437. The proximate context for the distinction in this dialogue is the Buddha’s discussion of the eight “liberations” (*vimokkha*) on the path to the elimination of the five fetters and the achievement of nibbāna.

<sup>32</sup> Gombrich 1996: 112ff. To my mind, he does not seem entirely resolved within himself on whether these passages suggest two different paths, two different goals, or both. He speaks of “two ... qualitatively different experiences of release” (113), and that: “The above [*Aṅguttara-nikāya*] passage...suggests two paths to nirvana” (114). Then later he says that it suggests that “to attain nirvana both methods must to some extent be employed” (114).

The passage may suggest some kind of tension between two different methods or tools for achieving this knowledge or liberation, based on the elimination of the two different causes of suffering implied here, passion and ignorance, but these different causes are not placed in opposition, at least not here. They are combined, and again, the Pāli commentary suggests a gradual path to bring about their cessation. Speaking first about the cultivation of mind, the commentary takes it as a much more specific claim, which might prompt a change of translation in the original. It glosses *citta*, “mind” or “thought,” as *maggacitta*, ostensibly “the thought of (or maybe for) the path.” This interpretation makes sense insofar as it is the path that eliminates desire or “craving” (*tanhā*), for instance, in the context of the Buddha’s explanation of the four noble truths in the first sermon.<sup>33</sup> And this might make a difference here, because one could then say that one is liberated by the thought of the path, and not that the mind is liberated. Perhaps then the grammar would align better with the idea of liberation by wisdom (*paññāvimutti*).

The broader point here is that the commentary relies on the concept of the path to connect the different paired concepts. When discussing the cultivation of wisdom, it also glosses wisdom or discernment as *maggapaññā*, “the wisdom of (or about or from) the path,” and then makes the interesting claim that “the thought of the path and the wisdom of the path are said to be two factors that arise together” (*maggacittam maggapaññāti dvepi saha-jāta-dhammāva kathitā*). At the end of the commentary on this passage, the commentator also makes the point that “in this discourse, concentration and insight are said to be momentary and diverse” (*imasmim sutte nānākkhaṇikā samādhivipassanā kathitāti*). It is unclear to me precisely what this means; maybe they arise at different moments on the path? The commentary suggests that the path connects calm and insight to the elimination of passion and ignorance and to the cultivation of thought and wisdom, which then leads to knowledge.

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<sup>33</sup> For an English translation of the version of the first sermon I have in mind, see Bodhi 2000: 1843-1847; in the PTS edition, this is found in vol. 5, p. 420-424.



Another canonical discourse that pairs calm and insight meditation is the *Mahāvaccagotta-sutta* of the *Majjhima-nikāya*.<sup>34</sup> In this sutta, Vacchagotta goes to see the Buddha after practicing for some four years as a monk. He says he has achieved all the knowledge that he can achieve through training, and he asks for a higher or further teaching (*uttari or uttariṃ dhammaṃ*, maybe, a teaching about what is higher). The Buddha says, “In that case, you should cultivate two higher (or further) factors (teachings, practices, things, *dhamma*): calm and insight.”<sup>35</sup> He says that one who has cultivated these two higher factors will be able to penetrate manifold states or realms (*dhātu*), and then goes on to explain that such a person will attain superhuman powers, the divine ear, knowledge of other minds, memory of past lives, the divine eye, and finally, the following:

To the extent that you may wish – “May I, through my own higher or direct knowledge (*sayam abhiññā*) in this very lifetime, realize, attain, and dwell in the liberation by wisdom (*paññāvimutti*), the liberation by mind (*cetovimutti*), which is stainless due to the destruction of the stains” – you will be able to realize and attain precisely that for which there is a basis.<sup>36</sup>

This last state or level of attainment is equivalent to awakening and becoming an arhat, and the language bears certain similarities to other descriptions of the awakened state, but for our purposes here, I want to note the pairing of the terms “liberation of/by mind” and the “liberation of/by wisdom.” There is no tension here between different types of awakening or liberation; the terms are used almost synonymously. Nor is there any indication in this discourse of different paths to this goal; rather, the contrast is between training practices and a higher or further teaching, suggesting a single, graded process or continuum of practices, not a dichotomy between alternatives.

<sup>34</sup> For an English translation, see Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi 1995: 595-602; in the PTS edition, it is vol. 1, p. 489ff.

<sup>35</sup> Following the CS edition: *tena hi tvam, Vaccha, dve dhamme uttari bhāvehi – samathaṅca vipassanaṅca.*

<sup>36</sup> *So tvam, Vaccha, yāvadeva ākaṅkhissasi – āsavānaṃ khayā anāsavaṃ cetovimuttiṃ paññāvimuttiṃ diṭṭheva dhamme abhiññā sacchikatvā upasampajja vihareyyanti – tatra tatreva sakkhibhabbatam pāpuṇissasi, sati satiāyatane ti.*

And in another discourse from the *Majjhima-nikāya*, the *Mahāvedalla-sutta*, calm and insight meditation are listed together in a five-fold set of factors connected to the cultivation of right view.<sup>37</sup> The question arises: “how many conditions give rise to right view?” The answer is that there are two conditions: the voice of another (*parato ghosa*) and focused attention (*yoniso manasikāra*). The next question concerns how many conditions support right view in bringing about the liberation of/by mind and the liberation by/of wisdom. The answer given is that there are five conditions: moral virtue (*sīla*), learning (*suta*), dialogue (*sākaccha*), calm (*samatha*), and insight (*vipassanā*). In this way, the cultivation of calm and insight meditation are again placed on a continuum of practices alongside the cultivation of moral habits, learning, and dialogue, and with listening to the words of the teacher and focused attention as the basis. Here, right view is not the goal, but the basis for achieving liberation of/by mind and liberation by/of wisdom.

One could cite other similar passages, but I want to turn instead to a narrative in which calm and insight meditation are presented together as a combined or complementary set of practices. It is the story of Sthavira or Sthaviraka, whom I call Old Baby. Structurally and thematically, it is quite similar to the Cakkhupāla story, though it comes from a different Buddhist textual tradition: the narrative tradition represented by the *Avadāna-śataka*, *The Hundred Buddhist Tales*, a collection of stories that may bear a close relationship to the *Mūlasarvāstivāda-vinaya* and the *Divyāvadāna*, and which has been linked by various scholars to the Sarvāstivāda tradition.<sup>38</sup> Like Cakkhupāla, Sthavira becomes an arhat while overcoming or experiencing the effects of both negative and positive actions committed in prior lifetimes. As in the Cakkhupāla story, the story of Sthavira includes a narrative of the past in which the Buddha explains the past actions that led to the specific circumstances of Sthavira’s final lifetime. Both stories also feature old men who become monks and practice intensively over the course of a rainy season retreat before finally becoming arhats.

<sup>37</sup> For an English translation, see Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi 1995: 390. In the PTS edition, it is vol. 1, p. 294.

<sup>38</sup> The Sanskrit edition of this text is found in Speyer 1902-1909, vol. 2, part 2: 133-146. On the intertextual relationships and school affiliation, see, for instance, Hartmann 1985.

In a number of respects, the story of Sthavira is a strange tale, and since it is not yet readily available in translation, apart from the old French translation in Feer (1891), I want to give a sense for the whole story. It opens with the common motif of a wealthy merchant, who marries a suitable woman, and they conceive a child, but the story then quickly enters the realm of the uncanny when the couple's first child stays in his mother's belly for sixty years. Meanwhile, the woman gives birth to ten sons. Eventually she becomes ill, and on her deathbed she informs her husband that she is still carrying their first child in her belly. She asks him to remove the boy when she dies. After the woman dies, Jīvaka, the king of physicians, is summoned to the cremation ground to cut open the dead woman's belly and take out the child. A voice from the heavens is also heard in town, announcing what is going to happen, and people become curious. Many of them gather at the cremation ground; the six rival teachers also join the crowd, and the Buddha invites his monks to come and witness the event as well, saying, "If any of you wants to see strange and unprecedented events, come with me" (*yo 'dbhutāni draṣṭukāmaḥ sa āgacchatu*). When the Buddha arrives with his entourage of monks, the crowd makes way for them.

Once everyone has arrived, Jīvaka cuts open the dead woman's belly, and out steps a small, withered old man, about sixty years old, who immediately announces to the crowd:

Honored Ones, do not speak harsh words about your gurus or those who act on behalf of your gurus, or about your mothers and fathers, or about your teachers and preceptors. Do not experience a similar kind of situation to me: remaining for sixty years amidst the stomach and intestines.<sup>39</sup>

After saying these words, he falls silent, at which point the Buddha engages him in a brief dialogue playing on the word, *sthavira*, which means "old man," but also "distinguished elder" or "senior monk." In their dialogue, the Buddha seems to acknowledge the old boy's status and that this will be his final lifetime: "Young man, you are an old man, an elder" (*sthavirako 'si dāraka*), he says; and

<sup>39</sup> Speyer 1902-1909, 135: *mā bhavanto guruṣu garusthānīyeṣu mātāpitṛṣvācāryopadhyāyeṣu kharāṃ vācaṃ niścārayata mā haivaṃvidhāṃ avasthāṃ anubhaviṣyatha | yad aham āmāśayapakvāśayayor madhye ṣaṣṭi varṣānyuṣitah.*

the old boy responds accordingly, “Yes, I am an old man (*sthavirako 'ham*).” This is said to be the origin of the protagonist’s name, an element many stories in the *Avadānaśataka* seek to explain, and another narrative feature the story shares with the Cakkhupāla story.

After his conversation with Sthavira, the Buddha gives everyone a sermon, and while many people are greatly edified by it, Sthavira attains no great achievement from it. Apparently he must develop more slowly. He lives for ten more years as a householder before finally becoming a monk. When he does so at the age of seventy, he spends the rainy season retreat in a group of twenty-five monks. The community’s elder monk, not the same person as Sthavira, urges everyone to achieve the noble path by the end of the retreat: “Let none of you go on practicing this path as a common ordinary being” (*na kenacit pṛthagjanena pracārayitavyam*), he says. They all practice intensively, and by the end of the retreat, all of them have become arhats; only Sthavira remains an ordinary person.

So, the elder admonishes him and expels him from the community of practitioners. At this point, the story becomes quite poignant. Sthavira takes a knife and goes into his hut, intending to end his own life. There, he composes a series of quite beautiful verses expressing his world-weariness and despair through a series of nature images, such as the following:

The entire forest is alight; the hill has become reddish gold.  
Yet even today this wretched mind is not freed.

The sound of the mountain stream has gone quiet;  
The flowing waters have become a trickle;  
Yet even today this wretched mind is not freed.<sup>40</sup>

The Buddha, of course, perceives Sthavira’s distress from afar, and immediately fixes his attention upon the old monk. He uses his superhuman powers to go and see him, and gives him another

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<sup>40</sup> Speyer 1902-1909, 136-137: *ādīptam kānanaṃ sarvaṃ parvatāḥ kapilīkṛtā | athedaṃ pāpakaṃ cittamadyapi na vimucyate || śāntā girinadīśabdāḥ parīttasalilodakāḥ | athedaṃ pāpakaṃ cittamadyapi na vimucyate*. The reading of *parvatāḥ kapilīkṛtā* in the second pada of the first verse was suggested by F. W. Thomas, based on the Tibetan, and given Speyer’s approval in a note in the addenda for which see page cxii of the preface.

teaching on the Dharma of such a kind that, when Sthavira hears it, he immediately realizes the state of an arhat.

When he becomes an arhat, Sthavira then surveys the world with his divine eye, looking for others he can train in the Dharma, an act that clearly mirrors the Buddha's own enlightened behavior. Sthavira perceives a group of five hundred merchants who are beset by a strong hurricane. With his superhuman powers, he goes and saves them. The merchants thereby gain faith in him and decide to become his followers. Sthavira then gives them, the story appears to say, a teaching on mental concentration or focused attention (*manasikāra*), and after a short while, all of them become arhats as well.

Here is the point at which the story first mentions calm (*śamatha*) and insight meditation (*vipaśyanā*). The group of six monks begins to question whether Sthavira and his five hundred followers really are arhats. It is apparent why this might be so. The monks are disconnected from the larger community and no one has yet tested their virtues. So, Ānanda goes to interview Sthavira and his five hundred followers in order to test their understanding. He first asks Sthavira: "Upon what things should a monk who has gone to live in the forest, at the foot of a tree, or in an empty village, maintain constant mental concentration (*katame dharmābhikṣṇam manasikartavyāḥ*)?"

Sthavira readily answers, "A monk who has gone to live in the forest, at the foot of a tree, or in an empty village, should maintain constant mental concentration on two things: calm (*śamatha*) and insight (*vipaśyanā*)." Ānanda then asks about the benefits of the persistent practice of calm and insight meditation, respectively: "When one has persistently practiced calm, cultivated calm, and frequently attained calm, what benefit will one experience? When one has persistently practiced insight, cultivated insight, and frequently attained insight, what benefit will one experience?" Sthavira answers,

When one has persistently practiced calm, cultivated calm, and frequently attained calm, then, achieving insight, one is freed. When one has persistently practiced insight, cultivated insight, and frequently attained insight, then, achieving calm, one is freed. Venerable Ānanda, when a noble disciple has learned and become completely saturated with calm and

insight, then his mind is freed with regard to his mental disposition.<sup>41</sup>

Here, Sthavira's answer suggests that calm and insight work together to generate the practitioner's freedom of mind. Grammatically, the passage conveys this point with the use of parallel gerund constructions: When one has persistently practiced *śamatha*, then, on account of (or having mastered) insight (*vipaśyanām āgamyā*), one is freed; when one has persistently practiced insight, then, on account of (or having mastered) calm (*śamatham āgamyā*), one is freed. Not only that, calm and insight are presented here as being on the same level; one is not more or less important than the other; they work together.

Ānanda goes on to inquire about the nature of mental disposition in this context, and Sthavira tells him that the mental disposition in question refers to annihilation, dispassion, and cessation (*nirodha*), each of them specifically regarding the latent tendencies or conditioning factors of existence (*saṃskāra*). So, to synthesize Sthavira's message, one might say that the state of mental freedom, which is generated through the combined practice of calm and insight meditation, entails the understanding that whatever arises through conditioning factors will be annihilated, the cultivation of dispassion toward whatever arises through conditioning factors, and ultimately the cessation of whatever arises through conditioning factors. This would seem to be the extent of Sthavira's teaching on mental concentration.

Ānanda is satisfied with Sthavira's answers, and he proceeds to interview the five hundred followers. He asks the same questions and receives precisely the same answers. He finally returns to see the Buddha, and he asks him the same questions and again receives the same answers. Ānanda then expresses his wonderment at the fact that he has independently received the very same answers to his questions from both Sthavira and his five hundred followers, as well as from the Buddha himself. The Buddha then asks him what he has determined about the situation, and Ānanda confirms that Sthavira and his five hundred followers

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<sup>41</sup> Speyer 1902-1909, 140: *śamatha āyusmann ānanda āsevito bhāvito bahulikṛto vipaśyanām āgamyā vimucyate; vipaśyanā āsevītā bhāvītā bahulikṛtā śamatham āgamyā vimucyate (vimucyante?). Śamathavipaśyanā-paribhāvitam āyusmann ānanda śrutavata āryaśrāvakasya cittam dhātuśo vimucyate.*

are arhats. In this way, the story tells us, the Buddha and Ānanda are able to demonstrate the virtues of Sthavira and his five hundred followers in the face of the skepticism voiced by a group of monks.

At this point, the monks who have been listening to the story, and who serve as the model for its ideal audience, ask what prior actions Sthavira performed in his past lives to have stayed for sixty years in his mother's belly, and which led him to develop so slowly, so very slowly, in his final lifetime, while at the same time achieving the state of an arhat. The Buddha explains that Sthavira had been a junior monk in a past life, during the time of the past Buddha Kaśyapa, and out of greediness for food, he had committed a harsh speech act toward his teacher, who was an arhat. Yet, through recitation and study, he also achieved mastery of the Buddha's teachings on the five aggregates, the twelve-fold chain of dependent arising, and the nature of the possible and the impossible. This caused him to become a monk again in his final lifetime, and by annihilating all the afflictions, he achieved the state of an arhat.

Within the present context, we may note the story's emphasis on recitation, study, and insight through hearing the teachings, despite the fact that the content of the main teaching concerns the pairing of calm and insight meditation practice. The past-life story emphasizes this point, and it also can be seen in the way the story underlines the legitimacy of Sthavira's attainment through a test of his understanding of what might be considered a doctrinal point, but also a point of theory and practice. In this case, the fact that the students repeat the same answers as Sthavira and the Buddha then answers in the same way serves to demonstrate that Sthavira and his students are "learned" (*śrutavat*). This is a legitimating technique of a particular kind, and a similar instance of this same technique is found in a passage in the Pāli *Samyutta-nikāya* in which Vacchagotta responds with wonderment to the fact that he independently receives the same answer to his questions from both Moggallāna the Great and the Buddha.<sup>42</sup> In the case of the Sthavira story, the efficacy of the teaching is further indicated by the fact that the Buddha's sermon is what finally facilitates

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<sup>42</sup> For an English translation of the whole passage, see Bodhi 2000: 1390-1392. My appreciation goes to Eviatar Shulman for his presentation at the workshop, which drew my attention to this passage and its rhetorical device. I also understand it to be found in many other contexts in the Pāli texts, as well.

Sthavira's awakening. Sthavira clearly possesses superhuman powers and extraordinary knowledge, and thus he cannot be described as "liberated by wisdom" in the same sense we find elsewhere, as someone lacking these sorts of powers and knowledge. Yet, maybe to a greater degree even than the story of Cakkhupāla, the story of Sthavira demonstrates the power and efficacy of wisdom or insight at certain key points along a gradual path of development with many highs and lows along the way. At the same time, the specific doctrinal understanding, or more accurately, the actual exhibition or demonstration of insight in the story, the doctrinal content of which centers specifically on the combination of calm and insight, also reflects and serves to legitimate a particular practitioner's level of attainment.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

The essay began by raising a set of broad, long-standing, and intractable questions in Buddhist Studies concerning the relationship between calm and insight meditation, an issue that has various doctrinal, conceptual, theoretical, practical, and historical dimensions. Rather than engaging directly with these questions, however, I proposed to address a slightly different set of questions, focused on the following: What narratives feature characters who are specifically described as being either "liberated by wisdom" or a "dry-insight practitioner"? What can these narratives tell us about how some ancient Buddhists conceived the relationship between calm and insight meditation? How are teachings about the relationship between calm and insight meditation portrayed or conveyed in specific narrative contexts? And how does the teaching in such narrative contexts compare to other teachings on the relationship between calm and insight found in other Buddhist dialogues? We explored these questions mainly by focusing on two stories, one in Pāli and the other in Sanskrit, supplemented by a few other narratives and dialogues, some quite well-known, like the *Susīma-sutta*. Now in the conclusion we may consider briefly what these narratives and dialogues can reveal about some of the intractable questions.

One of the questions is whether the mysterious figure of the arhat "liberated by wisdom" or the so-called "dry-insight practitioner" justifies the historical argument made by scholars like La Vallée Poussin, Gombrich, and others that some Buddhists have



claimed that one can achieve awakening without any meditative insight whatsoever, but only through the study of Buddhist texts or some other kind of theoretical or intellectual insight into the truth. The narrative evidence considered here does not support this claim, at least not straightforwardly. Instead, the picture of the dry-insight practitioner and his practice that we receive from the story of Cakkhupāla in the *Dhammapada* commentary is very far, indeed, from the one we sometimes find in the modern scholarship on this topic, where the dry-insight practitioner is described as someone who possesses “a sterile and desiccated intellectuality”.<sup>43</sup> In this story at least, the responsibility or vocation for practicing insight meditation appears to encompass or represent an entire ascetic lifestyle; it does not seem to be code for some sort of intellectualist approach to awakening. Asceticism, not intellectualism, more aptly characterizes Cakkhupāla’s practice, which also appears to include some kind of meditation. Thus, one conclusion to be drawn from the present analysis is cautionary: we need to be careful about distinguishing descriptions of particular meditative states or categories of soteriological achievement from descriptions of specific techniques by which such states may be achieved.

Speaking of such techniques, perhaps the idea of “liberation through wisdom” was sometimes meant to describe certain narrative contexts in which a dialogue with the Buddha could itself be liberating,<sup>44</sup> but what of the contrast between textual study and meditation practice? While the story of Cakkhupāla does contrast meditation practice, broadly construed, with a vocation dedicated to the mastery of Buddhist texts, it does so, arguably, not to suggest opposing approaches to the path or competing conceptions of the goal. It does not tell us how the two responsibilities of the Buddhist monk are meant to connect to one other. Rather, the dichotomy between textual study and insight meditation provides a narrative framework for contextualizing the overarching ascetic lifestyle that Cakkhupāla chooses. With respect to choice of lifestyle, the Cakkhupāla story is actually quite similar to the story of Sthavira in the *Avadānaśataka*. Both stories feature monks who enter the monastic order late in life, and they both become arhats at

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<sup>43</sup> This description is found in Griffiths 1981: 608.

<sup>44</sup> In this regard, it may be fruitful to consider these examples in light of Masefield (1986), which provides a larger framework for thinking about episodes in which hearing a sermon from the Buddha is efficacious.

the end of relatively short periods of intensive practice. They undertake their ascetic practices (including meditation) in the “border regions,” conceived as the ideal site for such practice. They both concentrate on their practice during the rainy season retreat, again, the ideal timeframe for such practices. So, the monks’ ages and the duration and intensity of their practices dovetail with their choice of an ascetic lifestyle and an explicit focus on achieving awakening in their present lifetime.

In other ways, however, Cakkhupāla does share certain characteristics seemingly associated with the arhat liberated by wisdom. In the *Susīma-sutta* and in the story of Pūrṇa from the *Divyāvadāna*, the arhat liberated by wisdom is someone who has achieved awakening, but not certain specific types of extraordinary knowledge or powers. In the case of the latter, Pūrṇa develops such powers at a moment’s notice through an intense application of vigor, but the initial depiction of him still supports the characterization of the arhat liberated by wisdom as someone who does not possess certain types of extraordinary knowledge and powers. While the development of superhuman powers are not really made an explicit focus or theme in the story of Cakkhupāla, it is key to the plot that he becomes blind and that his powers thus remain limited, even after he becomes an arhat. He becomes an arhat still, and his knowledge of the young monk’s moral character and behavior indicates this fact, but he nonetheless remains limited or constrained, particularly by the power of his past actions, which condition his present-life circumstances, choices, and achievements. Nevertheless, the point to emphasize here is that the stories do seem to say something about the qualities or powers (or the lack thereof) possessed by the arhat who is described as being either liberated by wisdom or a dry-insight practitioner.

Even though the story of Cakkhupāla does contain a dichotomy between the vocation of textual study and the vocation of meditation, however, it does not align this dichotomy with the one between calm and insight. By the same token, the story of Sthavira does not present its teaching about the connection between calm and insight as an alternative to some other teaching in which they are differentiated or opposed, or associated with differing or opposing lifestyles or practices. Sthavira is not called an arhat liberated by wisdom; neither is he called a dry-insight practitioner, nor is there any contrast presented in the story between meditation

or ascetic practice and textual study. Instead, specific doctrinal or propositional insights appear to reflect and legitimize specific achievements in practice. Despite the content of its teaching about the interdependence of calm and insight, the story arguably contains more on the transformative potential of learning or receiving the teachings than it does on the efficacy of intensive meditation practice. The demonstration of a point of doctrine becomes the measure of Sthavira's attainment, and the past-life portion of the story confirms the positive impact of past study and recitation of texts. Like Cakkhupāla, however, Sthavira is both constrained and enabled by the power of his past actions, which partly leads to his achievement of extraordinary knowledge and superhuman powers. This thematic similarity between the two stories is built into their basic narrative structures, and thus it calls for a specifically narrative analysis; but again, the point to recognize here is that the stories actually muddle the picture by challenging the clean parallels that have been proposed between calm and insight, on the one hand, and meditation practice and textual study, on the other.

Consequently, I remain doubtful that either of these stories makes a general claim about the relative or combined value of calm or insight in the context of some larger doctrinal discussion. They are not clear statements of systematic Buddhist doctrine. Instead, they are stories, and as stories, they speak to us in a narrative mode that is quite distinct from the more paradigmatic mode of the systematic treatises and many of the dialogues. For this reason, the stories allow us to think in a different way about categories like the arhat who is liberated by wisdom or the dry-insight practitioner, or "doctrinal" statements about the relationship between calm and insight meditation. They become characters and teachings (or practices) in a story, rather than decontextualized sets of propositions to be deduced and understood. Now, at the same time, there has also been a tendency to read these old stories as historical accounts of one kind or another. Certainly, as Hayden White (1987) observed, history is often articulated in the narrative mode, but as Steven Collins (2013: 57) has noted, "In any place and time it is difficult clearly to delineate when a narrative text is a 'history' or a 'story'."<sup>45</sup> Thus, we must exercise caution before we

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<sup>45</sup> Abbott 2008 calls the distinction between "fiction" and "nonfiction" one that is made "top-down," whereas the distinction between "narrative" and "non-

find evidence in these stories for our histories of Buddhism, complete with larger master narratives governed by dichotomies of our own making, because the stories do not provide us with straightforward historical information either. They reflect lived worlds of nature and social norms and institutions, but these remain imagined and ideal worlds. The stories create these worlds within and through the narrative, and they prompt the reader to understand them as the real world, our world, which we can then imagine as a world of meaning and meaningful action, but also one (like ours) containing certain ambiguities and tensions.

So, on the intractable questions concerning the relationship between calm and insight, we are still at the stage of collecting relevant data, and this essay has added a couple of new data points to the conversation. As we take stock of what we have learned, several points can be made. First, we should become more sensitive to the way texts sometimes slide from claims about particular states of being or attainment, to claims about certain types of person and their qualities, to claims about how people can achieve such states or qualities. We should also try to separate doctrinal, theoretical, exegetical, or pedagogical claims made in or about specific Buddhist works from historical claims concerning specific times and places. And we also need to disambiguate a number of different oppositions or dichotomies that have sometimes been conflated. For instance, calm and insight are not the same as meditation and textual study, or practice and theory. At the same time, since textual knowledge is also a type of practice, we should be careful about unreflectively projecting our own dichotomies about practice and theory onto Buddhism. Again, it matters what one means by calm, insight, meditation, and liberation; we need to revisit these terms and their relationships from fresh perspectives. In a variegated tradition, ambiguities and tensions will always give rise to outliers and alternative viewpoints, but I think we might reasonably move forward with the hypothesis that calm and insight (and perhaps even meditation practice and

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narrative” is a “bottom-up” determination (148). In general, Abbott’s work is a valuable resource for those who might wish to think more about the techniques and implications of a narrative approach to Buddhist literature, although both nonwestern literary traditions and religious narratives in general are woefully under-represented in his discussion. For a philosophical take on the question of religious narratives and their truth-value, see Comstock 1993.

textual study) are more typically seen along a continuum of related practices of self-transformation, rather than in opposition as competing forms of life or practice.<sup>46</sup>

Even still, I mean for this general claim to apply most especially within the multivocal and pluralistic world of the Buddhist textual imagination, the one constructed by and reflected in the textual works Buddhists themselves produced. Whether and how the stories of Cakkhupāla and Sthavira reflect specific historical realities or clear doctrinal stances are questions that will remain open for debate. Each narrative deserves its own close reading, but as we have seen, oftentimes under scrutiny the meaning of the story begins to wriggle and slip through our grasp, defying the attempt to pin down some type of general interpretation

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<sup>46</sup> See also Fiordalis 2018, where I've proposed a similar hypothesis, but rather than narratives, there I look at a rather different type of Buddhist text: the systematic work, instantiated principally by the *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya*. Whether it concerns the three practices of wisdom (learning, reasoning, and cultivation), which provide the focus for that paper, or the pairing of calm and insight, which has been our main focus here, the idea of seeing such practices on a continuum does not necessarily militate against the establishment of possible hierarchies between or among them. In this regard, it might be useful to reconsider Louis Dumont's famous, but also controversial, concept of "hierarchical opposition," which he used to describe the structure of the Indian caste system, and which he contrasted with the concept of binary, or what he called "complementary," opposition. On Dumont's notion of hierarchical opposition and its reception, see Hage, Harary, and Milicic 1995.

In the present context, the concepts of the arhat liberated by wisdom and the dry-insight practitioner are sometimes deployed in contexts that might be taken to convey a sense of hierarchy. For instance, according to the story of the first council found in the introductory section of the Pāli commentary on the *Dīgha-nikāya*, Buddhaghosa indicates that Mahākāssapa excluded an anonymous group of dry-insight practitioners from the first council or seated them at the outer fringes of the council alongside anonymous groups of stream-winners, once-returners, and non-returners, and other types of person. For the whole passage, see Rhys Davids and Carpenter 1886: 4. My appreciation goes to Anthony Scott for reminding me of this passage and encouraging my thinking in this regard. One might compare this example with the relative place of arhats liberated by wisdom in the lists of types of person cited in note 12 above. It would be interesting to consider on a case-by-case basis the question of whether hierarchy or the lack of hierarchy is suggested by various other narrative contexts. The passage described above is also mentioned in Wen 2009: 171-172; he connects it and a few other passages in the commentaries to issues related to the gradual disappearance of the Buddha's dispensation from the world.

or comparison, either historical or doctrinal. Perhaps that is part of their point – as stories, they can explore ambiguities and tensions without necessarily resolving them – but as a final remark it remains noteworthy that both stories are set within an imagined world of what we might wish to call Buddhist asceticism. The narratives locate Buddhist practices of calm and insight firmly within this world. Expected and certainly idealized, this world consists of communities of practitioners and seemingly reflects their concerns. This may be an obvious point, but I think it bears emphasizing, because it points to the narrative context for what may be a connected theme: the stories reflect the tension sometimes apparent in Buddhist literature between a longer path of spiritual development and the possibility of quicker or more dramatic periods of change or attainment. Both stories place these quicker, more intensive paths within a much longer narrative framework of meaningful actions and their effects across many lifetimes. Indeed, in this respect, both stories are quite typical of many other Buddhist narratives insofar as they illustrate the power of past actions to condition present circumstances. Consequently, they are exemplary tales that tell us that our own actions are meaningful, and they also suggest that the Buddhist path in all its variety and diversity is an effective means of finding our own fulfillment. Therein lies the power of narrative.

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