# THE ROLE OF BRAHMĀ IN PĀLI DISCOURSES

Popular introductions to Buddhism tend to present it as a godless religion, suggesting that Buddhism is actually not a religion but a philosophical system, since god has no place in it. This seems to some extent to be an oversimplification and the present article intends to draw out some aspects of the role of god in the Pāli discourses.

Contrary to popular assumption, the thought world of the Pāli discourses is well populated with gods and spirits, demons and ghosts, as picturesque as the imagination of a reader of Tolkien's novels could wish for. These gods and spirits were naturally present as part of the cultural and religious Indian heritage within which Buddhism grew and developed. Buddhism adopted to its Indian environment by introducing a change of perspective and emphasis that gave a particular Buddhist flavour to these inhabitants of the ancient Indian pantheon.

A closer perusal of the discourses shows that gods and spirits are as much a part of the world of the Pāli discourses as famous monk disciples such as Sāriputta and Ānanda. It would be doing little justice to the Pāli discourses if one were to assume that while Sāriputta and Ānanda are historical personalities, the various gods and spirits in conversation with the Buddha are merely fiction, taken over in order to accommodate the thought world of the ancient Indian audience.

The Buddha could be quite outspoken on issues ranging from caste to the absence of a self, taking up positions that were diametrically opposed to mainstream beliefs in ancient Indian society. One would expect the Buddha to have no qualms in proclaiming that gods and spirits do not exist, if he had thought this to be indeed the case. Yet, far from denying their existence, the Buddha never forgot to mention spirits and gods when referring to the world at large.[1] Such regular mentioning of gods and spirits does not appear to have been an empty formula, since the Buddha actually included belief in their existence in his definition of the right view, which in turn forms the foundation for the practice of the noble eightfold path and thereby stands at the very core of Buddhist theory and practice.[2]

Not only does belief in the existence of gods and spirits constitute an aspect of right view, but when asked to do so, the Buddha would even go so far as to teach his listeners the path to companionship with the god Brahmā.[3] In view of this

---

[1] Cf. the recurrent expression *sadevake loke samārake sabrahmake*, e.g. in D 29 at D III 135.
[2] M 117 at M III 72: *atthi sattā opapātikā ... ayaṃ sammā diṭṭhi*. The expression "spontaneously arisen beings", *sattā opapātikā*, refers to gods and spirits who, according to ancient Indian belief, are not born from a womb like humans and animals but spring into existence spontaneously.
[3] D 13 at D I 249 and M 99 at M II 207.

evidence, the existence of gods and spirits as an integral part of the thought world of the early discourses cannot be denied.

A central figure among these gods and spirits, populating the ancient Indian pantheon as well as the Pāli discourses, is the creator god Brahmā. The Pāli discourses have not only been able to accommodate such a creator god, they even have several personifications of god Brahmā and report the Buddha conversing with one or the other on several occasions.

In order to gain a clearer picture of the significance of Brahmā in the Pāli discourses, a question to be answered is how far this Buddhist version of a creator god differs from monotheistic conceptions of an almighty god. In addition to this, the purpose and function of such a creator god in the Pāli discourses needs to be ascertained.

Theistic religions tend to present their god as an eternal and omnipotent creator, endowed with infinite knowledge. The same assumptions recur in several Pāli discourses as explicit or implicit claims made by Brahmā. In the light of the early Buddhist emphasis on impermanence and the absence of a self, one would expect the ancient Indian creator god Brahmā to encounter criticism with such types of assumptions.

This is indeed the case, as can be seen in some discourses which have a Brahmā called Baka as their protagonist.[4] Baka Brahmā indeed believed himself to be supreme and eternal. One discourse describes how Baka's insistence on being supreme and eternal led to a contest between him and the Buddha, in which both manifested their respective power in a celestial version of "hide and seek", each attempting to vanish from the other's sight. While Baka failed to go beyond the Buddha's range of vision, the Buddha was able to completely disappear from the sight of Baka and his celestial assembly. After vanishing from their vision, the Buddha nevertheless made his voice heard, pronouncing a verse in favour of transcending all forms of existence.[5]

This demonstration of the Buddha's superior powers humbled Baka's pride. As the Buddha on this and on another occasion pointed out, Baka's present might and glory were merely the outcome of previous meritorious deeds.[6] Though Baka's present life span as a Brahmā was incredibly long, it was certainly not eternal.

---

[4] B. Jayawardhana in *Encyclopaedia of Buddhism*, Ceylon 1972, vol 3 p 297, suggests that the name Baka could be an allusion to Bhaga, the god of fortune in the *Ṛg-veda*, which would further enhance the humorous tone underlying the Pāli discourses in which Baka occurs.

[5] M 49 at M I 330.

[6] M 49 at M I 329 and S 6:4 at S I 143.

There is a clear note of humour to be found in this account. One might well imagine how expectations must have run high in an ancient Indian audience accustomed to narrations involving amazing supernormal feats and dazzling displays of unbelievable magical powers, while following the narrative flow of this discourse, with the god Brahmā and the Buddha pitted against each other in verbal combat, a struggle in which the two were finally ready to outdo each other in a display of their respective powers. Yet, the actual display of power comes almost as an anticlimax, since it does not involve anything more majestic than being able to hide from each other, a type of contest well known among children all over the world.

Through this witty description of his meeting with Baka Brahmā and through the skilful use of this anticlimactic turn of events, the Buddha was able to illustratively bring home to his audience that even though Brahmā was incredibly powerful, the transcendence of all forms of existence was something quite literally beyond Brahmā's ken.

The same nuance of humour continues through other discourses related to Brahmā's claim to being a supreme, all-knowing and almighty creator. The Pāli discourses mention another Brahmā who was convinced of having such a degree of superiority that no one would even be able to come to his realm. This presumption was thoroughly shattered by a magical display undertaken by the Buddha and four of his monk disciples, who not only visited Brahmā's realm but even manifested themselves on fire while seated in mid air.[7]

The rather spectacular sight of the Buddha manifesting above Brahmā and four monks similarly appearing in the four directions of Brahmā's realm, all seated in mid air and on fire, was not even a planned performance. After becoming aware of Brahmā's erroneous notion of superiority, the Buddha had on his own decided to pay him such a surprise visit. The other four monks, each wondering where the Buddha was staying and realizing that he had gone to the Brahmā world, decided to follow suit. Once his fiery visitors had left, the chastised Brahmā sent a messenger after them in order to inquire if the Buddha had other disciples of similar power in addition to the four who had just taken part in the Buddha's visit. The answer he received was that many more disciples had won perfection and gained supernormal knowledge.

In this case again, the humorous undertone cannot be missed and the image of the complacent Brahmā who suddenly finds himself visited by a whole group of monks blazing up in fire must have made the ancient Indian audience giggle with amusement which would have increased when the same Brahmā then enquired if

[7] S 6:5 at S I 144.

there were more such powerful disciples—possibly alarmed by the prospect of further unexpected visitors dropping in on his realm.

Another discourse depicts the great Brahmā confronted with an inquisitive monk who demanded an answer to the ageless question about what transcends the world, a question formulated in terms of where the four elements cease without remainder. The monk in search of such transcendence had proceeded through the different celestial realms recognized in ancient Indian cosmology, yet his inquiry had met with no reply, since the inhabitants of each realm only directed him onwards to the next higher realm for finding an answer to his query.

Once he finally managed to reach the glorious presence of the great Brahmā, he put the same question that so occupied his mind, expecting to finally get an answer.[8] In reply, the great Brahmā claimed to be the omnipotent creator who knows everything. The monk was however not satisfied with this proclamation and insisted on being given a proper reply to his question. But again the great Brahmā made his solemn proclamation.

When the undaunted monk repeated his question for a third time, Brahmā realized that he could not get around this inquisitive monk. So Brahmā took the monk aside and confided that he actually also did not know a reply to this question, but could not admit this in public in order to avoid upsetting the other gods. If the monk really wanted to find an answer to this question, the great Brahmā advised, he should rather go back and put this question to the Buddha.

Whereas our Indian audience was probably already amused by the previous story, most of them must have burst out laughing when they heard the second. The contrast between the great Brahmā's solemn declaration and his later admittance to ignorance, followed by directing the monk to consult the Buddha on this issue, are comical enough to make even a humourless person lose his composure.

Again the purpose of the parable is not mere entertainment, but to bring home the point that the different celestial realms, including the Brahmā realm and its corresponding mental experience of *jhāna* attainment, do not constitute real transcendence. Whereas much spiritual endeavour in ancient India was undertaken with the aspiration to be reborn in a celestial realm, and the experience of *jhāna* was sometimes taken to be the supreme consummation of the spiritual life, from the Buddha's perspective matters were different. According to him, to go indeed beyond the four elements requires developing a type of consciousness that is totally unestablished, a condition to be reached only through realization of *Nibbāna*.[9]

---

[8] D 11 at D I 221.

[9] The *anidassana viññāṇa* in D 11 at D I 223, which the commentary (Sv II 393) explains to refer to *Nibbāna*.

Not only has Brahmā's claim to being eternal and all knowing have come in for criticism in the Pāli discourses, but even his assumption to be the almighty creator. The contradictions involved in the notion of a benevolent creator god come up in another humorous remark made by the Buddha in regard to some ascetics engaged in self-mortification. If the existence of these ascetics were due to the creation of a god, the Buddha wittily suggested, this creator god must have had evil intentions, as the products of his creation were undergoing so much suffering.[10]

Here again the humour has a purpose, namely to reveal that the pain experienced when engaging in self-mortifications, practices held in high esteem in ancient India as a central means for spiritual purification, is far from being purificatory. Rather, such pain is but the product of a misguided form of striving.

Another point underlying the same remark is that, in view of the existence of suffering, the notion of an almighty creator god is self-contradictory, since it makes an assumedly benevolent creator responsible for suffering. The inner contradictions involved in posing such an almighty creator god as the responsible force behind the scene of events in the world are not restricted to the case of those ascetics. In another discourse the Buddha confronted the same idea with the rebuttal that, if all events were indeed the work of an almighty god, then this same god would also have to be held responsible for murder, theft and other forms of misconduct.[11] This stark conclusion highlights the inconsistency involved in such a belief, and for the followers of theistic systems it has remained an enigma up to today how to reconcile a benevolent and almighty creator god with the various forms of suffering ever so prominent in his creation, ranging from old age and disease to warfare and natural calamities such as droughts, floods and earth quakes.

The Buddha not only examined the notion of an almighty creator god for its validity, but he even went further and described, again in quite humorous tones, how this notion arose in the first place.

According to ancient Indian cosmology, the world system goes through repeated cycles of contraction and expansion. Once a period of contraction has passed, so the Buddha narrated in a discourse, the Brahmā world will reappear.[12] After some time a particular being, in accordance with its merits, will be reborn in this empty Brahmā world. Some more time passes and this being begins to feel lonely and develops a wish for company. In due course of time, other beings will also be reborn in this Brahmā world, again in accordance with their merits.

---

[10] M 101 at M II 222.

[11] A 3:61 at A I 174; cf. also Jātaka no 543 verses 936-938, which examine in more detail the same dilemma.

[12] D 1 at D I 17.

Now the being that arose first in the Brahmā world mistakes his wish for company to have been the cause for the other beings to arise in the Brahmā world. Due to this mistaken notion, the first being claims supreme creator status and the subsequently arisen beings accept this claim as true. Hence according to this again quite comical presentation, the assumption of a creator god is but the outcome of a deluded Brahmā's belief that beings arose in his realm in compliance to his wish for company.

If one probes a little deeper into this parable, one discovers that all this confusion came about in the first place because Brahmā felt lonely. This pun aims at ancient Indian conceptions of cosmic evolution, which posit an all-pervading divine presence as a beginning point of all existence. In the present parable, however, Brahmā as a representative of this divine presence when "all" was still "one", actually feels "alone", a comic predicament.

Looking back on the various passages covered so far, it becomes evident that though Buddhism did not deny the existence of the ancient Indian creator god Brahmā, it took his presumption of being an eternal and omnipotent creator from a rather humorous perspective. With all this humour, do we have to conclude that the Buddhists did not take Brahmā serious at all?

This does not seem to be the case, as other discourses show Brahmā playing an important role as a supporter of Buddhism. This is particularly the case for a Brahmā by the name of Sahampati, who visited the Buddha on a number of occasions and expressed his approval of central Buddhist teachings such as the five faculties,[13] or the four presences of mindfulness.[14] Other discourses report him supporting the Buddha's decision to rely only on the *Dhamma* as his teacher,[15] and extolling the life of a seriously practising monk.[16]

Another Brahmā quite appreciative of the Buddhist teachings was Sanankumāra. In one discourse this Brahmā extolled a whole list of qualities of the Buddha and his teaching to a celestial assembly.[17] Brahmā Sanankumāra was also well known for a verse spoken in favour of the superiority of accomplishment in knowledge and conduct, a statement quite in keeping with Buddhist values.[18] This verse is again not without an amusing undertone, since it begins by proclaiming that the *khattiyas*, the warrior or noble caste, are the highest of all castes. It does not take

[13] S 48:57 at S V 232.
[14] S 47:18 at S V 167 and again S 47:43 at S V 185.
[15] S 6:2 at S I 139 and A 4:21 at A II 20.
[16] S 6:13 at S I 154.
[17] D 18 at D II 211.
[18] S 6:11 at S I 153; quoted in D 3 at D I 99; D 27 at D III 97; M 53 at M I 358; A 11:11 at A V 327; and moreover repeated by the Buddha on his own accord in S 21:11 at S II 284.

much to imagine the displeasure of the brahmins, who were so keen on asserting themselves as the highest caste, on being quoted such a statement from the mouth of their own patron god Brahmā.

Returning to Brahmā Sahampati, this particular incarnation of the ancient Indian creator god was not only appreciative of the Buddha and his teaching, but even took a considerably close interest in the welfare of the Buddhist order. According to the Pāli discourses, Sahampati did not feel it beneath his dignity to intervene in order to reconcile the Buddha with a group of unruly monks.[19] On another occasion he informed the Buddha of the evil consequences of the schismatic Devadatta,[20] and again of the death and evil rebirth of the monk Kokālika,[21] a follower of Devadatta. At the time of the Buddha's passing away he was also present, pronouncing a verse suitable to the occasion.[22]

These instances indicate that Brahmā Sahampati had a rather close relationship to the Buddhist community. His role as an advocate of Buddhism acquires quite a comic dimension in a discourse featuring a lady devotee who used to make daily oblations to Brahmā.[23] One can well imagine how elated and thrilled this lady devotee must have felt when suddenly Brahmā Sahampati appeared in mid air in her dwelling and even addressed her in verse. Yet, the verses he spoke come as an anticlimax to this situation, since he told her to take the food offered to him and instead give it to her son, who had become a Buddhist monk and was outdoors begging for his daily alms.

Here again the humorous note cannot fail to make its effect. Ancient Indian brahmins tended to consider begging monks to be bald headed menials, the off spring of Brahmā's foot. Hence to give them the sacred leftovers of an offering to Brahmā would be akin to sacrilege.[24] Therefore, how would such a person react when Brahmā himself appeared in mid air and suggested that a monk, rather than the Brahmā, be the recipient of such offerings?

Brahmā Sahampati's support for the Buddhist cause, even at the cost of instigating his own devotees to support Buddhist monks instead of giving oblations to him, has an intriguing background. A Pāli discourse reveals that, in a former life,

---

[19] M 67 at M I 458 and S 22:80 at S III 92.
[20] S 6:12 at S I 153.
[21] S 6:10 at S I 151 and A 10:89 at A V 172.
[22] D 16 at D II 157 and S 6:15 at S I 158.
[23] S 6:3 at S I 141.
[24] Cf. e.g. S 7:9 at S I 167, where a brahmin searched for a recipient for the leftovers of an oblation (according to the commentary an oblation to Brahmā), but wanted to avoid giving it to a monk. For the type of abuse sometimes poured on Buddhist monks by brahmins cf. D 27 at D III 81.

Sahampati had been a monk during the time of Kassapa Buddha.[25] Practising under Kassapa Buddha, Sahampati had overcome sensuality and had been reborn in the Brahmā world.[26] The same discourse reports Sahampati applauding the Buddha's dictum that the development of the five faculties leads to the deathless. Sahampati actually proclaimed that he himself knew and saw this to be the case.[27] Such a way of formulating his approval indicates that he must have been speaking from the perspective of one who had himself experienced the deathless. These indications taken together suggest that he was a non-returner, a conclusion confirmed in a Pāli commentary.[28]

With Brahmā Sahampati being a non-returner, his role as someone who throughout the Buddha's ministry appears to be doing what he can in order to further the growth and continuity of the Buddha's dispensation becomes easily intelligible. The importance of his role as a supporter and protector of Buddhism should not be underestimated, because, if it were not for Brahmā Sahampati's decisive intervention, there might have been no Buddhism to speak about at all. In order to explore this possibly surprising suggestion, we need to take a look at the Buddha's autobiographical account of his awakening.

According to this autobiographical account, once the Buddha had gained awakening, he felt disinclined to teach what he had found to others. Brahmā Sahampati, who had become aware of the Buddha's disinclination to teach, was thoroughly alarmed at this prospect and decided to intervene without delay.[29] He appeared before the Buddha and requested him to proclaim the *Dhamma*, assuring him that some will understand what he had to teach. Encouraged by Brahmā's request, the Buddha surveyed the world and realized that there were indeed some who would be able to understand him. Prompted by Brahmā and convinced by his own survey of the propensities of beings in the world, the Buddha changed his mind and decided to teach. Hence it seems that, failing Brahmā Sahampati's intervention, the Buddha might not have changed his mind, in which case we would have little to say or write about "Buddhism" at all.

---

[25] S 48:57 at S V 233.

[26] S 48:57 at S V 233,15: *ahaṃ ... pañcannaṃ indriyānaṃ bhavitattā ... kāmacchandaṃ virājetvā ... brahmalokam upapanno.*

[27] S 48:57 at S V 233,19: *aham etaṃ jānāmi aham etaṃ passāmi, yathā imāni pañcindriyāni bhāvitāni ... amatogadhāni honti ...*

[28] Pj II 476, cf. also G.P. Malalasekera: *Dictionary of Pāli Proper Names*, Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal 1998, vol 2 p 1081.

[29] M 26 at M I 168; M 85 at M II 93 and S 6:1 at S I 137; cf. also S 21:7 at S I 234, where Brahmā repeated his earlier request.

The importance of Brahmā Sahampati's intervention right after the Buddha's awakening could be called into question, since the Pāli commentary suggests that the Buddha was not really disinclined to teach. According to the commentarial explanation, on surveying the world the Buddha only hesitated, since he had become aware of the degree to which people were under the influence of defilements and become apprehensive of how difficult it would be to teach them what he had realized.[30] He then displayed his disinclination to teach because he wanted Brahmā to invite him, as this would cause people in the world to develop respect for the *Dhamma*.[31]

This commentarial explanation is not convincing. A first argument against it is that it confuses the temporal sequence of events, since the Buddha's disinclination to teach occurred before he surveyed the world. Once he did survey the world, after Brahmā's request, the Buddha realized that some beings will be able to understand and decided to follow Brahmā's invitation to teach.

Another problem with the commentarial explanation is that, according to its presentation, the Buddha would have pretended unwillingness to teach in order to stage a show with the view of enhancing his reputation, an act that seems incompatible with the personality and integrity of the Buddha. A more serious implication of the same explanation arises in regard to a statement made by the Buddha, in which he informed the monks listening to his discourse of his earlier disinclination to teach.[32] On following the commentarial explanation, this statement would become a conscious speaking of a falsehood, an act which is simply an impossibility for the Buddha or an *arahant*.

In view of these inconsistencies, the commentarial explanation is unconvincing. Behind this commentarial explanation appears to stand the wish to reconcile the Buddha's explicit disinclination to teach with the idea that the Buddha had prepared himself over incalculable time periods for precisely this task, an idea prominent in historically later periods of all Buddhist traditions. The early Pāli discourses, however, clearly show that the Buddha indeed felt disinclined to teach. The same disinclination to teach becomes even more evident in the *Vinaya* account of the same event, according to which a single request by Brahmā was not sufficient to overcome the Buddha's unwillingness to proclaim the *Dhamma*. Rather, Brahmā Sahampati had to repeat his request three times before the Buddha consented.[33] So it

[30] Ps II 176.
[31] Ps II 177.
[32] M 26 at M I 168: *itiha me, bhikkhave, paṭisañcikkhato appossukkatāya cittaṃ namati, no dhammadesanāya.*
[33] Vin I 6.

appears to be indeed thanks to Brahmā Sahampati's decisive intervention that the Buddha decided to teach the *Dhamma*.

The need for *Brahmā* to intervene could be a natural part of the sequence of events leading up to the teaching activity of a Buddha, since another discourse reports the same initial disinclination, followed by Brahmā's intervention, in the case of the previous Buddha Vipassī.[34] Judging from this it seems as if the intervention of a Brahmā is what leads one who has realized supreme and full awakening to taking up the teaching activity of a Buddha, instead of remaining a silent Paccekabuddha. If this should indeed be the case, the role Brahmā has to play for the propagation of Buddhism in past, present and future times could hardly be more important.

Hence, though the Pāli discourses do to a considerable extent clip the wings of the ancient Indian creator god Brahmā by devaluating his claim to be eternal, to be an almighty creator, or to have all-encompassing knowledge, at least his function as a saviour has been retained. A small but decisive difference to theistic conceptions of god as a saviour, however, is that Brahmā is not really the saviour himself, but only the one whose decisive intervention at the right time the Buddha decided to teach the path by which mankind can become its own saviour by awakening.

**ANĀLAYO**

[34] D 14 at D II 36, notably in this case too, three requests by Brahmā were required, as according to Vin I 6 in the case of Gotama Buddha.

All quotations are according to the Pāli Text Society edition.
The abbreviations used are:

| | |
|---|---|
| A | *Aṅguttara Nikāya* |
| D | *Dīgha Nikāya* |
| M | *Majjhima Nikāya* |
| Pj | *Paramatthajotikā* |
| Ps | *Papañcasūdanī* |
| S | *Saṃyutta Nikāya* |
| Sv | *Sumaṅgalavilāsinī* |
| Vin | *Vinaya* |