

Was the Buddha Omniscient?

Dharmacāri Nāgapriya

Introduction

Did the Buddha know everything? What, anyway, can it mean to know everything? The precise scope of the Buddha's realisation is an important but difficult question to determine. Did he know all facts or was his knowledge more principal? Without direct access to the Buddha's mind it would seem impossible to be certain as to the precise range of his knowledge and powers and yet, if we are to engage imaginatively with Enlightenment as a meaningful goal, it seems important to try. After all, what marks out the Buddha as exemplary, as worthy of emulation, is the fact that he was a human being. He lived, breathed, talked, ate, and died like the rest of us while at the same time he was 'Enlightened'.

Here, I argue that one of the central disputes regarding the content of the Buddha's realisation arises from an equivocation over the meanings of the terms 'knowledge' and 'omniscience' as well as an unhelpful borrowing of vocabulary from existing Indian religious traditions^[1]. I will look at the traditional claims made on behalf of the Buddha in the light of similar claims made on behalf of his rivals and see to what extent the Pāli suttas support them. In doing so, I will clarify what the Buddha himself is reported to have claimed to know and comment upon why it is so important that we make an accurate assessment of his powers.

The Meaning of Omniscience

Before investigating the Buddha more specifically, it will be well to clarify what precisely the term 'omniscience' means. According to Collins Dictionary, omniscience means, first, "infinite knowledge or understanding" and, second, "very great, or seemingly infinite knowledge" (my italics). If we adopt the second definition, it will be much easier to defend the claim that the Buddha was omniscient than if we adopt the first. On this reading, the Buddha had such Insight, such wisdom, that it seemed as though he knew everything, as though his knowledge was drawn from a bottomless well.

In this connection, we may recall the Buddha's analogy of the *siṃsapā* leaves (*Samyutta Nikāya* 56,31). The Buddha once was staying at Kosambi, in a *siṃsapā* forest. Reaching down, he scooped

up a handful of leaves and held them out in the palm of his hand. Of the bhikkhus who were accompanying him, the Buddha asked,

Which are more numerous, the few *siṃsapā* leaves in my hand or those overhead in the *siṃsapā* forest?" Not surprisingly, the bhikkhus replied that, in comparison to the leaves in the entire forest, the leaves in the Buddha's hand were but few.

In the same way, monks, those things that I have known with direct knowledge but have not taught are far more numerous [than what I have taught]. And why haven't I taught them? Because they are not connected with the goal, do not relate to the rudiments of the holy life, and do not lead to disenchantment, to dispassion, to cessation, to calm, to direct knowledge, to self-awakening, to Unbinding. That is why I have not taught them.

[\[2\]](#)

Omniscience in the Pāli Canon

In the Pāli texts, two differing versions of omniscience are discernible and it will soon become clear that the connotations of the Pāli term commonly rendered 'omniscience' are quite different from those of the English word. In the *Tevijjavacchagotta Sutta* (*Majjhima Nikāya*, Sutta 71), the ascetic *Vacchagotta* approaches the Buddha. He wants to clarify the precise scope of the Buddha's knowledge and so questions him.

Venerable Sir, I have heard this: "The recluse Gotama claims to be omniscient [*sabbaññū*] and all-seeing [*sabbadassāvī*], to have complete knowledge and vision thus: "Whether I am walking or standing or sleeping or awake, knowledge and vision are continuously and uninterruptedly present to me." Venerable sir, do those who speak thus say what has been said by the Blessed One, and not misrepresent him with what is contrary to fact?[\[3\]](#)

According to the commentarial tradition, this statement encompasses two different scopes of omniscience. *Bhikkhu Bodhi* writes,

According to the exegetical Theravāda tradition the Buddha is omniscient in the sense that all knowable things are potentially accessible to him. He cannot, however, know everything simultaneously and must advert to what he wishes to know.[\[4\]](#)

The Milindapañha (Questions of King Milinda) - a post-canonical Pāli work that deals with many puzzling questions about the Buddha's life and teaching - seems to justify this interpretation. Nāgasena, a Buddhist monk, points out to the king that,

The omniscience of the Blessed One was dependent on reflection. But if he did reflect he knew whatever he wanted to know.^[5]

The more far-reaching version of omniscience is apparently claimed by - among others – Nigaṇṭha Nātaputta, the leader of what is now known as the Jain sect. Such a claim is attributed to him in the Culadukkhakkhandha Sutta (Majjhima Nikāya, Sutta 14). In this sutta, Mahānāma the Sakyan reports claims made by Nātaputta to his own followers regarding his more comprehensive version of omniscience:

Friend, the Nigaṇṭha Nātaputta is omniscient [sabbaññū] and all-seeing [sabbadassāvī] and claims to have complete knowledge [aparisesa ñāṇadassana paṭijānāti] thus:
“Whether I am walking or standing or asleep or awake, knowledge and vision [ñāṇadassana] are continuously [satata] and uninterruptedly [samitam] present in me.”^[6]

In more technical terms, Mahāvīra's omniscience was termed kevala-jñāna, a state in which the soul (ātman), “being totally independent of the senses and the mind, will, without any conscious effort whatsoever, directly and simultaneously mirror the whole range of knowables (sarvaṃ jñeyam)”.^[7] Seemingly, all freed souls attain to omniscience according to this system. The ‘All’ (sarva) that the omniscient come to know was understood to comprise the six substances (dravyas) with their infinite modes (paryāyas)^[8]. We will see that the transference of the vocabulary of the ‘All’ (sabba in Pāli) into Buddhism led to ambiguity and hence a long-running debate about its meaning.

Importantly, at least according to the Majjhima Nikāya (MN 76), Nātaputta is not able to live up to his lofty claim and his bragging is ridiculed by Ānanda:

Here, Sandaka, some teacher claims to be omniscient and all-seeing, to have complete knowledge and vision thus: ‘Whether I am walking or standing or sleeping or awake, knowledge and vision are continuously and uninterruptedly present to me.’ He enters an empty house, he gets no almsfood, a dog bites him, he meets with a wild elephant, a wild horse, a wild bull, ... he asks the name of a village or a town, and the way to go there. When he is questioned: ‘How is this?’ he replies: ‘I had to enter an empty house, that is why I entered it. I had to get no almsfood...’^[9]

Ānanda points out that if it is true that Nātaputta is omniscient why does he need to ask directions?

Why does he meet with misfortune (which his omniscience should presumably allow him to foresee and so avoid)? Nātaputta's defence is some version of determinism; that is, he could foresee these things but they were going to happen anyway.

The debunking of Nātaputta's claim to omniscience is taken further in the Cūḷasakuludāyi sutta (Majjhima Nikāya, Sutta 79). In speaking about a meeting with Nātaputta, Sakuludāyi reports to the Buddha:

When I asked him a question about the past, he prevaricated, led the talk aside, and showed anger, hate, and bitterness.[\[10\]](#)

This passage is clearly intended not only to discredit Nātaputta's claims but to show that such claims are ridiculous.

While decisively rejecting the broader version of omniscience claimed by Nigaṇṭha Nātaputta and other wanderers, the Theravāda school maintained that the Buddha was omniscient in the sense that "all knowable things are potentially accessible to him." However, a straightforward reading of the Buddha's reply to Vacchagotta – quoted above – would seem to contradict this claim.

In his reply, the Buddha says nothing about having omniscience, he simply asserts that he has the three knowledges (tevijjā), that is: he is able to recollect his manifold past lives (pubbe nāvāsānussati-ñāṇa); he is able - with his divine eye - to see the passing away and reappearing of beings and he understands how beings pass on according to their actions (dibba-cakkhu-ñāṇa); and finally, having realised for himself with direct knowledge (abhiññā), he knows that he has destroyed the taints (āsava-kkhaya-ñāṇa). One would have thought that these powers were remarkable enough in themselves! The Majjhima Nikāya, in particular, focuses on this formula of the three knowledges in order to describe the content of the Buddha's achievement and does not explicitly claim more [\[11\]](#). Moreover, returning to the Cūḷasakuludāyi Sutta, when the wanderer Sakuludāyin suggests that it is in fact the Buddha, rather than Mahāvīra, who is properly omniscient the Buddha dismisses such considerations as irrelevant and offers instead the formula of Dependent Origination (paṭicca-samuppāda):

When this exists, that comes to be; with the arising of this, that arises. When this does not exist, that does not come to be; with the cessation of this, that ceases.[\[12\]](#)

In the Kaṇṇakatthala-sutta (Majjhima Nikāya, Sutta 90), however, the Buddha gives a more ambiguous response. On this occasion, it is King Pasenadi of Kosala, the Buddha's old friend, who comes to see him and asks about omniscience.

Venerable sir, I have heard this: ‘The recluse Gotama says: “There is no recluse or brahmin who is omniscient [sabbaññū] and all-seeing [sabbadassāvī], who can claim to have complete knowledge and vision [aparisesa ñāṇadassana]; that is not possible.”’

Venerable sir, do those who speak thus say what has been said by the Blessed One, and not misrepresent him with what is contrary to fact?[\[13\]](#)

The Buddha denies that he has made this claim saying,

I recall having actually made the utterance in this way, great king: “There is no recluse or brahmin who knows all, who sees all, simultaneously; that is not possible.”[\[14\]](#)

Clearly, then, he does not here deny that it is possible to know and see all, only that it is possible to know and see all simultaneously. In other words, he is denying the kind of omniscience claimed by, and on behalf of, the Nigaṇṭha Nātaputta. Nevertheless, without explicitly denying it, he still does not claim to know and see all himself. As we have noted, the orthodox Theravāda position seems to be that the Buddha could, in principle, know and see all but he needed to give his attention to a particular object of knowledge in order to know it. The principal support for this claim in the Pāli texts is found in the Kāḷaka Sutta of the Anguttara Nikāya (i.24). Here the Buddha says,

Monks, whatsoever in the world (loka), with its devas ... with its hosts of recluses and brahmins, of devas and mankind, – whatsoever is seen heard, sensed, cognized, attained, searched into, pondered over by the mind, – all that I do know. Whatsoever is seen, heard ... pondered over by the mind, – that have I fully comprehended: all that is understood by the Tathāgata, but the Tathāgata is not subject to it.[\[15\]](#)

When the Buddha says, “I do know”, he is using the Pāli verb jān, which means ‘to know, to have or gain knowledge of, to be experienced, to be aware, to find out.’ This, then, would seem to confirm that the Buddha is in fact claiming some form of omniscience (though perhaps just one comment in the entire Pāli Canon is insufficient to be sure). However, the question arises, what does the Buddha mean when he says that he knows all that can be seen etc? Does he know these things as a finite range of possible facts of which he may gain knowledge or does he know them principally, that is, does he in principle know the true nature of all things, that is as being subject to the three characteristics of conditioned existence: unsatisfactoriness (dukkha, impermanence (anicca), and absence of permanent identity (anattā)?

A passage from the sutta immediately preceding the one just quoted sheds further light on this question. In ‘The World’ sutta (Anguttara Nikāya i.23), the Buddha makes an identical claim

regarding the scope of his knowledge. However, in this sutta the statement is made in the context of a passage where he discusses his knowledge of the world in relation to the Four Noble Truths.

Monks, the world is fully comprehended by a Tathāgata. From the world a Tathāgata is released. Monks, the arising of the world is fully comprehended by a Tathāgata; the arising of the world is abandoned by a Tathāgata, the ending of the world is fully comprehended by a Tathāgata; the ending of the world is realized by a Tathāgata. Monks, the practice going to the ending of the world is fully comprehended by a Tathāgata; the practice going to the ending of the world is made to become by the Tathāgata.[\[16\]](#)

This context makes the scope of the Buddha's claim much clearer. He is not claiming to know all facts. The 'world' indicated here is clearly the world of the unenlightened being, the being immersed in dukkha (suffering). The Buddha claims to know how this world arises and how to make it come to an end. In other words, he knows why people suffer, he knows too that suffering can be overcome, he knows how to overcome suffering, and he communicates a means of overcoming it. Here, then, the Buddha simply reiterates what he claims in many other places, that is, that he knows the Four Noble Truths.

The ambiguity regarding the exact claim made by - or on behalf of - the Buddha is shown clearly in the Sabbapariññā Sutta (Itivuttaka, Sutta 7). Here the Buddha is reported to say,

Bhikkhus, one who has not directly known and fully understood the 'All' (sabba), who has not detached his mind from it and abandoned it, is incapable of destroying suffering. But one who has directly known (abhijāna) and fully understood (parijāna) the 'All', and who has detached his mind from it and abandoned it, is capable of destroying suffering.

[\[17\]](#)

We noticed earlier that for the Jains the 'All' meant something very technical and specific; the totality of all knowables. However, the current passage suggests that the 'All' is used as a synonym for saṃsara, the unenlightened condition. The aim here is, through direct knowledge (pariññā) of it, to abandon the 'All' and, in doing so, liberate oneself from suffering. Other contexts make it clear that pariññā is a special, higher kind of knowledge - a gnosis - not merely a factual sort. It is identical with the goal of Buddhism[\[18\]](#). Knowing the 'All' in this sense may be spoken of in several ways, for example, insight into the Four Noble Truths (catāri ariya saccāni), the Three Characteristics (ti-lakkhaṇa) of Existence, or Dependent Origination. Accordingly, then, knowing the 'All' (sabba) is equivalent to knowing the nature of the world (loka). It is a spiritual insight into the way things are that leads to a profound transformation of one's attitude towards it that is

indicated here.

Jaini speculates that “the word sabbaññu was an ancient Āramaṇa technical term, and was in vogue among the Jains...at the time of Mahāvīra.”^[19] It was, he believes, taken up by the Buddhists and applied to their Master but perhaps not fully assimilated. Given the ambiguous meaning of the term sabba (Sanskrit, sarva), it is not surprising that confusion arose within the Buddhist context regarding what it signified and that, at least in the minds of some commentators, a more factual interpretation of sabbaññuta-ñāṇa replaced a more principial one. Consequently, certain powers were ascribed to the Buddha that are not only literally incredible but rather beside the point.

The Theravāda tradition exhibits this mistake when it appears to claim that the Buddha could know all possible facts. This claim is not only highly doubtful but also obfuscating. Its doubtful nature can be shown by considering some improbable scenarios. For example, could the Buddha, even if he gave his full attention to it, know how many hairs there are on my head? This seems extremely unlikely. Could he, then, know how to operate Word 7 (the word processing package I am using to type this essay) without instruction. I doubt it. Did the Buddha know that the Earth orbited the sun? There is certainly no evidence to suggest that he did. Did he understand the workings of the internal combustion engine? While, for sure, it is impossible to prove that the Buddha could not have known such things it seems unreasonable to suggest that he may have done since there is absolutely no evidence to support this claim. After all, why would he? Moreover, what, anyway would be the value of such knowledge in relation to the Buddha’s aims?

The Buddha claimed to see into the real nature of experience and phenomena, he did not claim to be some sort of transcendental know-all. Such a claim obscures the spiritual significance and orientation of his insight. It arises from a conflation of two different orders of knowledge; the Buddha’s knowledge was of spiritual principles, even laws, not of mundane facts. There is no reason to believe that his mastery of the principle of Dependent Origination should also give him access to the total range of mundane facts. The two kinds of knowledge are of a different nature. The claim that the Buddha could potentially know everything obscures the spiritual profundity of his attainment and reduces him to some sort of human encyclopedia.

This conflation of different orders of knowledge appears in one of the debates of the canonical Abhidhammic work the Kathavatthu (Points of Controversy). An opponent of the Theras, a Pubbaseliya, puts forward the view that an arahant may lack certain knowledge because he is liable to get perplexed about facts concerning everyday life and may be surpassed in such knowledge by others. The Thera’s response is very instructive:

You maintain that he [the arahant] does [lack knowledge]. Then you must also admit that the arahant has ignorance - ignorance as flood, bond, latent bias, attack, fetter, hindrance. If you deny this, you cannot say he lacks knowledge.[\[20\]](#)

This false dichotomy reveals that the debate founders on a misunderstanding about the use of the word knowledge (here *ñāṇa*). The Thera is not able to conceive of different orders of knowledge and so must reject the claim that an arahant lacks knowledge of any sort. For him, if the arahant lacks knowledge of any kind it calls into question his transcendence of ignorance. However, this equivocation on the word 'knowledge' misleads. Surely it is possible that the arahant may have fully penetrated the sources of greed, hatred, and delusion (and so have knowledge of the destruction of the taints) but not know how to get to Benares, for example. There seems to be no necessary connection between the former sort of knowledge and the latter apart from the fact that both are referred to as kinds of 'knowledge'.

Warder[\[21\]](#) speculates that part of the reason that the early Buddhist tradition was so keen to promote the Buddha to the status of omniscience was that other contemporary teachers made such claims including Nigaṇṭha Nātaputta - as we have already noted - but also Makkali Gosala, and Purana Kassapa[\[22\]](#). Clearly, the redactors of the Pāli Canon - and the later commentators - would wish to set the Buddha above any of his rivals. This speculation seems plausible. But were they consistent? Can we find evidence to contradict the claim that the Buddha was omniscient even in the qualified sense outlined by, for example, Nāgasena?

Testing the Buddha's omniscience

One way to refute the claim that the Buddha was omniscient would be to find examples in the Pāli Canon that clearly demonstrate a lack of knowledge on his part. In other words, we can test the claim to omniscience by attempting to falsify it. I have selected several incidents that appear to show that, at least with regard to the question at hand, the Buddha lacked knowledge.

1 Cātumā Sutta (Majjhima Nikāya Sutta 67)

Here the Buddha is staying at Cātumā in a myrobalan grove. A large group of monks headed by Sāriputta and MahāMoggallāna have come to Cātumā to see the Buddha. However, while the visiting monks exchange greetings with the Buddha's own retinue, they are very noisy and boisterous.

Seemingly rather annoyed, the Buddha demands of Ānanda:

Who are these loud noisy people? One would think they were fishermen hawking fish.

[\[23\]](#)

Interestingly, the Buddha does not seem to know who the bhikkhus are, even though two of them are his leading disciples. Ānanda then informs the Buddha as to the monks' identities and the Buddha summons them to him. The Buddha then dismisses them from his company and they go.

However, hearing of this, the local Sakyans undertake to visit the Buddha to “restore his confidence.” Their appeal to him is quite instructive:

Venerable sir, let the Blessed One delight in the Sangha of bhikkhus; venerable sir, let the Blessed One welcome the Sangha of bhikkhus; venerable sir, let the Blessed One help the Sangha of bhikkhus now as he used to help it in the past. Venerable sir, there are new bhikkhus here, just gone forth, recently come to this Dhamma and Discipline. If they get no opportunity to see the Blessed One, there may take place in them some change or alteration [i.e. they may lose their inspiration and fall back].[\[24\]](#)

It seems almost as though the Sakyans think that the Buddha's behaviour shows a lack of compassion and, later in the sutta, there is no evidence that he upbraids them for this apparent presumption. In addition, the Sakyans bring a consideration to the Buddha's attention that he has quite clearly not thought of. He is not aware that there are new bhikkhus who, not being able to see the Buddha, might lose inspiration or, if he is aware of it, he has chosen not to weigh it with any importance.

In his response to the Sakyans, the Buddha seems determined. He will not change his decision. However, the god Brahmā Sahampati (famous for requesting the Buddha to teach the Dhamma to humanity), knowing the Buddha's mind, appears before him and pleads in the same way as the Sakyans have done. As a result of this intercession, the Buddha relents and recalls the banished monks. Whether Brahmā Sahampati is seen literally as a god or metaphorically as the Buddha's own conscience reflecting on the issue, it is clear that the Buddha changes his mind. Moreover, he changes his mind because he has begun to weigh seriously circumstances that previously he was either unaware of or had not given importance too. Presumably, if his first decision was correct he should not have changed his mind, while if the second decision is correct, the first must have been wrong. It might be argued that the Buddha's initial decision to send the bhikkhus away seemed reasonable at the time but unreasonable when new circumstances came to light, so he changed his mind. This seems all very human and reasonable but does not seem reconcilable with the claim that

the Buddha was omniscient[25]. After all, he should, presumably, have been able to tell that some of the visiting bhikkhus were just newly gone forth. My own, admittedly somewhat speculative, interpretation of this passage is that initially the Buddha was rather annoyed, so dismissed the visiting bhikkhus heatedly. Later, when he had had time to think the matter through and when persuasive reasons were given for allowing the bhikkhus to stay, he changed his mind and allowed them back in.

2 The Monks who Commit Suicide

The Samyutta Nikāya[26] records an account of the Buddha teaching a meditation on the unlovely (asubhabhāvana). Having taught this meditation, the Buddha goes into solitary retreat for a month and has contact with no-one except the monk who brings his food. During this time, the monks meditated on the unlovely:

As to this body, they worried about it, felt shame and loathing for it, and sought for a weapon to slay themselves. Nay, as many as ten monks did so in a single day; even twenty, thirty of them slew themselves in a single day.[27]

At the end of the period of solitary retreat, the Buddha enquires of Ānanda why there are less bhikkhus than before. Seemingly, then, he does not know that a number of monks have committed suicide. Ānanda tells him what has happened. The Buddha's response is simply, "Very well, Ānanda," and to summon the remaining bhikkhus for a discourse on the mindfulness of breathing. Apart from this, he makes no remark about what has happened.

In this incident, then, the Buddha appears not to know that the bhikkhus have committed suicide until informed of the fact and, moreover, when teaching the meditation on the unlovely in the first place, it seems that he did not foresee that they would commit suicide as a result of practising it. (This would seem to raise questions about the Buddha's knowledge of the future.)

3 Devadatta's Entry into the Sangha

One of the many questions raised by King Milinda in his dialogues with Nāgasena is the issue of Devadatta's entry into the Order. Milinda asks Nāgasena if the Buddha knew that, if admitted to the order of bhikkhus, Devadatta would cause schism. Nāgasena replies that the Buddha did know this. Milinda's response is astute.

But Nāgasena, if that be so, then the statement that the Buddha was kind and pitiful, that he sought after the good of others, that he was the remover of that which works harm, the provider of that which works well to all beings - that statement must be wrong.[\[28\]](#)

In other words, if the Buddha had been properly compassionate he would not have admitted Devadatta to the order knowing the problems he would cause. Naturally, Nāgasena denies this interpretation of events claiming that the Buddha knew Devadatta's karmic inheritance and that, should he not be admitted to the order "he would pass for an endless series of kalpas from torment to torment, and from perdition to perdition."[\[29\]](#) However, if admitted to the order, then Devadatta's (bad) karmic inheritance would become limited and so endure only for one kalpa.

While one might admire this response as a clever way to try to get out of a tricky spot it is unconvincing. Since causing schism in the Sangha is one of the five most heinous crimes,[\[30\]](#) would it not have been better for Devadatta never to have entered the Order since he couldn't then have committed it? It seems more reasonable to suggest that Devadatta's karmic inheritance would become worse as a result of his membership of the order of bhikkhus rather than better. After all, he became involved in a power struggle with the Buddha and even attempted to kill him (another of the five heinous crimes). What could be worse? If Devadatta had not been a bhikkhu it seems unlikely that he would have wanted to usurp the Buddha in this way.

While admiring Nāgasena's fidelity to the claim that the Buddha was omniscient it seems more reasonable to assume that the Buddha did not in fact foresee the consequences of Devadatta's membership of the order, given that these consequences were so disastrous.

4 The Jaṭila Ascetics

In the Udāna (6,2) there is an incident that appears to reveal the Buddha denying omniscience and, in particular, denying his apparent ability to know the thoughts of others. The Buddha is talking with his friend King Pasenadi when a raggle-taggle group of ascetics wanders by. As they pass, Pasenadi asks the Buddha whether any of them are arahants or on the arahant path. The Buddha's reply is very interesting:

It is by living with a person that his virtue is to be known, great king, and then only after a long time, not after a short period; and only by considering it, not without consideration; and only by one who is wise, not by a fool. It is by associating with a

person that his purity is to be known. ... It is in adversity that a person's fortitude is to be known. ... It is by discussion with a person that his wisdom is to be known, great king, and then only after a long time, not after a short period; and only by considering it, not without consideration; and only by one who is wise, not by a fool.[\[31\]](#)

It appears then that the Buddha is suggesting that one cannot know the attainment of another unless one has extended experience of him or her at close quarters. This would seem to undermine the claims made regarding the Buddha's abilities in other parts of the Pāli Canon, in particular the supernatural power of telepathy (*parassa cetopariya-ñāṇa*) said to be one of the six such powers possessed by the Buddha.

In the episode of the Jaṭila ascetics, Pasenadi later admits to having played a little trick on the Buddha. All of the ascetics are in fact his spies in disguise! At no point does the Buddha claim to have known this fact before Pasenadi reveals it.

Conclusion

I have presented several incidents recorded in the Pāli Canon that seem to falsify in a clear and straightforward manner the traditional but somewhat misguided claim to omniscience made on behalf of the Buddha. It is not surprising that on close inspection the Canon is inconsistent on this topic since, given its oral origin, it is unlikely that one editor, or even a team of editors, could have combed through the entire Canon deleting or revising any episodes that might reveal limitations to the Buddha's sphere of knowledge.

However, the question may arise: why am I so interested in trying to illustrate the Buddha's apparent lack of omniscience? Is this simply another example of contemporary procrusteanism? Am I trying to cut the Buddha down to size (my size), to show that he had feet of clay? No. My intention is rather the opposite. So long as implausible claims such as omniscience are made on behalf of the Buddha his true significance cannot be fully understood or appreciated. Instead of being respected, venerated, and emulated as a spiritual exemplar he is more likely to be worshipped as some kind of unreachable superman, even a god. The Buddha was a man who achieved a profound spiritual insight, a spiritual insight that - at least according to Buddhism - all human beings can emulate. This is what makes the Buddha so inspiring and so important. Whether he was able to walk through walls or understand quantum theory is irrelevant.

The Buddha's principal claim was that he had broken the cycle of rebirth and that he had done this

by overcoming any tendencies within him towards greed (taṇhā), hatred (doha), and delusion (moha). The proper test of the profundity of his realisation, then, is not asking him obscure questions about topics of which he could be expected to know nothing, but in examining his conduct for any evidence that he fell short of his claim. Indeed, this is a test that he himself proposes for the assessment of a sage's attainment and so of his reliability as a teacher.^[32] The primary means of evaluating spiritual integrity then is to examine the ethical purity of the sage not his magical powers (should he have any) or the scope of his mundane knowledge. The Buddha may or may not have had all sorts of magical abilities but these considerations should not obscure what is most fundamentally important about him and what he realised.

The irrelevance of factual omniscience to the real concerns of spiritual life are poignantly summarised by the Mahāyāna Buddhist theologian Dharmakīrti:

People, afraid of being deceived by false teachers

In the matter of directing the ignorant,

Seek out a man with knowledge,

for the sake of realising his teaching.

What is the use of his knowledge

pertaining to the number of insects in the whole world?

Rather, inquire into his knowledge of

that which is to be practised by us.^[33]

Notes

[1]. This latter point, in particular, is argued by P.S. Jaini in his 'On the Sarvajñatva of Mahāvīra and the Buddha' in *Buddhist Studies in Honour of I.B. Horner*, edited by L.S. Cousins et al (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1974), pp.71–90.

[2]. Trans. Thanissaro Bhikkhu, <http://world.std.com/~metta>.

[3]. *The Middle Length Sayings*, trans. by Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi, Wisdom 1995,

p.587.

[4]. Ibid. p.1276.

[5]. The Questions of King Milinda, trans. T.W. Rhys Davids, Motilal 1988, vol. 1, p.154.

[6]. Ñāṇamoli, op.cit. p.187–8.

[7]. Jaini, op. cit. p.75,

[8]. Ibid. p.76.

[9]. Ñāṇamoli, op. Cit. p.623–4.

[10]. Ibid. p.655.

[11]. Clearly the formula of ‘three knowledges’ is intended as an ironic reference to, and criticism of, the basis of Vedic knowledge: the three Vedas.

[12]. Ñāṇamoli, op.cit. p.655. Imasmiṃ sati, idaṃ hoti, imass’uppādā, idaṃ uppajjati; imasmiṃ asati, idaṃ na hoti; imassa nirodhā, idaṃ nirujjhati. (M Ī.32)

[13]. Ibid. p.735.

[14]. Ibid.

[15]. The Book of the Gradual Sayings, vol. Ī trans. F.L. Woodward, PTS, 1982, p.26–7.

[16]. Ibid. p.25. This sutta is also found at Itivuttaka, 112.

[17]. The Udāna and the Itivuttaka, trans. John Ireland, Buddhist Publications Society, Kandy, p. 159.

[18]. See, for example, MN i.251.

[19]. op. cit. p.87.

[20]. Points of Controversy, Pali Text Society, 1915, p.115 (S i.1).

[21]. Indian Buddhism, Motilal Banarsidass, 1980, p.135ff.

[22]. Anguttara Nikāya 9:38/iv.428-9.

[23]. Ñāṇamoli, op. Cit. p.560.

[24] Ibid. p.561.

[25] In The Questions of King Milinda, Milinda puts this very issue to Nāgasena who gives a rather feeble response saying that the Buddha changed his mind because he was convinced by parables that he himself had previously used (op. cit. vol. 1 p.301–2). The question arises, though, why did the Buddha not think the matter through for himself?

[26] This episode is also described in the Vinaya, Suttavibhaṅga, ii.1 where the incident is considerably elaborated (suggesting that it was recorded later). In the Vinaya account, some of the monks ask a ‘sham recluse’ to kill them. Under the influence of Māra, the ‘sham recluse’, Migalaṇḍika, later goes on a killing spree, murdering even sixty monks in a single day. The incident is used to point out that intentionally killing another results in ‘defeat’ (pārājika).

[27] The Book of the Kindred Sayings, vol. 5, PTS, trans. F.L. Woodward, p.284.

[28] The Questions of King Milinda, op. cit. vol. i, p.163.

[29] Ibid. p.164.

[30] Anguttara Nikāya v.129, Parikuppa Sutta, ‘In Agony’. ‘There are these five inhabitants of the states of deprivation, inhabitants of hell, who are in agony and incurable. Which five? One who has killed his/her mother, one who has killed his/her father, one who has killed an arahant, one who -- with a corrupted mind -- has caused the blood of a Tathagata to flow, and one who has caused a split in the Sangha. These are the five inhabitants of the states of deprivation, inhabitants of hell, who are in agony and incurable.’ Thanissāro Bhikkhu, op. cit.

[31] Ireland, op. cit. pp.84–5.

[32] See, for example, Cankī Sutta, Middle Length Sayings, op. cit. p.781:

Then a householder or a householder’s son goes to [the sage] and investigates him in regard to three kinds of states: in regard to states based on greed, in regard to states based on hate, and in regard to states based on delusion: ‘Are there in this venerable one any states based on greed such that, with his mind obsessed by those states, while not knowing he might say, “I know,” or while not seeing he might say “I see,” or he might urge others to act in a way that would lead to their harm and suffering for a long time. (MN i.171–2)

[33] Pramāṇavārttika, I, 32–3. Quoted in Jaini, op. cit., pp.86–7.