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## Buddhas and Body Language: The Literary Trope of the Buddha's Smile

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# **THE LANGUAGE OF THE SŪTRAS**

Essays in Honor of Luis Gómez

*Edited by Natalie Gummer*

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The cover drawing depicts the endless knot, one of the eight auspicious symbols of Buddhism. Drawing and cover design by Ignacio Ercole.

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# **Buddhas and Body Language: The Literary Trope of the Buddha's Smile<sup>1</sup>**

**DAVID V. FIORDALIS**

*If you smile at me, I will understand  
'cause that is something everybody everywhere  
does in the same language.*

—Stephen Stills and Paul Kantner, Lyrics for “Wooden Ships”

*A miracle is, as it were, a gesture which God makes.  
As a man sits quietly and then makes an impressive*

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1. My thanks to Oskar von Hinüber and other audience members at the American Oriental Society's 2013 annual meeting in Portland, Oregon. They heard the first version of this essay and provided a few references that improved subsequent drafts. Luis Gómez offered valuable support and encouraged my questions and approach at their earliest formulation, and I am grateful to him and Natalie Gummer for inviting me to present a revised version of this essay in their workshop, “The Language of the Sūtras,” hosted by the Mangalam Research Center for Buddhist Languages in June, 2015. My thanks also go to the other participants in that workshop, especially to the respondent, Ryan Overbey, for encouraging remarks; thanks also to John Strong, who read a later draft and offered kind words as well as some helpful suggestions, which I have tried my best to incorporate; and to Natalie Gummer, once again, for offering her own insightful comments and suggestions on the penultimate draft. She helped me to clarify (for myself and hopefully for others) the larger theoretical framework and implications of the essay. Finally, I would like to note that a version of this essay will appear in Spanish translation as “Los budas y el lenguaje corporal: el tropo literario de la sonrisa del buda,” in *La sonrisa del Buda: estudios sobre budismo. Ensayos en homenaje a Luis O. Gómez*, edited by Adrián Muñoz and Roberto García (Mexico City, MX: Centro de Estudios de Asia y África, El Colegio de México, 2021), 97–146. I thank the editor and publishers at Mangalam Press, the publisher and editors of the Spanish publication, as well as the translator, Marianela Santoveña Rodríguez, for all their support and hard work to bring this essay to a wider audience.

*gesture, God lets the world run on smoothly and then accompanies the words of a saint by a symbolic occurrence, a gesture of nature.*

—Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*<sup>2</sup>

## Introduction

With the advent of new media, multimodality has come into vogue as one model for theorizing about hybrid forms of communication, such as film, video, webpages and other modern combinations of figurative and linguistic communication.<sup>3</sup> Multimodal semiotics begins from the assumption that verbal communication

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2. See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, edited by G. H. von Wright, translated by Peter Winch (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 45 and 45e. Strangely, this remark is part of a longer comment or series of comments with no corresponding German. Instead, the English is reproduced twice on opposite pages. It therefore gives the impression that the passage was originally written by Wittgenstein in English, though perhaps it is the result of an error in the production of the edition. Neither the editor nor the translator mentions the issue or explains why the English is reproduced where the German should be.

3. For a quick introduction to the concept, see Jeff Bezemer, “What Is Multimodality?” in *MODE: Multimodal Methodologies* (London: Centre for Multimodal Research at the University of London Institute of Education), published February 16, 2012, <<http://mode.ioe.ac.uk/2012/02/16/what-is-multimodality/>>. More relevant to the specific theoretical concerns of the present discussion are Alan Cienki and Cornelia Müller, “Metaphor, Gesture, and Thought,” and Charles Forceville, “Metaphor in Pictures and Multimodal Representations,” both in *The Cambridge Handbook of Metaphor and Thought*, edited by Raymond W. Gibbs, Jr. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 462–82 and 483–501. Several of the articles in Charles J. Forceville and Eduardo Urios-Aparisi, eds., *Multimodal Metaphor* (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 2009), are also relevant. The past decade has witnessed further growth in the literature on multimodality and its application in a number of academic disciplines. For another example that is highly relevant to the broader concerns of this essay, I would point to the special collection of essays on visual and multimodal argumentation edited by Jens E. Kjeldsen, including the editor’s introduction, “The Study of Visual and Multimodal Argumentation,” *Argumentation* 29.2 (2015): 115–32. My thanks to Nic Newton for bringing this collection to my attention. As will become apparent, questions about the basic distinction and the various connections between the visual and verbal modes of signification require more discussion than I can give them here, but the present essay can be seen largely in their light.

should not be seen in isolation from other, nonverbal modes of making meaning. It prompts one to consider all available forms of representation in the analysis of communication, including gestural and figurative behavior, that is, body language and the making of figures and images.

Figurative behavior seems fundamental to our ability to communicate, gesture being equally if not more basic to our common sentience than verbal, linguistic utterances.<sup>4</sup> Still, as archeologist and anthropological theorist, André Leroi-Gourhan, wrote in his 1964 work, *Le geste et la parole (Gesture and Speech)*: “Figurative behavior cannot be dissociated from language. It forms part of the same human aptitude, that of reflecting reality in verbal or gestural symbols or in material form as figures.”<sup>5</sup> Despite a long-standing tradition of studying the connection between texts and images in Buddhist art history, the field of Buddhist studies has arguably placed greater emphasis on the verbal and aural modes of communication, the saying and the hearing, when discussing the position of language in Buddhist discourse; more recently, however, some scholars have turned increasing attention to the visual and material dimensions.<sup>6</sup> Leroi-Gourhan and others remind us not only

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4. I had initially thought to write “our common humanity,” but then it occurred to me that we share with other animals the capacity to use body language and make meaningful non-linguistic, vocal utterances.

5. André Leroi-Gourhan, *Gesture and Speech*, translated by Anna Bostock Berger (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993), 363. Originally published as *Le geste et la parole* (Paris: Editions Albin Michel, 1964). While I agree with Leroi-Gourhan that verbal and nonverbal communication share a common cognitive basis, I am unconvinced that their basic function is “reflecting reality.” Both can be said to generate reality of a particular kind. With that being said, I would like to take this opportunity to honor the memory of Luis O. Gómez, my advisor, teacher, and friend, who first mentioned Leroi-Gourhan’s work to me in connection with this essay. A small thing, it may seem, but it is indicative of the incredible breadth of his knowledge. I always learned something from our conversations.

6. Andy Rotman, *Thus Have I Seen: Visualizing Faith in Early Indian Buddhism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009). Somewhat earlier is Jacob Kinnard, *Imaging Wisdom: Seeing and Knowing in the Art of Indian Buddhism* (Richmond, UK: Curzon, 1999), and the essays by Robert Brown, “Expected Miracles: The Unsurprisingly Miraculous Nature of Buddhist Images and Relics” and “The Miraculous Buddha Image: Portrait, God, or Object?” in *Images, Miracles, and Authority*



that these modes are inseparable, but also that they are intimately connected as tools and products of a common creative imagination.<sup>7</sup>

This essay investigates the literary portrayal of a particular gesture, one of the most widespread and basic of human gestures: the smile. More particularly in focus here is the smile of the Buddha as represented in classical Buddhist literature and visual culture. What does the Buddha's smile signify in such literary and visual representations? What was it meant to signify for the Buddha of story or stone or paint—by those Buddhists who composed and created such representations; by those Buddhists in ancient and modern times who tried to understand such representations; and by all the

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*in Asian Religious Traditions*, edited by Richard H. Davis, (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998), 23–36 and 37–54, as well as several other essays by different authors in the same volume. On the broader South Asian context, see Richard H. Davis, *Lives of Indian Images* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997). For a look beyond South Asia, see Cynthea Bogel, *With a Single Glance: Buddhist Icon and Early Mikkyō Vision* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2009), and Pamela Winfield, *Icons and Iconoclasm in Japanese Buddhism: Kūkai and Dōgen on the Art of Enlightenment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013). Also highly relevant to the present discussion is David McMahan, *Empty Vision: Metaphor and Visionary Imagery in Mahāyāna Buddhism* (Richmond, UK: Curzon, 2002). While, like Natalie Gummer, I remain unconvinced by several of McMahan's main arguments, for instance, about the historical shift from the oral/aural to the visual in Buddhist literature, the significance of writing to this ostensive shift, and the concomitance of devaluing language in this prioritization of vision, the focus on the themes of visibility and "visual metaphor" in Buddhist texts is important, and I feel it calls for a multimodal approach. For her insightful review of McMahan's book, see Natalie Gummer, "Review of *Empty Vision: Metaphor and Visionary Imagery in Mahāyāna Buddhism*, by David McMahan," *Journal of Global Buddhism* 6 (2005): 36–40. I put scare quotes around visual metaphor above because, technically speaking, visual metaphors should be at least partially expressed in the visual mode. See, for instance, Noel Carroll, "Visual Metaphor," in *Aspects of Metaphor*, edited by Jakko Hintikka (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1994), 189–218. A forthcoming volume edited by Naomi Appleton, *Narrative Visions and Visual Narratives in Indian Buddhism* (Sheffield, UK: Equinox), will contain essays that attempt to bridge the gap with respect to verbal/textual and pictorial narratives. My own contention is that narratives are particularly well suited to play this bridging role.

7. In this latter connection see also David Shulman's wonderful book, *More Than Real: A History of the Imagination in South India* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012) as well as Italo Calvino's fantastic essay, "Visibility," in *Six Memos for the Next Millennium* (New York: Vintage, 1993), 81–99.

others who interpret them, including ourselves? What relationship do Buddhist texts establish between visual and verbal modes of signification in regard to the smile? One may, of course, take a purely cultural historical approach to these questions, but a robust literature also exists in modern psychology and physiological science dedicated to the study of facial expressions, including the smile, going back to Darwin and Duchenne.<sup>8</sup> More recently, the psychologist Paul Ekman has contributed significantly to the taxonomy of facial expressions and studied the links between facial expression and emotion.<sup>9</sup> How much, if any, of this scientific literature can help us understand the Buddha's smile, a figurative trope from a very different time and place? Modern American culture, at least, imbues the smiling person with a virtual halo of positive qualities, and there may be scientific evidence to support the association of smiling and feeling happiness, but at the same time everyone is apt to see in

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8. See Marianne LaFrance, *Lip Service: Smiles in Life, Death, Trust, Lies, Work, Memory, Sex, and Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2011). LaFrance makes much of this modern scientific investigation accessible to a general audience.

9. Paul Ekman's work is widely accessible through a variety of popular and scholarly avenues, but here are a few references to work that touches directly upon topics of relevance to the present discussion: Paul Ekman, Wallace Friesen, and Phoebe Ellsworth, *Emotion in the Human Face: Guidelines for Research and an Integration of Findings*, second edition (New York: Cambridge University Press, [1972] 1982); Paul Ekman and Wallace Friesen, *Unmasking the Face: A Guide to Recognizing Emotions from Facial Expressions*, second edition (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, [1975] 1984); Paul Ekman and Wallace Friesen, *The Facial Action Coding System* (Palo Alto, CA: Consulting Psychologists Press, 1978); Paul Ekman and Wallace Friesen, "Felt, False, and Miserable Smiles," *Journal of Nonverbal Behavior* 6.4 (1982): 238–52; Paul Ekman, Wallace Friesen, and Maureen O'Sullivan, "Smiles When Lying," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 54.3 (1988): 414–20; Paul Ekman, "The Argument and Evidence about Universals in Facial Expressions of Emotion," in *Handbook of Social Psychophysiology: The Biological Psychology of Emotions and Social Processes*, edited by Hugh Wagner and Antony Manstead (London: John Wiley, 1989), 143–64; Paul Ekman, Richard J. Davidson, and Wallace V. Friesen, "The Duchenne Smile: Emotional Expression and Brain Physiology II," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 58.2 (1990): 342–53; Paul Ekman, "Strong evidence for universals in facial expressions: A reply to Russell's mistaken critique," *Psychological Bulletin* 115.2 (1994): 268–87. My understanding is that much of this research is currently being reassessed within the field, with the issue of cultural pluralism at the forefront of the debate.

a smile what we wish or need to see. Recognizing our impulse to interpret bodily expressions and their linguistic representations in terms of our basic suppositions or our own expected cultural norms should make us cautious when considering common figurative tropes like the smile from a cross-cultural perspective.<sup>10</sup> Science may provide one way of thinking critically about our cultural norms, but a particular kind of close reading and cross-cultural interpretive practice can also help us to reconsider our norms and expectations.

The smile may be a universal human expression, but its meanings are necessarily socially, culturally, and historically determined to a significant degree. The broader questions posed by the literary and visual representations of the Buddha's smile thus prompt one to situate its study, first and foremost, within a consideration of historical material, including Buddhist and non-Buddhist art and literature, including the Indian epics, poetry, and aesthetic theory, and the extensive nonverbal evidence, that is, the images and figures themselves, while also taking into account both the social and spatial (or architectural) contexts in which people would encounter them. In this essay, I can only begin to gesture toward some of these broader contexts while focusing attention on the specific literary figurations or configurations of the Buddha's smile.

Even when it comes to classical Buddhist literature, many different genres need to be considered. The Buddha's smile is found frequently across a variety of genres, from sūtra and *āgama* literature to *vinaya* and *avadāna* materials, commentaries, and Mahāyāna sūtra literature. These texts are preserved in a variety of classical languages, including Pāli, Sanskrit, Tibetan, Chinese, and others. The commentaries and systematic materials (such as the *abhidharma*) provide another layer of indigenous interpretation, while the narratives, the *avadānas* in particular, may help one to trace an apparent line of development, or at least some type of conceptual trajectory, in the figuration of the Buddha's smile from the mainstream sūtras and *āgamas* to the Mahāyāna sūtra literature. From the limited

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10. See Jonathan Z. Smith, *Relating Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), on morphology as a method of comparison superior to phenomenology (9, 64); and his concept of rectification (197–98, 346).

selection of Buddhist and non-Buddhist texts studied here, the general contours of this trajectory may become apparent. Although the essay will not engage directly with visual representations, due primarily to considerations of length and focus, it is important to recognize that the literary representations are themselves highly visual. We are dealing here primarily with literary representations that have an irreducibly visual dimension, since the smile is itself a form of nonverbal or bodily action, indeed, a gesture. Thus, a theoretical approach informed by considerations of multimodality and figurative behavior may help us to keep in mind that these literary representations always remain connected to broader sociocultural contexts of signification.

The most elaborate forms of the classical narrative depiction of the Buddha's smile, such as one finds in the *avadānas* and Mahāyāna sūtras, also intersect with another common visual trope, representing another nearly universal dimension of human experience: the presence of light. As Matthew Kapstein's edited volume with the same title makes clear, light imagery is widely distributed across the world's religious art and literature.<sup>11</sup> And in our culture, more specifically, all of us have heard metaphors linking the smile to light imagery in such expressions as having a brilliant smile, bright eyes, or a sunny disposition.<sup>12</sup> In the literary depiction of the Buddha's smile, however, multicolored rays of light are said actually

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11. *The Presence of Light: Divine Radiance and Religious Experience*, edited by Matthew Kapstein (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004). For an earlier work looking primarily at an early Christian context, most specifically Augustine, see David Chidester, *Word and Light: Seeing, Hearing, and Religious Discourse* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1992). Chidester discusses light imagery and the phenomenon of synesthesia in poetic depictions of light while exploring the relationship between the verbal and the visual modes of perception and signification.

12. Upon reading LaFrance, *Lip Service*, I was struck by how often the metaphor of the luminous smile arose both in her own discourse and in her citations. Consider, for example, the quote from Thomas Hardy's *Far from the Madding Crowd* on page 4 and the Walter Sisula quote about Nelson Mandela on page 128. One wonders, upon reflection, whether this association between smiling and luminosity has something to do with the optical characteristics of human teeth, which are (often) white and highly reflective [compare "dazzling smile"].

to emanate from his smile, prompting the same range of questions we asked about the smile in general: How do we interpret this radiant smile, this apparent wonder? What was it meant to signify? This more complex “visual metaphor” also provokes the same questions about universality, or, at least, the great span of its distribution across cultures and times. Interpreting the meanings behind the Buddha’s luminous smile thus requires the same careful approach, the same sensitivity to the possibility of historical differences behind apparent similarities; otherwise we might miss or mistake layers of meaning behind the Buddha’s smile.

Still, one of the contentions in this essay is that at least some awareness of modern psychological and anthropological studies of nonverbal bodily gestures like the smile, properly situated in their own historical and cultural context, can expand our interpretive toolbox somewhat, influencing the kind of questions we bring to the specific textual and visual representations under analysis. For instance, psychologists have drawn a distinction between the spontaneous and the volitional smile.<sup>13</sup> The former is generally held to be an expression of positive emotion, such as joy or happiness. It is associated with notions of transparency, genuineness, and trustworthiness. Psychologists further distinguish between the genuine smile and the social smile. The genuine smile involves both the contraction of the zygomaticus major muscle to draw up the sides of the mouth and the *obicularis oculi*, which bunches the skin around the eyes. The former is easy to contract deliberately, while the muscles around the eyes are less voluntary. The tell is thus usually in the eyes. Yet, the smile remains highly context sensitive, and even an obviously spontaneous smile at the wrong time may generate doubts or negative responses from an audience. The volitional or deliberate smile is more enigmatic, perhaps because it is not

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13. See LaFrance, *Lip Service*, especially chapters 1 and 2, as well as some of the publications by Paul Ekman listed in note 9 above. At an advanced stage of editing this essay, I also benefited from reading certain sections of the following textbook for undergraduates: Dale Leathers and Michael H. Eaves, *Successful Nonverbal Communication: Principles and Applications*. 4th ed. (Boston: Pearson, 2008). My thanks to Jackson Miller, Professor of Communication Arts at Linfield University, for introducing this latter work to me.

necessarily linked to a specific emotion. It may reflect an attempt to mask underlying thoughts or emotions behind a veneer of positivity. For this reason, the deliberate smile also carries associations of artifice and social skill. Both types of smile are communicative acts; both signify; both are symbolic; and, like language generally, both send a message that requires interpretation. Which is the Buddha's smile: volitional or spontaneous? Asking such a question of the texts serves at least to highlight the necessarily interpreted nature of all figurative language, including body language. In the same way that everyone must somehow interpret a smile in everyday life based on some kind of awareness of social context and embodied human experience, literary representations of the smile, even (or especially) representations of ones made by such an inscrutable figure as the Buddha, also prompt some kind of explanation.

The smile of the Buddha is undoubtedly recognizable as one of the most evocative images in all Buddhist art and literature, but it is also among the most enigmatic. A cursory search yields many modern interpretations; we typically hear that the Buddha's smile is one of kindness, compassion, peace, composure, true happiness, equanimity, good humor, or wisdom.<sup>14</sup> In this context, modern western interpreters have also referred to Budai or Hotei,

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14. The following examples should suffice for a start: Shen Shi'an, "The Secret of the Buddha's Smile," *TheDailyEnlightenment.com*, published March 14, 2011, <<http://thedailyenlightenment.com/2011/03/the-secret-of-the-buddha%E2%80%99s-smile/>>; Andrew Olendzki, "The Buddha's Smile: Cultivating Equanimity," *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*, Winter 2012, <<https://tricycle.org/magazine/buddhas-smile/>>; Maya Gayatri Stein, *The Buddha Smiles: A Collection of Dharma-toons* (Ashland, OR: White Cloud Press, 1999); Jacquelyn Baas, *Smile of the Buddha: Eastern Philosophy and Western Art from Monet to Today* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005). Of the last two, the former is a collection of modern Buddhist cartoons with little connection to the traditional smile of the Buddha; the latter is a study of the purported influence of Buddhism on western artists of the modern period. It bears almost no direct correlation to the traditional smile of the Buddha, except for an epigraph that references the Flower Sermon, and Robert Thurman's "Foreword," xi-xiv, which briefly discusses the Buddha's radiant smile as it is found in the *Aśokāvadāna*, a work studied and translated by John Strong, *The Legend of King Aśoka* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983). The visual imagery of the Buddha's luminous smile in this narrative work is nearly identical to that found in the *Avadānaśataka*, on which see more below.

the so-called “Laughing Buddha” of the Chinese Buddhist tradition, who is said to be an emanation of the future Buddha, Maitreya; they have also pointed to the Flower Sermon of the Zen tradition, where the Buddha is said to hold up a flower and Mahākāśyapa smiles; they have shown images of kings and buddhas from Gandhāra, Mathura, Cambodia, China, and Japan; some have even connected the Buddha’s smile to the *risus sardonicus*, the *rictus* or facial spasm sometimes seen in the dead!<sup>15</sup>

Noting the connection (or lack thereof) between the textual and visual depictions of the smile in the South Asian traditions, Donald Lopez remarks, “Many texts report that the Buddha smiled on occasion, but it seemed to be a tight-lipped smile, the subtle and enigmatic smile we see in so many statues and paintings.” He continues, “It is noteworthy that we rarely see the Buddha grin, that is, smile in such a way that one could see his perfect teeth, forty teeth, teeth that are even, with no gaps between them, very white.” Lopez then states, “There is an important reason for this,” and he goes on to indicate that traditional Buddhist texts portray the Buddha differently from how he is often depicted in modern sources. Lopez then summarizes the standard trope of the multicolored rays of light emanating from the Buddha’s smile and illuminating the entire cosmos, as it is found in classical Buddhist literature.<sup>16</sup> As

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15. See, for instance, Conrad Hyers, *The Laughing Buddha: Zen and the Comic Spirit* (Wolfeboro, NH: Longwood Academic, 1989), revised and expanded edition of *Zen and the Comic Spirit* (London: Rider, 1974); Peter Fingesten, “The Smile of the Buddha,” *Oriental Art* 14.3 (1968): 176–83; “The Mask and the Smile,” *Marg: A Magazine for the Arts* 27.1 (1973): 5–15; Angus Trumble, *A Brief History of the Smile* (New York: Perseus, 2004), 107–14. In regard to the general scholarly discussion of the smiling (and laughing) buddha(s), see also Michel Clasquin, “Real Buddhas Don’t Laugh: Attitudes toward Humour and Laughter in Ancient India and China,” *Social Identities* 7.1 (2001): 97–116; Karl-Heinz Pohl, “What Is There to Laugh about in Buddhism?” in *Translating Buddhist Chinese: Problems and Prospects*, edited by Konrad Meisig (Weisbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2010), 97–111. The latter focuses on East Asian materials and includes numerous color images depicting smiles.

16. Donald S. Lopez, Jr., *The Scientific Buddha* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012), 42–43. See also Donald S. Lopez, Jr., “Buddha,” in *Critical Terms for the Study of Buddhism*, edited by Donald S. Lopez, Jr. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 28. Here Lopez briefly mentions the Buddha’s smile in the context of discussing the *uṣṇiṣa*.

the appendix to my essay, I have provided for the reader's benefit a new translation of the fifth short story from the *Avadānaśataka*, the "Story of Moon," wherein this luminous smile passage is found in full— it actually makes up the majority of the narrative.

Many questions remain unanswered by Lopez and other scholars who have discussed the Buddha's smile, however.<sup>17</sup> For instance, how do Buddhist texts usually depict the Buddha's smile? Does it always emit light? If, in fact, the Buddha never grins, or smiles widely, or shows his teeth, why not? What sociocultural expectations does the Buddha's smile confirm or challenge? What is the connection between the wondrous, luminous smile, which is actually quite common in Buddhist literature, and the subtle and enigmatic one we find throughout Buddhist art? What does his smile signify to those who witness it in the narratives? How should we go on to interpret its significance within the tradition? How did the Buddhist scholar-monks who wrote the traditional commentaries interpret its meaning? In this essay, I will argue that while the Buddha's smile certainly remains enigmatic and rich in potential meanings, historically speaking, it became a site for his portrayal in classical Indian Buddhist literature as a figure of sovereign power and superhuman knowledge, a literary figuration supported to some degree by traditional readings, but which both challenges and largely evades modern interpreters. Perhaps this is because it is not a "normal" smile, and yet, its "wondrous" or "extraordinary" character really only emerges once we begin to recognize that it occurs within a broader context in which certain sociocultural norms and expectations (about language, non-verbal communication, figurative

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17. Besides Lopez and the brief discussion by Thurman, cited in note 14 above, the literary depiction of the Buddha's smile has also been discussed previously by Paul Mus, "Le sourire d'Angkor: Art, foi et politique bouddhiques sous Jayavarman VII," *Artibus Asiae* 24.3–4 (1961): 363–81, and "Où finit Puruṣa?" In *Mélanges d'indianisme à la mémoire de Louis Renou* (Paris: E. de Boccard, 1968), 539–63; and by John Strong, *Legend of King Aśoka*, and "The Transforming Gift: An Analysis of Devotional Acts of Offering in Buddhist Avadāna Literature," *History of Religions* 18.3 (1979): 221–37. See below for more on Mus and Strong's interpretations of the smile.



behavior, the smile, the Buddha, gender, social status, authority, and so forth) are seemingly already operative.

### **Smiling Buddha, Smiling Arhat, and a Laughing Baby Buddha-to-be**

I will begin with the portrayal of the Buddha's smile and that of his eminent disciple, Maudgalyāyana, in certain passages in Buddhist canonical literature preserved in Pāli and Sanskrit. In these passages, smiling does not initially appear to be connected with light imagery. Furthermore, light imagery can be found apart from any reference to smiling, such as in the *Acchariyabbhutadhamma-sutta* and its parallels, where great light is said to accompany the Buddha's conception and birth.<sup>18</sup> Yet, these passages help to set the basic conditions and contexts for smiling and for the appearance of marvelous light in Buddhist literature; a number of key themes are found in them that recur, albeit with greater or lesser emphasis, when these visual and narrative elements are found in combination.

In several passages in the Pāli suttas, and in parallel passages in the Chinese *āgamas* and other canonical literature, the Buddha smiles. His great disciple and fellow Buddhist "worthy," the arhat Maudgalyāyana (Moggallāna in Pāli), also smiles, and both of them do so in these instances without emitting any rays of light from their mouths.<sup>19</sup> More specifically, the Buddha smiles twice in

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18. *Majjhima-nikāya*, edited by V. Trenckner and R. Chalmers, 4 vols. (London: H. Frowde for the Pali Text Society, [1888–1925] 1991–94), iii.118–24; for translation see Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans., *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha: A New Translation of the Majjhima Nikāya* (Boston: Wisdom, [1995] 2001), 979–84. For parallels and analysis, see Bhikkhu Anālayo, *A Comparative Study of the Majjhima-nikāya*, vol. 2 (Taipei: Dharma Drum Buddhist College, 2011), 702–11. Here and in what follows, Pāli texts are cited according to volume and page number of the Pali Text Society editions, but the text of the citations has been drawn from the Chaṭṭha Saṅgāyana (VRI) electronic edition.

19. *Majjhima-nikāya* ii.45, 74; *Aṅguttara-nikāya*, edited by R. Morris and E. Hardy, 6 vols. (London: Luzac and Company for the Pali Text Society, [1885–1910] 1961–79), iii.214; *Samyutta-nikāya*, edited by M. Leon Feer, 5 vols. (London: H. Frowde for the Pali Text Society, [1884–1904] 1975–99), i.24; for a translation of the latter see Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans., *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Samyutta Nikāya* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2000), 113

the *Majjhima-nikāya*, once in the *Aṅguttara-nikāya*, and once in the *Saṃyutta-nikāya*. Maudgalyāyana also smiles once in the *Saṃyutta-nikāya*. These passages largely parallel one another in the way they introduce the smile. For example, the *Ghaṭṭikāra-sutta* says,

Then at a particular spot beside the main road the Blessed One smiled. It occurred to Ānanda, “What is the reason, what is the cause for the Blessed One’s smile? Not without reason do the Tathāgatas smile.” So, he arranged his upper robe on one shoulder, extended his hands towards the Blessed One, palms together in a gesture of respect, and asked him, “Venerable sir, what is the reason, what is the cause for the Blessed One’s smile? Tathāgatas do not smile without reason.”<sup>20</sup>

The discourse gives little indication as to whether the Buddha’s smile is spontaneous or voluntary. It tells us that smiles have causes, and this suggests deliberation, which would make sense in light of the standard Buddhist theoretical position that intentions precede and condition actions, vocal as well as physical. However, we do

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and 368n78 for Pāli commentary. Moggallāna smiles at *Saṃyutta-nikāya* ii.254; for the translation, see Bodhi, *Connected Discourses*, 700–701 and 815n344, for Pāli commentary. See also *Vinaya Piṭakam*, edited by Hermann Oldenberg, 5 vols. (London: Pali Text Society, [1879–83] 1982–97), iii.105 on Moggallāna’s smile, and *Vinaya Piṭaka* iv.159; *Theragāthā (The Thera- and Therī-gāthā: Stanzas Ascribed to the Elders of the Buddhist Order of Recluses)*, edited by Hermann Oldenberg and Richard Pischel, second edition, with appendices by K.R. Norman and Ludwig Alsdorf (London: Luzac and Company for the Pali Text Society, [1883] 1966), i.630; and *Le Mahāvastu, texte sanscrit publié pour la première fois et accompagné d’introductions et d’un commentaire*, edited by Émile Senart, 3 vols. (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1882), i: 317. For some Chinese parallels to the above, see Anālayo, *A Comparative Study of the Majjhima-nikāya*, vol. 1, 441 and 466.

20. *Majjhima-nikāya* ii.45: *Atha kho bhagavā maggā okkamma aññatarasmiṃ padese sitaṃ pātvākāsi. Atha kho āyasmato ānandassa etadahosi, “ko nu kho hetu, ko paccaya bhagavato sitassa pātukammāya? Na akāraṇena (akāraṇe) tathāgatā sitaṃ pātukarontī” ti. Atha kho āyasmā ānando ekaṃsaṃ cīvaraṃ (uttarāsaṅga) katvā yena bhagavā tenañjaliṃ paṇāmetvā bhagavantaṃ etadavoca, “ko nu kho, bhante, hetu, ko paccayo bhagavato sitassa pātukammāya? Na akāraṇena tathāgatā sitaṃ pātukarontī” ti.*

not know whether the text even conceives a distinction between intentionality and spontaneity in regard to the smile. Nor does the sutta describe the smile in any detail. The audience is left with more questions than answers, and Ānanda ably reflects our doubts when he responds that only the Buddha himself is capable of explaining the reason behind his smile. In this instance, the Buddha responds by telling a story from the distant past about a potter who served as chief attendant to a past buddha at that spot.

In fact, all these discourses portray the smile as a gestural response to particular states of affairs associated with particular locations or interpersonal situations. The Buddha smiles in response to what particular persons did at a particular location in the past, or he smiles about something living beings do in his presence in the present. Maudgalyāyana smiles at something that he sees in the present, but reveals it only in the Buddha's presence. In the *Samyutta-nikāya*, the Buddha's smile throws his authority even more starkly into relief when a host of divinities intent upon finding fault with him come to challenge his integrity and trustworthiness.<sup>21</sup> When the Buddha answers their challenge, the divinities ask for his pardon, and the Buddha responds with a smile, enraging the divinities once again. This seems like a classic example of a smile taken pejoratively as a sign of disrespect. Why does the Buddha smile here? Assuming he does it intentionally, what does he intend by it? I am not asking these questions in relation to, or in search of, a putatively "historical" Buddha behind the texts, but rather I am pointing to the way in which the literary representation of the smile as a nonverbal, bodily act or gesture itself prompts questions about intentionality and meaning.

Similar questions arise in the case of Maudgalyāyana's smile, for he does so upon witnessing a series of horrific images, including the skeleton of a hungry ghost, which appears floating in the air before him. As it hovers there crying in pain, vultures, crows, and other birds of prey dive and peck at its body, stabbing it between the ribs and pulling its body apart. It is a terrifying scene, and we

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21. These are the so-called *ujjhānasaññika* deities; that is, apparently they are "easily irritated."

might rightfully ask, just as the Pāli commentary does, why did Maudgalyāyana smile at such a scene? What was he thinking or feeling? What did he intend the gesture to convey? These are interpretive questions seemingly anyone reading or hearing the stories must try to answer—that is, unless the smile were simply to remain inscrutable—and the Buddhist commentarial literature likewise addresses such questions to some extent.

Even the suttas themselves address such questions, though perhaps not so directly. The three instances in which the Buddha smiles in the *Majjhima-nikāya* and *Āṅguttara-nikāya* introduce *jātaka* stories, and the Buddha's smile becomes an occasion for him to tell stories of the past. These episodes are comparable to many of the instances in which the Buddha smiles in the Buddhist *avadāna* literature. The Pāli commentaries then try to formalize the intention or mental state that results in the smile.<sup>22</sup> In regard to the *Ghaṭṭikāra-sutta*, for instance, the commentator informs us that the Buddha contemplated a particular spot on the ground and became aware of the fact that he had been a particular monk named Jotipāla during the dispensation of the Buddha Kāśyapa. Ostensibly, this thought of the past is the reason for the smile, but does he smile because he feels happy, as the Pāli commentaries at times suggest,<sup>23</sup> or because he intends to tell stories of the past, as the Pāli commentaries also suggest,<sup>24</sup> or for a combination of reasons?

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22. In what seems to be a similar impetus, the Pāli Abhidhamma tradition also tries to formalize his mental state by including *hasita*, “smiling,” or *hasituppāda*, “the arising of the smile,” in a list of mental states. For more on this, see the *Abhidhammatthasangaha*, referenced in note 35 below.

23. *Papañcasūdanī of Buddhaghosa*, edited by J.H. Woods, D. Kosambi, and I.B. Horner, 5 vols. (London: Pali Text Society, 1922–38), iii.279: *Imasmim̐ pana ṭhāne kiriyāhetukamanoviññāṇadhātusomanassasahagatacittam̐ bhagavato haṭṭhapahaṭṭhākāramattam̐ hasitam̐ uppādesi*. My translation: “In this case, the Blessed One produced a smile that is a mental state accompanied by joy, [arising within] the sphere of mental cognition, and not rooted with a cause [and thus it] is nothing more than a sign of joy and happiness.”

24. *Papañcasūdanī* iii.309: *Sitam̐ pātvākāsīti sāyanhasamaye vihāracārikam̐ caramāno ramaṇiyam̐ bhūmibhāgam̐ disvā—“vasitapubbam̐ nu kho me imasmim̐ okāse” ti āvajjanto—“pubbe aham̐ maghadevo nāma rājā hutvā imam̐ ambavanam̐ ropesim̐, ettheva pabbajitvā cattāro brahmavihāre bhāvetvā brahmaloke nibbattim̐.*

From the standpoint of a contemporary reader looking at how traditional Buddhists may have tried to interpret the Buddha's act of smiling, such questions and explanations might seem perfectly plausible, even commonsensical, but what is perhaps most interesting to note here is the way that the commentators, in providing such explanations, appeal to specific contexts or even specific emotional states, for lack of a better term, to explain the reasons behind the smile. In other words, it is clear that the commentators treat the smiling Buddha or arhat as an "intentional" agent acting in something like a "real-world" performative context. He is interpreted as performing a recognizable nonverbal, bodily action, an action that is still somehow understandable as such, and therefore calls for explanation or interpretation, which the commentators themselves seek to provide. This is not to say that the Buddha is treated as an "historical" figure, but that he enters the audience's world of meaning, the world constructed by the narrative, as a "real-life" figure, and his actions, especially in this case, his nonverbal gestures, also require something from "us" as audience, interpreters, or readers. In this way, we find ourselves on similar hermeneutical ground to that of the traditional commentators, even as we ask the slightly different question of how the smile functions in Buddhist literature as a literary trope.

In this respect, the commentaries also indicate another, somewhat different layer of meaning, which connects to the other two instances in the *Samyutta-nikāya* in which the Buddha and Maudgalyāyana smile; we might call this a "symbolic" explanation (with a nod to the epigraph by Wittgenstein), though it is not basically different in kind from the other "sociocultural" explanations considered so far, at least insofar as the smile remains a nonverbal,

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*Taṃ kho panetaṃ kāraṇaṃ bhikkhusaṅghassa apākaṭaṃ, pākaṭaṃ karissāmī" ti aggaḅḅadante dassento sītaṃ pātu akāsi.* My translation: "He displayed a smile, that is, in the evening time, while walking to the monastery he saw a particular spot of ground that delighted him, and he reflected, 'In a past life I appeared in this place. Previously I was a king named Maghadeva, and I graced this mango grove. Then I renounced the world, cultivated the four heavenly states and was reborn in the Brahmā world. Now, this deed is not apparent to the community of monks. So, I will make it apparent to them.' And with that he smiled, displaying the tips of his teeth."

bodily action requiring some kind of interpretation or explanation to fix its meaning. In all these episodes, the smile serves to indicate the Buddha's power, knowledge, authority, and trustworthiness. This interpretation is evident in the story of the divinities who visit the Buddha intent upon finding fault with him, where the Pāli commentary raises the issue explicitly in contrast to the ostensibly commonplace interpretation of the smile as a sign of happiness:

“He displayed a smile” means that he showed the tips of his teeth and displayed a sign of happiness. Why? Those divinities did not seek pardon in accordance with his nature, and instead they acted as if there were no difference between common people and the Tathāgata, the supreme person in the world, even with its divinities. So, the Blessed One thought, “When discussion arises about this, I will display the power of a buddha and afterwards I will pardon them.” With that, he displayed a smile.<sup>25</sup>

Here, the commentary asks why the Buddha should feel happy about the behavior of divinities who are intent upon finding fault with him, and the commentator depicts the Buddha as intending to establish his power and status as the Supreme Being in the universe. Moreover, the content of the dialogue in the sutta already seems to support this interpretation by characterizing the Buddha as someone without fault, who practices what he preaches, and vice-versa, further instantiating his authority.

The episode in which Maudgalyāyana smiles also emphasizes the Buddha's trustworthiness and power. Maudgalyāyana smiles at a horrific scene of suffering, but the scene remains imperceptible to his companion, since he has not achieved sufficient superhuman

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25. *Sāratthapakāsinī*, edited by F.L. Woodward, 3 vols. (London: Pali Text Society, 1929–37), i.65–66: *Sitaṃ pātvākāsīti aggadante dassento pahaṭṭhākāraṃ dassesi. Kasmā? Tā kira devatā na sabhāvena khamāpenti, lokiyamahājanañca sadevake loke aggapuggalaṃ tathāgatañca ekasadisamaṃ karonti. Atha bhagavā “parato kathāya uppannāya buddhabalaṃ dīpetvā pacchā khamissāmi” ti sitaṃ pātvākāsī.* For an alternate translation of this passage, see Bodhi, *Connected Discourses*, 368.

power to see it. The commentary again raises an interesting question about Maudgalyāyana's actions and intentions:

Seeing such a being's existence ought to generate feelings of compassion. So why does the Elder smile? He does so because he calls to mind his own attainment and the Buddha's attainment of knowledge. Seeing it, the Elder calls to mind his own attainment, thinking, "I am free from such an existence. . ." and "See the Blessed Buddha's attainment of knowledge! He teaches the dharma, saying, 'You should not consider that the fruit of this action, monks, is unknowable.' The buddhas teach the dharma according to their own direct perception of it, having thoroughly penetrated the realm of dharma of the buddhas." In this way, calling to mind the buddhas' attainment of knowledge, he displayed a smile.<sup>26</sup>

Several points are noteworthy. First, it is interesting that the commentator does not directly associate smiling with feelings of compassion. Instead, the smile again gestures towards the attainment of liberation, both Maudgalyāyana's and the Buddha's, and the power and knowledge that accompany it. In the discourse itself, Maudgalyāyana explains his smile as a response to seeing the horrific scene, but the commentary explains that the intention behind the smile is to draw attention to the Buddha's power, authority, and trustworthiness. For Maudgalyāyana only describes the scene in the Buddha's presence, and the Buddha responds by

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26. *Sāratthapakāsinī* ii.216: *Evarūpaṃ pana attabhāvaṃ divvā kāruṇṇe kattabbe kasmā sitaṃ pātvākāsīti? Attano ca buddhañāṇassa ca sampattiṃ samanussaraṇato. Tañhi divvā therō "adiṭṭhasaccena nāma puggalena paṭilabhitabbā evarūpā attabhāvā mutto ahaṃ, lābhā vata me, suladdhaṃ vata me" ti attano ca sampattiṃ anussarivā—"aho buddhassa bhagavato ñāṇasampatti, 'yo kammavipāko, bhikkhave, acinteyyo na cintetabbo' ti desesi, paccakkhaṃ vata katvā buddhā desenti, suppaṭividdhā buddhānaṃ dhammadhātū" ti evaṃ buddhañāṇasampattiṃca anussarivā sitaṃ pātvākāsīti.* For a paraphrase of this passage, see Bodhi, *Connected Discourses*, 815.

noting that he, too, sees such scenes, but does not speak of them. Thus, the episode works to corroborate the Buddha's own knowledge and vision. Similarly, in the three past-life stories, the smile offers an indirect way for the Buddha to display his extraordinary ability to recall his past lives and then express that knowledge in the form of an instructional tale.

We can see that both the commentaries and the narratives themselves formulate explanations for the Buddha's smile, both relying upon culturally available explanations of the smile while maybe also beginning to challenge such explanations, indicating that the Buddha's smile might in some ways be a special case, requiring a different explanation, one associated with the special significance of the Buddha's actions. While the theme of authority and power associated with the smile would seem to intersect well with the *Acchariyabbhutatthama-sutta*, the discourse on the wondrous and unprecedented qualities of the Buddha—where major events in his life, such as his conception and birth, are depicted as being accompanied by the presence of light, a wonder which also testifies to his status—we can also find these same connections represented across different Buddhist literary traditions in different ways. For instance, they are apparent, perhaps even more explicitly, in two passages from the *Mahāvastu* that depict the baby Buddha-to-be as laughing just after his birth: firstly, in the story of the past Buddha Dīpaṅkara, and then in regard to the Buddha's own birth. The newborn baby Buddha-to-be “takes seven steps, surveys the ten directions, and makes a great laugh” (*mahāhāsa*).<sup>27</sup> Laughing and smiling are apparently connected behaviors, both in modern psychological literature and also from the sociocultural standpoint of traditional Indian aesthetic theory, as we will see. The laugh is portrayed as a more intense (and less inhibited) form of the same kind of bodily gesture or expression as the smile, and it expresses the same range of basic impulses and emotions, but here the passages in which this particular laugh occurs explicitly connect it to the Buddha's superhuman

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27. *Mahāvastu*, i: 219–20; ii: 20: *jātamātro ca vikrame sapta vikramate bhūvi / diśāṃ ca praviloketi mahāhāsaṃ ca ūhati*. See also J. J. Jones, trans., *The Mahāvastu*, 3 vols. (London: Luzac, 1949–56), vol. 1, 174; vol. 2, 18–19.



knowledge and his own special status. Here is how the *Mahāvastu* explains the Buddha Dīpaṃkara’s laugh:

Right after he was born, the thought occurred to the very best of speakers: “Is there anyone who is my equal in intelligence?” In order to resolve this doubt—and thinking, “Is there anyone who is tormented by the snares of samsara?”—the Sun among men (*puruṣāditya*) surveys all directions. Then, the best of speakers, while surveying the ten directions, sees the hundreds of thousands of deities, and that is why he laughs. And right after his birth, the deities who have embodied Māra say, “You will be a wheel-turning king possessing great sovereignty (*mahākośa*, lit. “great wealth”) over the four continents.” And then he laughs at that, and says, “You do not know my nature. I will become all-knowing and all-seeing, the supreme one among men.”<sup>28</sup>

Although no light issues from the Buddha’s mouth on this occasion, the broader context abounds in light imagery—the context of the Buddha’s birth is one that the Pāli sources also connect with light imagery<sup>29</sup>—and much of what we will find in the narrative trope of the luminous smile is prefigured in this passage from the *Mahāvastu*. At the same time, it clearly echoes a discussion similar to the one surrounding the Buddha’s smile that we have been observing in the Pāli suttas, by connecting it to a broader Buddhist discourse about the Buddha’s superhuman knowledge and his preeminent status as

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28. *Mahāvastu* i: 219–20: *jātamātrasya taccittam abhūtpavaravādino | asti kaścitsamabuddhi me cetaṃ tarkaṃ nivaritum || kecitsaṃsarapāśena arttīyante yathā ahaṃ | ityarthaṃ puruṣādityo diśāṃ sarvāṃ nirīkṣati || atha diśā vilokento paśyati vadatāṃ varo | devakoṭisahasrāṇi tasmāt hāsaṃ pramuṃcati || taṃ jātamātramityāhu devatā mārakāyikā | cāturdvīpo mahākośo cakravartī bhaviṣyasi || athāsya hāso saṃbhavati na mama satvābhijānatha | sarvajño sarvadarśī ca bhaviṣyaṃ puruṣottamaḥ*. See also Jones, trans., *The Mahāvastu*, vol. 1, 174–75.

29. The paradigmatic example of this connection is seen in the *Acchariyabbhuta-dhamma-sutta*, the reference for which is given in note 18 above.

a spiritual sovereign. As we will see, it is also probably no accident that the Buddha is compared to the sun in this passage.

## Smiling Buddhas in Sociocultural Context

When the Buddha or another Buddhist worthy smiles, he (or she?) makes a gesture with various social and cultural meanings attached to it. If we are to place the trope within its own historical context, we also need to understand the broader meanings of the smile in classical Indian culture: what connotations are commonly associated with the smile in secular and non-Buddhist Indian literature and culture, how these meanings change according to context or over time; whether Brahmins typically smile, or kings, women, queens, and goddesses—for instance, do Rāma or Kṛṣṇa smile?<sup>30</sup> Do Śiva or Pārvatī?<sup>31</sup> Does Mahāvīra ever smile? While pursuing such questions would detain us from the specific focus of this essay, even some preliminary answers would be helpful for gaining a fuller sociohistorical understanding of the literary and visual trope of the Buddha's smile.

One source for gaining a sense for this broader context is Indian aesthetic theory. The *Nāṭyaśāstra* offers theoretical reflections upon and prescriptions for classical Indian theatre, music,

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30. A comprehensive survey of the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata*, together with the *Harivaṃśa*, would likely yield much interesting data on this question. For a related discussion, see Lee Siegel, *Laughing Matters: Comic Tradition in India* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), especially in this regard chapter 8, "The Laughter of Kṛṣṇa," 341ff.

31. A brief perusal of Kālidāsa's *Kumārasaṃbhavam*, chosen more or less at random, revealed that Pārvatī smiles on three occasions (references to chapter and verse: 1.44, 5.20, 8.80) and laughs once silently to herself (7.95); Kāma smiles once (4.23); noble people smile from ear to ear in mockery of Pārvatī (5.70); Śiva smiles five times (5.84, 6.25, 7.46–47, 8.3, 8.50), two of which may show a possible connection to light imagery, which is also prevalent throughout the play (2.2, 2.19–20, 2.58, 6.3–4, 6.7, 6.49, 6.60); at 8.60, Śiva compares the soft light that precedes the rising of the moon in the east to a smile. For a bilingual Sanskrit edition with English translation, see David Smith, trans., *The Birth of Kumāra by Kalidasa* (New York: Clay Sanskrit Library, 2005). For another English translation of the same, see Hank Heifetz, trans., *The Origin of the Young God: Kalidāsa's Kumārasaṃbhava* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1990).

dance, as well as literature and poetics. Figurative behavior includes both gestural representations and figurative art, and Leroi-Gourhan notes the hazy boundaries in traditional culture between dramatic and ritual performances and other social contexts for figurative behavior.<sup>32</sup> Drama/ritual and art/literature both draw upon a common palette of figurative representations and conceptions. Of course, theoretical reflection is one thing and actual creative practice in art, literature, poetry, and drama is something else. Yet, the *Nāṭyaśāstra* can give us a more or less systematic perspective on the questions raised above.

The text offers a fairly detailed typology of the smile under the context of discussing the emotional aesthetic of the comic or *hāsya rasa*. The aesthetic theory contained in this text and its commentaries proposes various basic physiological feeling states (*bhāva*) associated with each kind of aesthetic experience or cultivated emotion (*rasa*) and the determining factors (*vibhāva*) that generate an enduring state of emotion. The text also classifies the eight aesthetic principles as primary or secondary, with the latter derived from the former. In this way, the comic is secondary and derived from the primary aesthetic of the erotic (*śṛṅgāra*) as a sort of imitation or mimicry (*anukṛti*) of it. Although the smiling face and sweet words are also associated with love, the *Nāṭyaśāstra* primarily associates smiling with the comic aesthetic.

The comic aesthetic arises from the enduring emotional state of laughter or amusement (*hāsa*) and from a variety of determining factors (*vibhāva*), such as the display of improper or unusual attire or ornamentation, uncouth or odd behavior or words, displays of greed or quarrelling, the mention of faults, and so forth. The text tells us it is mostly associated with women and persons of a lower social standing, but also lists six varieties of expressing the sentiment, and these varieties imply a broader range of social context and status for the smile. To quote the text:

The six types are the slight smile (*smita*), the fuller smile (*hasita*), gentle laughter (*vihasita*), ridiculing

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32. Leroi-Gourhan, *Gesture and Speech*, 273 and 363ff.

laughter (*upahasita*), vulgar laughter (*apahasita*) and excessive laughter (*atihāsita*). Two by two, they are associated with superior (*uttama*), middling (*madhyama*) and lower types (*adhamaprakṛta*) of person, respectively. The slight and fuller smiles are associated with superior persons, gentle and ridiculing laughter with middling persons, and vulgar and excessive laughter with lower types.<sup>33</sup>

The specific language here is noteworthy in that the names of the first two types of smile, *smita* and *hasita*, are the terms primarily found in Buddhist literature when referring to the Buddha's smile. In describing these first two expressions, the *Nāṭyaśāstra* provides further detail:

The slight smile (*smita*) of superior persons should be steady, accompanied with slight puffing of the cheeks and sidelong glances as suitable, and the teeth should not be visible. The fuller smile (*hasita*) may be distinguished by the broadening of the face and eyes, the puffing of the cheeks and the teeth are slightly visible.<sup>34</sup>

From the descriptions, the other types of smile become progressively more and more expressive, with the vulgar and excessive forms of laughter characterized by loud guffaws, tears, violent shaking of the head and shoulders, and holding the sides. Yet, the descriptions of

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33. *Nāṭyaśāstra of Śrī Bharata Muni*, edited by Pārasanātha Dvivedī, vol. 2 (Varanasi: Sampurnanand Sanskrit University Press, 1996), 164–65: . . . *ṣaḍbhedāścāsya vijñeyāstāmśca vakṣyāmyahaṃ punaḥ || smitam atha hasitam vihasitam upahasitam cāpahasitam atihāsitam | dvau dvau bhedau syātāmuttamamādhya-mādhma-prakṛtau || tatra | smitahasito jyeṣṭhānām madhyānām vihasitopahasite ca | adhamānāmapahasitam hyatihāsitam cāpi vijñeyam*. My translation here and in what follows modifies what is found in Manomohan Ghosh, trans., *The Nāṭyaśāstra: A Treatise on Hindu Dramaturgy and Histrionics*, vol. 1 (Calcutta: Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1951), 110 and following.

34. *Nāṭyaśāstra*, 166: *iṣadvikasitairgaṇḍaiḥ kaṭākṣaiḥ sauṣṭhānavitaiḥ | alakṣitadvijam dhīramuttamānām smitam bhavet || utphullānananetraṃ tu gaṇḍairvikasitairatha | kiñcillakṣitadantaṃ ca hasitam tadvidhiyate*.

the first two types of smile parallel those found in the Pāli commentaries to a rather striking degree.<sup>35</sup>

The Pāli commentaries also distinguish between the smile of the Buddha and those of common people. Commenting upon the Buddha's smile in the *Ghaṭṭikāra-sutta*, the commentator says, "The Buddha smiled a slight smile showing the points of the teeth. For, while common people beat their chests and laugh, 'Kuhān kuhā,' the buddhas do not act in that way."<sup>36</sup> The *Critical Pāli Dictionary* cites this last sentence in its entry on the expression, *kahaṃ-kahaṃ*, also citing Bollée's edition of Bhadrabāhu's Prakrit dictionary, the *Bṛhatkalpaniryukti*, which defines the expression as onomatopoeia for the sound of laughter and notes that it refers to excessive laughter from an open mouth.<sup>37</sup> A short passage from the *Āṅguttara-nikāya* makes a similar distinction:

Monks, in the discipline of the Noble One, singing is wailing. In the discipline of the Noble One, dancing is madness. In the discipline of the Noble One, to laugh

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35. I am not the first to note a connection between classification of the smile in the *Nāṭyaśāstra* and Buddhist systematic discourses. See also Shwe Zan Aung, trans., *Compendium of Philosophy, Being a Translation Now Made for the First Time from the Original Pali of the Abhidhammattha-Sangaha*, edited by C.A.F. Rhys Davids (London: Henry Frowde for the Pali Text Society, 1910), 22–25. Aung cites no Buddhist sources and does not name the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, but provides the same typology and claims it is found in Buddhist texts before pointing out that *hasita* is one of a variety of mental factors incorporated into the Pāli Abhidhamma system, such as the *Abhidhammatthasangaha* translated by him. See also Hyers, *Laughing Buddha*, 16–17 and 33. For Indian sources on the Buddha's smile or laughter, Hyers cites only the above passage by Aung and identifies the *Nāṭyaśāstra* as a source for the typology. Hyers is then cited by Clasquin, "Real Buddhas Don't Laugh," 98, and by Pohl, "What Is There to Laugh about?" 97, who also cites the latter. Clasquin himself also draws significantly upon Siegel, *Laughing Matters*, for his discussion of Indian sources.

36. *Papañcasūdanī* iii.279: *Aggaggadante dassetvā mandahasitaṃ hasi. Yathā hi lokiyamanussā uraṃ paharantā kuhaṃ kuhan ti hasanti, na evaṃ buddhā. Buddhānaṃ pana hasitaṃ haṭṭhapahaṭṭhākāramattameva hoti.*

37. *A Critical Pāli Dictionary Online* (Cologne: Data Center for the Humanities at the University of Cologne in cooperation with the Pali Text Society), <<https://cpd.uni-koeln.de/>>; Bhadrabāhu *Bṛhat-kalpa-niryukti and Sanghadāsa Bṛhat-kalpa-bhāṣya*, edited by Willem B. Bollée, vol. 3 (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1998), 65.

excessively while showing one's teeth is childishness. Therefore, monks, with regard to singing, destroy the bridge; and with regard to dancing, destroy the bridge. When you smile, mindfully rejoicing in the dharma, it is sufficient simply to show a slight smile.<sup>38</sup>

A proper description of the social and cultural context for the Buddha's smile requires a fuller treatment of a much broader range of materials than has been possible here. More classical religious and secular literature would also need to be consulted, including ritual works, *brāhmaṇas*, epics, *purāṇas*, *kāvyas*, dramatic works, *śāstras*, as well as Jain religious literature. However, the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, when taken together with a few remarks from the Pāli commentaries and the passage from the *Aṅguttara-nikāya*, suggests that the Buddha conveyed an elevated social status with his smile.

Turning now to the narrative trope of the illuminating smile, we will see the theme of the Buddha's special status remain in the foreground.

### The Majestic and Illuminating Smile of the Buddha

Paul Mus, who did some of the most provocative and creative work on the Buddha's illuminating smile, sought to connect it to the famous Vedic hymn of the cosmic person.<sup>39</sup> According to Mus, the Buddhist adaptation of the hymn places the Buddha at the head of the cosmic hierarchy, simultaneously emphasizing not only his bodily extension throughout the universe, but also that of his philosophical vision of no-self and sameness in emptiness. Building on Mus's work, John Strong also interprets the Buddha's smile as a narrative trope about cosmic power and preeminence, and notes how "the rays which

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38. *Aṅguttara-nikāya* i.260–61: *Ruṇṇamidam, bhikkhave, ariyassa vinaye yadidaṃ gītaṃ. Ummattakamidam, bhikkhave, ariyassa vinaye yadidaṃ naccaṃ. Komāarakamidam, bhikkhave, ariyassa vinaye yadidaṃ ativelaṃ dantavidamaṣakahasitaṃ [dantavidamaṣakaṃ hasitaṃ (sī. pī.)]. Tasmātiha, bhikkhave, setughāto gīte, setughāto nacce, alaṃ vo dhammappamoditānaṃ sataṃ sitamattāyā ti.*

39. Mus, "Le sourire d'Angkor;" "Où finit Puruṣa?"

emanate from the Buddha's mouth are visible manifestations of the Buddha's Word—his teachings, his Dharma."<sup>40</sup> Both Mus and Strong seem correct to connect the Buddha's luminous smile to broader Indian discourse, but neither traces the specific network of associations whereby the Buddha's smile comes to be connected with light imagery. Doing so strengthens the argument that the Buddha's smile became a site for his portrayal as a superhuman being of majestic power and knowledge, and prompts the question of how the ubiquitous narrative trope of the Buddha's luminous smile might connect to the visual images and material figurations of the smiling Buddha.

The earliest Indian text I know that depicts a smile emitting rays of light is the *Pravargya Brāhmaṇa* of the *Taittirīya Āraṇyaka*, which has been studied and translated by Jan Houben.<sup>41</sup> As the background myth for the rite is being told, we learn that a figure named Makha had succeeded in acquired glory (*yaśas*). What happens next is not found in the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*'s version of the story. Makha thinks to himself, "I am one, and though they are many, they cannot overpower me" (*ekaṃ mā santaṃ bahavo nābhyadharsīsur iti*), and "he smiled" (*so 'smayata*). As he smiles, his fiery energy (*tejas*) escapes from his mouth, and this makes him vulnerable to the gods. Ants chew through his bowstring while he is leaning against his bow, and it snaps up and decapitates him. The episode concludes with the instruction: "Therefore, an initiate should smile with his mouth closed in order to hold onto his *tejas* (*tasmād dikṣitenāpigṛhya smetavyam tejaso dhrtyai*)."<sup>42</sup> Though Houben understands *apigṛhya* to mean that the mouth is covered, the term may well indicate a tight-lipped smile.

While no one has connected the above passage to the luminous smile of the Buddha, so far as I know, Jan Gonda has described the Vedic rite it mentions as "a tool to confer a share of the sun's glow upon the sacrificer."<sup>43</sup> In this way, connecting the *Pravargya*

40. Strong, *Legend of King Aśoka*, 59ff; "The Transforming Gift."

41. My thanks to Joseph Walser, who first brought this text to my attention and offered other support for this research project at an early stage of its conception.

42. Jan Houben, *The Pravargya Brāhmaṇa of the Taittirīya Āraṇyaka* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1991), 46.

43. Jan Gonda, *Die Religionen Indiens 1: Veda und älterer Hinduismus* (Stuttgart:

*Brāhmaṇa* passage to the figuration of the Buddha leads into a topic once hotly debated in Buddhist studies: the apparent link between the legend of the Buddha and Indian solar mythology, a thesis first proffered by Émile Senart in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and subsequently criticized by Heinrich Kern and others.<sup>44</sup> Some time ago, Gonda explored light motifs in ancient Indian religious literature, including some Buddhist texts, and connected such imagery to the portrayal of divine status and inspired, extraordinary knowledge.<sup>45</sup> More recently, however, Theodore Proferes has carefully shown how the sun, light, and fire, and also water, all form a set of interlinking motifs that express sovereign power in earlier Vedic discourse, and he shows how this paradigm became universalized and then spiritualized in the *Upaniṣads*.<sup>46</sup> David Gordon White has also explored some of the broader linkages with respect to the development of yogic powers.<sup>47</sup> These connections deserve to be explored in greater detail than is possible here, but the main point to be kept in mind for our purposes is that even the specific connection between smiling and luminosity evokes a much broader Indian discourse on power and sovereignty.

We are now in a position to consider the classic trope of the luminous smile of the Buddha, as found more than a dozen times in

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W. Kohlhammer, 1960), 153.

44. Émile Senart, *Essai sur la légende du Buddha*, second edition (Paris: Ernest Leroux, 1882). Heinrich Kern, *Der Buddhismus und seine Geschichte in Indien* (Leipzig: Otto Schulze, 1882); Heinrich Kern, *Histoire du Bouddhisme dans l'Inde*, 2 vols. (Paris: Ernest Leroux, 1901–3).

45. Jan Gonda, *The Vision of the Vedic Poets* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1963), 266–75. Besides the general metaphor of light as knowledge, the specific description of the poet as “bearing light in the mouth” (*bibhrato jyotir āsā*) cited from the tenth book of the Ṛg Veda, is interesting to consider in the present context (272). It also indicates the transmodal metaphor of light as inspired word or speech. On the “symbolic synesthesia” of seeing sounds and hearing colors, see Chidester, *Word and Light*, 14ff.

46. Theodore Proferes, *Vedic Ideals of Sovereignty and the Poetics of Power* (New Haven: American Oriental Society, 2007). My thanks again to Joseph Walser for first bringing Proferes’s work to my attention in 2010.

47. David Gordon White, *Sinister Yogis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 177ff.



nearly identical form in a variety of narratives in the *Avadānaśataka* and the *Divyāvadāna*, two collections of Buddhist narratives commonly associated with the Sarvāstivāda tradition.<sup>48</sup> To set the narrative context, the smile in these texts is closely associated with the Buddha's ability to predict the future and to perceive and validate a person's destiny. However, the Buddha's smile is revelatory in more ways than one, for the multicolored rays of light emanating from it also illuminate the entire cosmos, including the various hells and heavenly realms, bathing the whole world in a simultaneously soothing and enlightening glow. This light alleviates the sufferings of hell-beings, and transforms into magical images of the Buddha. Hell-beings understand him to be the source of the light, and are able to direct their faith towards him. In the heavenly realms, the light resounds with verbal teachings about impermanence, suffering, emptiness and no-self, reminding the deities of their own underlying existential status. After illuminating the cosmos in this way, the multicolored light rays form a nimbus behind the Buddha before they disappear into different parts of his body, depending on the specific type of prediction he wants to give.

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48. On the school affiliation of these narrative collections, see Jens-Uwe Hartmann, "Zur Frage der Schulzugehörigkeit des Avadānaśataka," in *Zur Schulzugehörigkeit von Werken der Hinayāna-Literatur, Erster Teil*, edited by Heinz Bechert (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1985), 219–24; E. J. Thomas, "Avadāna and Apadāna," *Indian Historical Quarterly* 9 (1933): 32–36. Also for the record, the Pāli commentaries know the trope of the Buddha's luminous smile. Consider the following passage from the commentary on the *Ghaṭikārasutta* (*Papañcasūdanī* iii.278): *Taṃ panetaṃ hasitaṃ evaṃ appamattakampi therassa pākaṭaṃ ahoṣi. Kathaṃ? Tathārūpe hi kāle tathāgatassa catūhi dāṭhāhi catuddīpikamahāmeghamukhato sateratāvijjulātā viya virocāmānā mahātālakkhandhapamāṇā rasmivaṭṭiyo uṭṭhahitvā tikkhattuṃ sisavaraṃ padakkhiṇaṃ katvā dāṭhaggesuyeva antaradhāyanti. Tena saññānena āyasmā ānando bhagavato pacchato gacchamānopi sitapātubhāvaṃ jānāti.* My translation: "Moreover, the smile apparent to the Elder was really quite small in measure. How so? The reason is that, at such times, bands of splendid rays of light issue like bolts of lightning from his four canines and from the Tathāgata's mouth, like a great cloud covering the four continents. These light rays extend as far in length as the trunk of a mighty palm tree, encircle the Buddha's noble head three times and then disappear upon the points (*agga*) of his canine teeth. With this sign, the venerable Ānanda recognizes the appearance of a smile even when he is going along behind the Blessed One."

This is a complex image and I cannot do full justice to it here. Besides referring the reader to the translation in the appendix of the fifth story of the *Avadānaśataka*, where this luminous smile passage appears in full, a few points will have to suffice. First, as mentioned previously by Mus, the specific colors of light in the passage—blue, yellow, red, and white—correspond, according to the *Abhidharmakośa*, to the four great elements.<sup>49</sup> So, in much the same way that the Buddha demonstrates his sovereign power over the forces of nature when he performs the Twin Miracle by transforming his body progressively into fire and water, the luminous smile demonstrates his ability to manipulate the basic material elements: in this case, by reducing the cosmos to light, or at least by illustrating the fundamental homology between light and the basic constituents of reality. In both cases, that of the Twin Miracle and the luminous smile, Proferes's analysis can help to clarify the connection with a broader Indian poetics of power in which light, fire, and water all come to symbolize sovereignty. As we will see below, when we turn to the figuration of the Buddha's smile in certain Mahāyāna sūtras, this same theme of sovereignty is also involved in the ability

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49. Mus, "Le sourire d'Angkor," 369; see also Louis de La Vallée Poussin, trans., *L'Abhidharmakośa de Vasubandhu*, vol. 1 (Paris: Paul Geuthner, and Louvain: J.-B. Ista, 1923), 16. Mus suggests that the breakdown into basic colors, corresponding to an almost atomic level of reality—what he calls a "spectral analysis"—supports the notion that everything is empty, a theme then developed in the Mahāyāna sūtras. Beyond this interpretation, however, it is possible to find other associations between these four "basic" colors and various states of affairs in the cosmos. For instance, one might consider the association in the *Mahābhārata* between the four colors and the four "cosmic ages" (book 3, chapter 148, verses 5–37) and the "four" *varṇas* or "castes" (book 12, chapter 181, verses 5ff). Although some of the specific terms for the colors vary therein—we find *sita* (instead of *avadāta*) for "white," and *asita* (instead of *nīla*) for "dark blue" or "black"—there seems to be a broader "pan-Indian" association between color and reality that is worth exploring in more detail. I have consulted the relevant Sanskrit passages in the electronic text of the *Mahābhārata* (Pune, India: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1999), <<https://bombay.indology.info/>>. For English translations, see J.A.B. van Buitenen, trans., *The Mahābhārata: 2. The Book of the Assembly Hall; 3. The Book of the Forest*, vol. 2 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), 504–6, and Kisari Mohan Ganguli, trans., *The Mahabharata: Ānti Parva*, vol. 2 (Calcutta: Bhārata Press, 1891), 47–49. (Some older editions of the latter erroneously name Pratap Chandra Roy as the translator.)

of the Buddha to multiply his body—being one, he becomes many; being many, he becomes one—this notion of multiplying buddha-bodies, incidentally, may parallel certain developments in Medieval European political theology detailed by Ernst Kantorowicz.<sup>50</sup> Again, this final point deserves a separate and extended treatment, but here we can simply emphasize the way a variety of narrative images and tropes (light, smiling, fire, water, multiple bodies) begin to coalesce into a clear statement within a broader discourse on power and sovereignty.

In a “Buddhalogical” context; that is, in the context of specific Buddhist reflection on the nature of a buddha, while earlier iterations of the Buddha’s smile highlight the temporal connection to the buddhas of the past, the miracle of multiplication, that is, the miracle of multiplying the body, adds a spatial dimension to the connection between buddhas. These connected narrative tropes thus work to emphasize the Buddha as a unique kind of being whose supreme sovereignty is unparalleled, except by other buddhas, and may indicate a trajectory in the conception of the Buddha as an underlying metaphysical reality encompassing but ultimately transcending material reality. Another recurring theme in this broader discourse of sovereignty is the connection or homology between light and knowledge, with the former sometimes also portrayed as an outpouring of compassionate wisdom or a demonstration of omniscience.<sup>51</sup> In the standard trope of the luminous smile, the Buddha demonstrates his sovereign power insofar as the rays of light emanate from his mouth, fill the entire cosmos, and then return to him and are reabsorbed within his body. So, unlike the figure of Makha in the *Pravargya Brāhmaṇa*, when the Buddha smiles, he confidently releases his fiery energy without being weakened thereby; his power simply returns to him. In the language of the broader Indian poetics of power, this says something important

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50. Ernst Kantorowicz, *The King’s Two Bodies: A Study in Mediaeval Political Theology* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1957).

51. For more besides Gonda, *Vision of the Vedic Poets*, on the metaphor of seeing as knowing and related metaphors, especially in Mahāyāna Buddhist literature, see McMahan, *Empty Vision*. McMahan briefly discusses the metaphor of light as knowledge (72–73), but he spends more time on the connection with space (73ff).

about how Buddhists positioned the Buddha as a unique being of supreme power.

Figuratively and thematically, the Buddha's luminous smile in the Sanskrit *avadānas* bears a striking similarity to another illumination miracle found in the Pāli commentaries, a miracle that serves to demonstrate his omniscience. In its introduction to the commentary on the first book of the Pāli Abhidhamma, the *Atthasālinī* depicts the Buddha emitting rays of light from various parts of his body and illuminating the whole cosmos for seven days while rehearsing the *Paṭṭhāna* during the fourth week after his awakening.<sup>52</sup> As is typical in the Pāli commentaries, the Buddha emits light rays of six different colors (blue, yellow, red, white, orange-brown, and lustrous). And while he does not smile or reabsorb the light into various parts of his body on this occasion, the passage still deserves a close analysis in comparison with the luminous smile in the *avadānas*, primarily because of the way the light rays issue from the Buddha's body and extend throughout the cosmos, illuminating the various heavens and penetrating the material elements, such as earth and water. Shortly beforehand, the Buddha also rises into the air and performs the Twin Miracle. According to the commentary, the whole episode primarily illustrates the Buddha's omniscience, highlighting the special significance of the *Paṭṭhāna* as an expression thereof.

The motifs surrounding luminosity and the smile are further accentuated and extended in Mahāyāna sūtra literature. For instance, the *Perfection of Wisdom in Twenty-five Thousand Lines* (*Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikā-prajñāpāramitā*) opens with a miracle in which the Buddha emerges from the meditation called "the King of Samādhis" (*samādhirāja*), surveys the universe with his divine eye, and then "smiles with his entire body" (*sarvakāyāt smitaṃ akarot*).<sup>53</sup>

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52. The *Atthasālinī: Buddhaghosa's Commentary on the Dhammasaṅgaṇī*, edited by Edward Müller, revised reprint with indexes by L.S. Cousins (London: H. Frowde for the Pali Text Society, [1897] 1979), 12–15; for a full translation of this passage, see Pe Maung Tin, trans., *The Expositor (Atthasālinī): Buddhaghosa's Commentary on the Dhammasaṅgaṇī, the First Book of the Abhidhamma Piṭaka*, edited and revised by C. F. Rhys Davids (London: Oxford University Press for the Pali Text Society, [1920–21] 1976), 16–18.

53. *The Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā*, edited by Nalinaksha Dutt,

Conze translates the passage as “his whole body became radiant,”<sup>54</sup> but the *Mahāprajñāpāramitā-śāstra*, which is structured as a commentary on the *Perfection of Wisdom in Twenty-five Thousand Lines*, clearly understands the metaphor more literally: “one smiles with the mouth, and sometimes also with the eyes,” it asks; “why does the sūtra say that the Buddha smiles with his entire body?” Tangentially, we can note the insightful physiological analysis behind the question: drawing specific attention to the eyes in the act of smiling. However, the *śāstra* defies our modern expectations when it proceeds to answer the question by saying that the Buddha can make his entire body the same as his mouth or eyes, because he has obtained mastery over the universe.<sup>55</sup>

What follows in the text is one of the most extended and insightful commentaries on acts of smiling and the special significance of the Buddha’s smile I have found in the classical Buddhist literature. Since the Buddha does not smile wantonly, or so the text says, several reasons are given. The commentary points out that smiles have all manner of causes. One smiles from joy, hatred, or shyness. One smiles at strange or ridiculous spectacles. One smiles in the face of uncommon difficulty. The Buddha has a serious reason for smiling, the commentary tells us: although all phenomena are ultimately empty and inexpressible, he must name them in order to lead living beings to liberation. It is a particularly extraordinary challenge, and therefore he smiles with his whole body.

However, this full-bodied, luminous smile of the Buddha, all the way down to the pores, as the sūtra says,<sup>56</sup> is only the first

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Calcutta Oriental Series, no. 28 (London: Luzac, 1934), 6.

54. Edward Conze, trans., *The Large Sutra on Perfect Wisdom* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), 38ff.

55. Étienne Lamotte, *Le traité de la grande vertu de sagesse: Mahāprajñāpāramitāśāstra*, vol. 1 (Louvain: Institut Orientaliste de l’Université de Louvain, 1944), 441–42. Here and in what follows I am translating and paraphrasing Lamotte’s French translation.

56. Dutt, *Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā*, 7: *atha khalu bhagavān punar eva sarvaromakūpebhyaḥ smitam akarot | ekaikataśca romakūpāt ṣaṣṭiṣaṣṭīraśmikoṭīniyutaśatasahasrāṇi niśceroḥ | yair ayaṃ trisāhasramahāsāhasro lokadhātur avabhāsitaḥ sphuṭo ’bhūt*. My translation: “All the Blessed One’s hair follicles smiled, and from each pore issued sixty hundreds of thousands of millions

in a series of wonders that occur one after another in the opening passage of the *Perfection of Wisdom in Twenty-five Thousand Lines*. It is followed by the miracle of the tongue covering the entire cosmos and emitting bands of light, and this miracle quickly transforms into a multiplication miracle, whereby magical buddha images appear on lotus flowers filling the cosmos. The basic sequencing here is prefigured perhaps by “the Story of the Brahmin’s Daughter” (*brāhmaṇa-dārikāvadāna*) in the *Divyāvadāna*,<sup>57</sup> where another, simpler version of the tongue miracle, in which the Buddha covers his whole face with his tongue, directly follows the standard luminous smile passage found in the *avadānas*. This association of the Buddha’s smile with the tongue miracle is also evident elsewhere in Mahāyāna sūtra literature, for example, in the *Lotus Sūtra*, and it seems intentional, as both appear to be connected to the overall theme of the Buddha’s authority.<sup>58</sup>

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of billions of light rays, which illuminated the entire three-thousand-fold, great-thousand-fold universe.”

57. *The Divyāvadāna*, edited by E. B. Cowell and R. A. Neil (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1886), 67–72; Andy Rotman, trans., *Divine Stories, Part I* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2008), 135–42.

58. See, for instance, Mus, “Le sourire d’Angkor,” particularly 373–75. For the specific passage from the *Lotus Sūtra*, see *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka*, edited by Heinrich Kern and Bunyiu Nanjio (St. Petersburg: Imprimerie de l’Académie Impériale de Sciences, 1912), 387. The smile is not found in Kumaraśīva’s Chinese translation, translated into English by Leon Hurvitz, but Hurvitz sometimes translates the Sanskrit in his notes: See his *Scripture of the Lotus Blossom of the Fine Dharma* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976), 286 and 398n1. Incidentally, when Mus integrates the Mahāyāna sūtra materials into his discussion, he becomes even more than typically dazzling with his interpretations. He sees the episode in chapter twenty of the Sanskrit version of the *Lotus Sūtra*—where the Buddha and Prabhūtaratna smile at each other and stick out their tongues, which emit light rays and cover the universe—as critical to the development of the narrative trope from the *avadānas* to the Mahāyāna sūtras, and he sees in it an accompanying shift in doctrine; he goes on to find the logic of this doctrinal development represented in the “florid” art of Hinduism and then in the “flamboyant” art of Bayon. For more on the tongue miracle, in addition to Mus, “Le sourire d’Angkor,” see Peter Skilling, “The Tathāgata and the Long Tongue of Truth—The Authority of the Buddha in Sūtra and Narrative Literature,” in *Scriptural Authority, Reason and Action: Proceedings of a Panel at the 14th World Sanskrit Conference, Kyoto, September 1st-5th 2009*, edited by Vincent Eltschinger and Helmut Krasser (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen

In the *Perfection of Wisdom in Twenty-five Thousand Lines*, more miracles follow in sequence. After the multiplication miracle, there is an earthquake, followed by the emptying of the hells and the realms of hungry ghosts and animals, and the rebirth of those beings into the worlds of gods and men. Everyone remembers their former lives and pays homage to the Blessed One. The blind regain their sight and other healing miracles occur. Flowers rain down from the heavens, followed by another illumination miracle and another luminous smile from the Buddha, which again illuminates all the world systems in all the ten directions, inviting buddhas to come from all directions to hear the teaching of the *Perfection of Wisdom*. The sequence of images leaves one almost speechless.

At the very least, we can say that these passages confirm what the Pāli commentaries also indicated above: The Buddha sometimes smiles with his mouth open. But here it hardly seems to matter, when he smiles with literally every pore of his body. The whole concatenation of narrative tropes found here may also help to explain why the image of the Buddha's luminous smile is simultaneously ubiquitous and somehow absent in Buddhist art. The trope/

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Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2013), 1–48. Finally, one might note that the basic tongue miracle is also found in two discourses of the *Majjhima-nikāya*, the *Brahmāyu-sutta* (no. 91) and the *Sela-sutta* (no. 92), as well as in the *Sela-sutta* of the *Sutta-nipāta*. In these discourses, the Buddha shows his tongue and his penis in order to convince Brahmin ascetics (who are difficult to convince) that he possesses all the thirty-two marks of greatness; the latter discourse explicitly links the context here to the demonstration of the Buddha's sovereignty. For a provocative discussion of these key episodes in the *Lotus Sūtra* and the *Brahmāyu-sutta*, which also raises important issues of gender and performativity, see Natalie Gummer, "The Scandal of the Speaking Buddha: Performative Utterance and the Erotics of the Dharma," in *Buddhist Literature as Philosophy, Buddhist Philosophy as Literature*, edited by Rafal K. Stepień (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2020), 197–229. My own forthcoming article, "The Buddha as Spiritual Sovereign: Narrative Figurations of Knowledge and Power," in *Narrative Visions and Visual Narratives in Indian Buddhism*, edited by Naomi Appleton (Sheffield, UK: Equinox), discusses the episode from the *Sela-sutta* while exploring further several of the theoretical and historical concerns that inform the present essay, including both the broader theoretical questions around multimodality and narrative argumentation, and the more specific historical question of how the rhetoric of sovereignty and kingship has shaped Buddhist ideals, images, and representations of the Buddha.

image of the luminous smile becomes so complex, even overwrought, that it cleaves into a multiplicity of different directions, including the Twin Miracle, the luminous Buddha, the Multiplication Miracle, and perhaps also the rainbow body of light,<sup>59</sup> leaving behind the singularly enigmatic, tight-lipped smile to convey all of these layers of meaning and more besides.

## Conclusion

There is a great deal more that could be done to illuminate the smile of the Buddha and the broader sociohistorical context in which it occurs. While indicating some trajectories for future research, I have argued throughout this essay that the Buddha's smile became part of a complex visual and narrative trope emphasizing the Buddha's supreme sovereignty, extraordinary knowledge, superhuman power, and majestic authority. Placed within the context of the broader poetics of power and sovereignty in classical Indian intellectual and religious culture, we can see how the pattern of concatenative or agglutinative tropes and details surrounding the Buddha's smile serves to indicate his claim to supreme authority in some highly specific ways. This occurs even before the smile is linked to light imagery, and since light imagery in itself also works to emphasize sovereignty, knowledge, and power in classical Indian discourse, the luminous smile of the Buddha serves to accentuate his supremacy even more explicitly. Therefore, speaking theoretically, we might see the literary trope of the Buddha's smile as a specific example of narrative argumentation, or possibly even multimodal argumentation. Despite the fact that we have dealt here exclusively with the verbal/textual mode of communication, the narratives employ highly visual imagery, including that of gesture, to support the claim.

The evidence also points to a development or some kind of trajectory in the figuration of the smile from the suttas and *āgamas* to the *avadānas*, and from the *avadānas* (and perhaps also

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59. On the rainbow body, see Matthew Kapstein, "The Strange Death of Pema the Demon Tamer," in *The Presence of Light*, ed. Kapstein, 119–56. More generally, my impression is that images of buddhas emitting rainbow light are quite common.



the commentaries and systematic treatises) to the Mahāyāna sūtra literature, with more narrative and figurative tropes added to serve the purpose of emphasizing the Buddha's supreme sovereignty and power. This is not to say that we should or must see this trajectory as reflecting some kind of linear or diachronic series of historical developments; it is equally possible that the texts bear witness to a series of mutual influences between various texts, genres, and traditions of Buddhist literature, which took place within a larger intertextual and inter-traditional context. This mutual influence is perhaps evident if we consider the textual history of the *Avadānaśataka* itself, and compare the depiction of the Buddha's luminous smile in the earlier Chinese translation of this text with its more extensive treatment in the later Sanskrit manuscripts and the Tibetan translation.<sup>60</sup> Still, if we take the various iterations of the Buddha's smile, I think we may be able to discern a certain logical or ideological development; for instance, in the conception of the Buddha (or buddhas), and of his/their relationship to the cosmos. Some of these same developments may be evident in the various commentaries and systematic treatises, which deserve to be treated in greater depth than has been possible here, as do the figurative art

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60. On the textual history of the *Avadānaśataka*, see Mitsuyo Demoto, "Fragments of the *Avadānaśataka*," in *Buddhist Manuscripts*, vol. 3, edited by Jens Braarvig (Oslo: Hermes, 2006), 207–44, and more recently, Camillo Formigatti, "Walking the Deckle Edge: Scribe or Author? Jayamuni and the Creation of the Nepalese *Avadānamālā* Literature," *Buddhist Studies Review* 33.1–2 (2016): 101–40. I have recently reviewed some of the text historical issues and related manuscript evidence in my article: David Fiordalis, "The *Avadānaśataka* and the *Kalpadrūmāvadānamālā*: What should we be doing now?" *Critical Review for Buddhist Studies* 25 (2019): 47–77. For the purposes of this essay, however, the difference between the two depictions of the Buddha's smile is apparent if one simply reads my translation in the appendix of the fifth story of the *Avadānaśataka*, translated from the Tibetan translation (ca. ninth century), and then compares it with the translation of the earlier Chinese version/translation (ca. third century?) translated in Fa Chow, trans., "Chuan Tsi Pai Yuan King and The *Avadanasataka*," in *Visva-Bharati Annals, Vol. I: Cheena Bhavana*, edited by P. C. Bagchi, 35–55 (Calcutta: Visva-Bharati, 1945), 37–38. A more recent translation of the related second story from the Chinese collection is found in Marion Meisig, "名稱 *Míngchēng*—Fame and Glory," in *Translating Buddhist Chinese*, edited by Konrad Meisig, 75–86.

and the political dimension, which Mus integrated so successfully in his pioneering work on the Buddha's smile.<sup>61</sup>

Regarding the visual and figurative art, in particular, it remains noteworthy that despite the highly visual nature of the narrative trope of the Buddha's luminous smile, it does not seem to have served as a specific theme in Buddhist art, even though the slightly smiling visage of the Buddha does appear to be ubiquitous throughout the many visual and figurative depictions of him as well as of many other Buddhist figures. The historical accuracy of this speculative claim still needs to be confirmed, however.<sup>62</sup> There may also be a relevant practical dimension to explore here, wherein the practitioner may use the highly visual narrative trope of the Buddha's smile to bring to mind or visualize a particular image of the Buddha as a cosmic sovereign, thus linking the narrative and visual/figurative/material dimensions to the ritual (or meditative or performative) dimension.

Finally, while it may be difficult to conceive of complex emotional states like compassion as psychophysiological phenomena that have simultaneously physical, emotional, and cognitive dimensions, we need to be careful not to reduce bodily gestures or figurative behaviors, such as the smile, which is so highly context-sensitive, to one or another seemingly obvious emotional or propositional content, especially when we begin to appreciate the potential gap that exists between the visual/figurative mode and the aural/verbal mode of signification. Indeed, what initially calls for a multimodal approach is the fact that even ostensibly obvious connections between gesture or figure and meaning may not appear so obvious once submitted to the analyst or reworked by the artist or the storyteller. Thus, it might not be immediately evident that the Buddha's smile would carry so many connotations of superhuman knowledge and sovereign power, but when we consider the broad cultural linkages between the smile, social status, and charismatic

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61. Mus, "Le sourire d'Angkor," 376.

62. One possible starting point or foil for such an investigation could be Alexander C. Soper, "Aspects of Light Symbolism in Gandhāran Sculpture," *Artibus Asiae* 12.3 (1949): 252–83; 12.4 (1949): 214–30; 13.1–2 (1950): 63–85.

authority, these connotations begin to make more sense. Such connotations result in a rather different image of the Buddha from the one that is most often promulgated today, but they remain present, if we know to look for them.

To underline this final point, I want to conclude by referencing two very different modern iterations of the trope of the Buddha's smile. First, "Smiling," Thich Nhat Hanh says, "means that we are ourselves, that we have sovereignty over ourselves, that we are not drowned in forgetfulness. This kind of smile can be seen on the faces of Buddhas and bodhisattvas."<sup>63</sup> Now, he may have quite a different notion of sovereignty in mind from the one we have been exploring throughout this essay, and yet his usage of the term in reference to the act of smiling still evokes some sense of power and control. In my final example, quite different from the first, the sovereignty expressed by the Buddha's smile becomes transfigured into an image of awesome destructive force and power over nature, though probably unintentionally and seemingly without any compassionate wisdom, when we recall that the first nuclear weapons test India conducted in 1974 was, for some reason unknown to me, given the codename "Smiling Buddha."<sup>64</sup>

These contrasting, even contradictory, examples testify not only to the strength of a particular association of the Buddha's smile with sovereignty, power, and status, but also to the power and flexibility of language itself, in this case particularly of gesture, figure, and body language. There is great power in body language, and the smile is such a ubiquitous human gesture—just as the smiling Buddha is a ubiquitous visual image—perhaps in part because it is so flexible. People can see in it what they wish or need to see. While the smile may have a core set of meanings and associations, perhaps even rooted in certain universals of human psychophysiology, part of its flexibility may come from the fact that it is always to some degree dependent on context. It always requires interpretation,

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63. Thich Nhat Hahn, *Being Peace* (Berkeley: Parallax, 2005), 15.

64. "India's Nuclear Weapon Program: Smiling Buddha, 1974," in *The Nuclear Weapon Archive*, administered by Carey Sublette, article last revised November 8, 2001, <<http://nuclearweaponarchive.org/India/IndiaSmiling.html>>.

and like the embodied human experience of light, which could also be said to elicit a similarly diverse range of associations (though perhaps also similarly conditioned by certain basics of human physiology), the smile points to the gap between the verbal and nonverbal modes of signification. The specific association between smiling and light deserves further study to determine the scope of its universality across cultures and time periods, but it is clear that the luminous smile evokes the visual mode as much as the verbal, and as a nonverbal form of bodily expression, it remains separate from but essentially tied to other forms of communication, verbal as well as figurative. Thus, as a literary trope, the Buddha's luminous smile does more than signify his sovereign status and spiritual authority; it also points to the power and flexibility, and perhaps even to the universality, of certain basic forms of human expression.

### Appendix: The Story of Moon<sup>65</sup>

The Blessed Buddha, it is said, receives honor, reverence, respect, and worship from kings, ministers, the wealthy, townspeople, merchants, caravan leaders, gods, *nāgas*, *yakṣas*, demigods, divine

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65. The following story is translated primarily from the Tibetan translation of the *Avadānaśataka*, where it appears as the fifth story of the collection. For some reason, this story is no longer extant in any of the Sanskrit manuscripts of the text from Nepal. All these Sanskrit manuscripts are later or even considerably later than the Tibetan translation, which was made in the ninth century. Nevertheless, there is a demonstrably close connection between the extant Sanskrit manuscripts and the Tibetan translation of this work, and like other stories, this one contains several stock passages that recur in other stories still preserved in Sanskrit, including the stock passage of the Buddha's luminous smile. Thus, my translation also draws heavily on reading the Sanskrit text that underlies the Tibetan translation. For the Sanskrit text—not of this story, but of similar tales that contain the luminous smile passage and other stock phrases—see *Avadānaśataka: A Century of Edifying Tales Belonging to the Hinayāna*, edited by Jacob S. Speyer (St. Petersburg, Russia: Imperial Academy of Sciences, 1902–9), vol. 1, 1ff. For the Tibetan text of this story, I have mainly followed the Derge edition directly—see D, volume 75 (*aṃ*), 30ff—but I also consulted the Tibetan text as presented in Royce Wiles, “*Avadānaśataka*: The Hundred *Avadānas*: A Translation of the First Seven Tales from the Sanskrit and a Presentation of the Tibetan Text from the Derge, Lhasa, Peking and Tog (Stog) Palace Editions of the Tibetan Kanjur” (BA Honors Thesis: Australia National

eagles, *kinnaras*, and mighty serpents. Being well known and possessing great merit, he is furnished with the various requirements of the ascetic life: robes, bowl, bedding, and medicine to cure illness. Once, while being worshipped by gods, *nāgas*, *yakṣas*, demigods, divine eagles, *kinnaras*, and mighty serpents, the Blessed Buddha dwelt with his community of disciples in Śrāvastī in Jeta's Grove in the Park of Anāthapiṇḍada.

At that time in Śrāvastī there was a weaver named Moon (Tib. "Dawa," *zla ba*; Skt. Soma), who dwelled in poverty, extreme poverty. Indeed, for as much work as he did, he would receive only a small amount of food and nothing more. As a result, he could not save anything at all.

So, he thought to himself, "I have come here from that other world without having made any merit, and I have not done any good here either. If I do not make some merit or do some good, I will definitely go from here to the other world without having made any refuge from fear and dread. Therefore, I must make at least some small offering to the Blessed One. That is certain." This is what he thought.

One day, when he had woven the cotton from some householder, he took the loose ends (*tshar tshar*; *daśā*) of cloth and set out on the road. That morning the Blessed One put on his robe, took his bowl, and went into Śrāvastī to beg for alms. The weaver then saw the Blessed Buddha adorned with the thirty-two marks of a great

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University, 1985). Wiles also produced an English translation of this story, the only other translation into English that exists, I believe, and I have consulted it. More recently (2008), Justin Fifield completed a translation of the other nine stories of the first set of ten for his MA thesis at the University of Texas, Austin, but left this story untranslated. Even more recently, Naomi Appleton has left this story untranslated in her new translation of the first forty stories of the collection. See Naomi Appleton, trans., *Many Buddhas, One Buddha: A Study and Translation of Avadānaśataka 1–40* (Sheffield, UK: Equinox, 2020). Léon Feer, in his earlier French translation, *Avadāna-çataka: Cent légendes (bouddhiques)*, *Annales du Musée Guimet*, vol. 18 (Paris: Ernest Leroux, 1891), did include a translation of the story, which he also translated from Tibetan, but he mistakenly failed to translate the verses of the protagonist's main vow, instead indicating that the Tibetan text simply repeats a stock phrase of the vow, which it does not. Wiles was able to correct the error, but in other respects I hope to have improved upon his translation here.

being and the eighty other characteristics of greatness. His splendid body shone with a heavenly light, more brilliant than a thousand suns. He looked like a living mountain of jewels, lovely in every way.

At the very moment he saw him, his mind became full of faith toward the Blessed One. For the weaver's benefit, the Blessed One showed him that his robe was torn. The weaver then offered the loose ends of cloth to the Blessed One, and the Blessed One showed that his robe was instantaneously mended. Then a prodigious faith arose in the weaver, and he venerated the feet of the Blessed One and made a solemn vow:

Though the gift is small, the field (*shing; kṣetra*)  
is prodigious.<sup>66</sup>

You, whose superhuman power is great, know this.  
Through this gift having become great,  
May I become a buddha of prodigious renown.

Even though this gift is small,  
My aspiration (*sems; citta*) is vast and boundless.  
Even a small gift produces great effect,  
When received by the supreme conqueror  
of gods and men.

The Blessed One replied:

In the future, you will become calm and achieve  
great superhuman power.  
You will have prodigious renown, and you will be  
honored by gods and men.  
You will become self-awakened and full of sympathy  
for the benefit of the world.

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66. This metaphor of the field refers to the idea of the field of merit, the notion that a gift made to a particular type of person, like a buddha or a monk, accrues greater merit for the one who gives the gift due to the overabundance of merit already possessed by the one who receives the gift. It is essentially an agricultural metaphor. When one plants a seed in fertile soil, then it grows larger than it would if it were planted in barren soil.

You will be a conqueror named The One Whose State  
is Supreme (or The Supreme One Through Loose  
Ends) (*tshar tshar bla ma; daśottama*).<sup>67</sup>

Perceiving the sequence of actions and the sequence of causes of the weaver named Moon, the Blessed One then displayed a smile.

When blessed buddhas smile, it is the nature of things (*dharmatā*) that rays of light—blue, yellow, red, and white—issue from their mouths. Some rays go downwards; others go upwards. Those that go downwards penetrate the many hells named the Reviving Hell (*saṃjīva*), Black Cord Hell (*kālasūtra*), Crushing Hell (*saṃghāta*), Shrieking Hell (*raurava*), Mighty Shrieking Hell (*mahāraurava*), Burning Hell (*tapana*), Roasting Hell (*pratāpana*), Ceaseless Torture Hell (*avīci*), Blistering Hell (*arbuda*), Bursting Blisters Hell (*nirarbuda*), Chattering Teeth Hell (*aṭaṭa*), Ugh! Hell (*hahava*), Brrr! Hell (*huhuva*), Blue Lotus Hell (*utpala*), Lotus Hell (*padma*), and Great Lotus Hell (*mahāpadma*).<sup>68</sup> In those hells that are hot, the rays of light are cooling. In those hells that are cold, the rays of light are warming.

In this way, the extreme sufferings of those hell-beings are eased, and the thought occurs to them: “Friends, have we fallen from here and arisen somewhere else?” In order to instill them with faith, the Blessed One then produces a magical image of himself. Having seen it, the hell-beings think: “No, we have not fallen from here. We have not arisen elsewhere. For there is this being, not previously

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67. There is a play here on the Tibetan word/phrase *tshar tshar*, which is likely a translation of the Sanskrit word, *daśā*. This term can mean the fringe or loose end of a piece of cloth, as it apparently does earlier in the story, but it can also mean the particular state or condition or stage of something, and the future Buddha’s name, Daśottama or Tshar tshar bla ma, conveys both these meanings at the same time.

68. Here in the list of the hells (of which the first eight are “hot” and the second eight are “cold”) and in list of names of the various heavens below, I have borrowed or been influenced by some of the translations from Rotman, *Divine Stories*, 136–37. I have also consulted the explanations found in Akira Sadakata, *Buddhist Cosmology: Philosophy and Origins* (Tokyo: Kosei, 1997). The cold hells named after lotuses ostensibly refer to the fact that the beings there are so cold their skin turns the color of blue, red, or white lotuses, though the tradition contains other explanations, too. See Sadakata, *Buddhist Cosmology*, 53.

seen, by whose wondrous presence (*anubhāva*) our extreme sufferings have been eased.” Having established faith in their minds toward that magical image, they extinguish the karma still to be experienced in hell and are reborn in the realms of gods and men, where they become vessels for the truth.

Meanwhile, the rays of multicolored light that go upward penetrate the many heavens, such as the Heaven of the Four Great Kings (*cāturmahārājika*), the Heaven of the Thirty-Three Gods (*trāyastrīṣa*), Yāma’s Heaven (*yama*), the Heaven of the Contented (*tuṣita*), the Heaven of Those whose Delight comes from Magical Creations (*nirmāṇarati*), the Heaven of Those who Possess the Power to Transform Others’ Delight into Their Own (*paranirmitavaśavarti*), the Heaven of Brahmā’s Assembly (*brahmakāyika*), the Heaven of Brahmā’s Priests (*brahmapurohita*), the Great Brahmā Heaven (*mahābrahmaṇa*), the Heaven of Limited Radiance (*parittābha*), the Heaven of Immeasurable Radiance (*apramāṇābha*), the Resplendent Heaven (*ābhāsvara*), the Heaven of Limited Splendor (*paritāsubha*), the Heaven of Immeasurable Splendor (*apramāṇaśubha*), the Heaven of Total Splendor (*śubhakṛtsna*), the Cloudless Heaven (*anabhraka*), the Heaven of Those Born from Merit (*puṇyaprasava*), the Heaven of Great Results (*bṛhatphala*), the Heaven of the Pure (*abrha*), the Heaven of the Cool (*atapa*), the Heaven of the Beautiful Ones (*sudṛśa*), the Heaven of the Clear-Sighted Ones (*sudarśana*), and the Supreme Heaven (*akaniṣṭha*). The light rays reverberate with the words, “Impermanent! Suffering! Empty! Not self!” And they pronounce these two verses:

Get started! Go forth! Apply yourselves to the  
Buddha’s teaching!  
Destroy the army of death, like an elephant would  
destroy a hut of reeds!

Whoever practices this teaching and discipline  
without wavering  
Will abandon this cycle of rebirth and bring an  
end to suffering.



The rays of light then travel throughout the three-thousand-fold, great-thousand-fold universe and come back together again behind the Buddha.

In this way, if the Buddha wishes to reveal actions from the past, the rays of light disappear into the Buddha's back. If he wishes to reveal the future, they disappear into the Buddha's front. If he wishes to reveal a rebirth in hell, then they disappear into the soles of his feet. If he wishes to reveal an animal rebirth, then they disappear into his heels. If he wishes to reveal a rebirth as a ghost, then they disappear into his big toes. If he wishes to reveal a human rebirth, then they disappear into his knees. If he wishes to reveal a rebirth in the kingdom of a powerful wheel-turning king, then they disappear into his left palm. If he wishes to reveal a rebirth in the kingdom of an ordinary wheel-turning king, then they disappear into his right palm. If he wishes to reveal a rebirth as a god, then they disappear into his navel. If he wishes to reveal an instance of someone achieving the awakening of a disciple, then they disappear into his face. If he wishes to reveal the awakening of a solitary buddha, then they disappear into the tuft of hair between his eyebrows. If he wishes to reveal the unexcelled, perfect and complete awakening of a fully-awakened buddha, then they disappear into the bump on the top of his head.

On this occasion, the rays of light circled the Buddha three times and disappeared into the bump on the top of his head. Then, the venerable Ānanda placed his palms together before his chest in a gesture of respect and questioned the Buddha: "A myriad band of light with a thousand colors has come out of your mouth and illuminated the ten directions like the rising sun." And he spoke these verses:

Buddhas have exhausted rebirth and abandoned  
misery and passion;  
they are truly the supreme objects in the world.  
Not without cause have the conquerors, who have  
overcome their enemy,  
shown their smile, shimmering like a lotus stalk  
or a conch shell.

Hero, ascetic, prince among the conquerors, you  
 know at once,  
 Through your intelligence, the wishes of  
 your audience.  
 Best of sages, remove the doubt that has arisen  
 in them  
 With your supremely splendid and wise words.

Steady like the waters of the ocean or the king of  
 the mountains,  
 the mighty ones, the perfect buddhas do not display  
 their smile wantonly.  
 For what reason do the steadfast ones show  
 their smiles?  
 A flood of people wish to hear.

The Blessed One responded, "It is so, Ānanda, it is so. Not without cause or condition, Ānanda, do the perfect, complete buddhas, those who have gone before, the worthy ones, display their smile. Did you see, Ānanda, how this weaver named Moon honored me?"

"Yes, honored one, I saw it."

"Ānanda, by this root of virtue, by conceiving this thought, and by this act of giving in accordance with the proper nature of giving, this weaver named Moon will attain awakening at the end of three incalculable eons after he has completely developed great compassion and perfected the six perfect virtues. He will arise in the world and become a perfect, complete buddha named The One Whose State is Supreme (*tshar tshar bla ma; daśottama*). He will possess the ten powers, the four types of confidence, the three special applications of mindfulness, and great compassion. The proper nature of his act of giving was the faith he had toward me in his mind."

This is what the Blessed One said, and the overjoyed monks rejoiced at his words.