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# The Issue of the Buddha as *Vedagū* with Reference to the Formation of the *Dhamma* and the Dialectic with the Brahmins

by Katherine K. Young

Controversy surrounds the question: was the Buddha *vedagū* according to the Brahmanical understanding of expertise in the three Vedas—*Ṛk*, *Yajur*, and *Sāma*?<sup>1</sup>

The *nikāyas* of the Pāli Canon commonly describe the Brahmin as the *vedagū*, the “knower,” or to be specific, the “expert-goer” of the Vedas.<sup>2</sup> Further elaboration of expertise in the Vedas is encountered in the standard description of the Brahmins as:

The repeaters who know the *mantas* by heart, who are experts in the three Vedas with the *nighanta* (list of difficult words), the *ketubha* (ritual), the *akkhara* (syllables; phonology), the *pabheda* (exegesis), the *itihāsa* (stories), the *pada* (words), the *veyyākaraṇa* (grammar), the *lokāyata*, and the theory of the 32 marks on a *mahāpurisa* (a great man).<sup>3</sup>

Similar descriptions are found in Brahmanical works. Therefore, we may assume that the canonical definition was according to the Brahmanical understanding of Vedic expertise.

The evidence for the Buddha’s “textual knowledge” of the Veda must be sought from the earliest, presumably authentic, portion of the canon, namely the *Dīgha* and *Majjhima nikāyas*. The first question is whether there is concrete evidence that the Buddha knew the *mantas* by heart. In other words, is there record of his memorization, recitation, citation or even paraphrase of Vedic verses?

As the canon records and implies, the Buddha did not use

Sanskrit for his discourses or conversation.<sup>4</sup> Even when he occasionally encountered Vedic content expressed by some Brahmin, the canon does not cite the original expression in Sanskrit. Instead, a periphrastic description of the Vedic content, with its source unclear, is given. Neither is the Buddha depicted as quoting or citing the Vedic content in Sanskrit or in Pāli translation or paraphrase.<sup>5</sup> The Buddha probably felt no need to quote or cite except while debating with Brahmins. But, even then he was silent regarding the Vedic content and context. The question becomes: did the Buddha at least employ the tools of exegesis and interpretation from the Brahmanical branches of learning, such as grammar, etymology, sentence-analysis, etc., either for his own understanding of Brahmanism or for exposition of his own views? Even these principles of hermeneutics do not seem to have been known to him either verbatim or in application. Moreover, to him they were exclusively Brahmanical apparatus. On the general level as well, the Buddha seems to have had little authoritative information of the Vedic content. For example, when he attempted to identify the Vedic gods, he revealed striking ignorance of their epithets, standard descriptions, and the mythical associations; Indra, for example, was not the killer of Vṛtra to him. In fact, he was not even Inda, but Sakka, the *inda* (chief) of the gods.<sup>6</sup>

Since the concepts of *dvija* (twice-born) and *upanayana* (initiation into learning) are of much later date, we cannot superimpose the routine academic career on the Buddha just because he was a *khattiya*.<sup>7</sup> Whatever information the *nikāyas* supply us is the only record that proves the status of his knowledge. As the Buddha refrained from using Sanskrit, and did not cite Vedic references, employ the hermeneutical principles from the various “sciences,” or demonstrate extensive and accurate knowledge of the Vedic content, he was probably not qualified as a scholar on the primary sources and methods of Brahmanical learning.

There is, of course, one other possible explanation for the Buddha’s apparent lack of Vedic expertise: that he did have technical knowledge of the three Vedas but for dialectical reasons chose to remain silent. This alternative explanation, however, requires proofs for one if not all of the following state-

ments: 1) that the Buddha's childhood education involved study of the Veda, 2) that the early canon contains textual and contextual references to the Veda and sacrifice (*yajña*), and 3) that the Buddha himself claimed that he was *vedagū* according to the Brahmanical understanding of the term. Since there is no such evidence in the *nikāyas*, we are left to conclude that his knowledge was "popular." Apart from the Sākya's religion, which must have maintained some continuity with Āryan practices, he could have derived his popular knowledge from observation of Brahmanical practice during his travels, from his debates with the Brahmins, and from discussions with disciples who had formerly been Brahmins.

The next question is: if the Buddha was an Āryan and a *khattiya*, why was he not *tiṇṇam vedānam paragū*, an expert in the three Vedas?

Perhaps textual knowledge of the Vedas had become a hermetic tradition known only to the Brahmins because of 1) their prolonged and highly technical education, 2) the continuity of the specialized training through family tradition, or 3) the jealous guarding of the expertise for racial, political, and economic reasons. Then, too, the hiatus of geography may account for the Buddha's lack of knowledge. The Sākya principality, where the Buddha spent his childhood, was located far from the centres of Āryan culture, even those of the eastern frontier on the Gangetic plain. Accordingly, the principality was probably without communities of Brahmins. The *Ambaṭṭha Sutta* (*Dīgha Nikāya*, 3.10–13) alludes to this context: Ambattha says to the Buddha that his Sākya tribe (*jāti*) is horrifying (*caṇḍā*), harsh (*pharusā*), and petty (*lahusā*); moreover, they did not give honour or gifts to Brahmins. When challenged, Ambaṭṭha supports his statement by relating an incident that occurred when he went on business to the Sākyas' congress hall (*santhāgāra*). When he arrived there, the Sākyas were making merry and joking together, nudging one another with their fingers; they did not even offer him a seat. The Buddha defends the Sākyas, saying: In our assembly we have full freedom to talk the way we want. Moreover, this is ours, O Ambaṭṭha, this Kapilavatthu belongs to us, the Sākyas; Ambaṭṭha should not be obsessed with this minor detail! While this *sutta* could be read as illustrative of Ambaṭṭha's foolish Brahmin superiority, we find it cur-

ious that the Sākya seemed quite oblivious to the Āryan norms of behavior—showing respect to a stranger or guest, much less to a Brahmin—and that the Buddha excused his kinsmen on the grounds that people may act as they please in their own home.

Passages such as this lead us to surmise that Brahmins did not live in the Sākya territory. If Brahmins did not dwell there, there probably would have been no education in the Vedas available and consequently no respect for Vedic knowledge. Moreover, on account of such isolation the Sākya would not have been exposed to the Brahmins' assertion of superiority by birth, and even if they had encountered it from visitors, they could have conveniently ignored it in their society. We therefore conjecture that the Sākya were nominally Āryan but that their popular religion and culture were developing along distinct lines. It is against this background that we must view the Buddha's childhood and education. He was not a *vedagū* according to the Brahmanical understanding of the term probably because Vedic education was not available to him.

Now we must ask: how does the Buddha's lack of Vedic knowledge influence his formation of the *Dhamma*?

When the Buddha became a wanderer (*paribbājaka*) and travelled to other regions, he would have encountered Brahmins who claimed to be superior by birth and knowledge. It may be true that he lacked the qualifications of a *vedagū*. It may also be true that he had no respect for those who had such knowledge, since to him it appeared only to lead to animal sacrifice, unproductive asceticism, or gross materialism and psychological dependence through the "peddling" of fortune-telling, charms, cures, and promises of mundane or supermundane pleasures. Consequently, the Buddha would have looked to other directions for true knowledge.

Hence, the Buddha's "lack of expertise in the Veda" does not seem to be detrimental in any way to his quest for knowledge and truth. Precisely because he was an outsider to the Brahmin circle and because he was a sincere seeker of supreme knowledge, he availed himself of the freedom to criticize the existing religion and its Brahmanical leadership. He could afford to think independently and thereby go to the root of the issue. His major "breakthrough" was to realize: 1) that the key

to knowledge and wisdom was analysis of human experience, 2) that self-effort in thought and deed was the means, not reliance on the Brahmins or the gods, and 3) that there was a consummate realization (*nibbāna*), which anyone could attain, regardless of the caste of birth. Accordingly, the Buddha's contribution to the religious milieu of the time was his provision of a more existential and universal dimension to religion.

The Buddha's silence on the Vedas must be understood in terms of his original ignorance of the texts, which, in fact, enabled him to discover the path to supreme knowledge. It must also be seen as resulting in a superb means to propagate his *Dhamma* without any risk of dialectical interference by the Brahmins. For, the Buddha knew that the more he debated with the Brahmins, the more he would have been caught in their "great confusion," since they wrangled with "hair-splitting" of the Vedas and emerged with contradictory conclusions (D. 1.18; D. 13.35). Making expertise in the Vedas a non-issue by relegating them to superfluity (D. 4.13), making metaphysics a non-issue by refusing to discuss the famous ten questions, and making Sanskrit a non-issue by promoting the vernaculars, the Buddha successfully avoided the arena of Brahmanical expertise and, for him, their confusion. As he bypassed their expertise, he surpassed all criticism levelled by them and forced on them a serious consideration of his *Dhamma*. The absolute certainty of his radical insight thus stayed intact and stood unchallenged. Confidence was engendered among his disciples through the singular concept of the two levels of knowledge: his *Dhamma* was supreme, whereas the Veda was not only lower and unnecessary but even an obstacle.

The dialectics of the Buddha's silence had an immediate appeal. In so far as the Buddha's silence silenced the Brahmins, he made an impact on society:

1) He appealed to the *khattiyas* of Magadha and Kosala. For, although they had a "working relationship" with the Brahmins (gifts such as villages in exchange for advice and performance of ritual), they were annoyed over the Brahmins' claim to superiority by birth and the designation of the *khattiyas* as their attendants. The *khattiyas* needed a way to change the balance of power. Because they too may have lacked expertise in the Veda, they would be attracted to the Buddha's teaching of

higher knowledge. Furthermore, the Buddha was a *khattiya* and stood up for the *khattiyas'* superiority when challenged by the Brahmins (*khattiyo seṭṭho janetasmin ye gottapaṭisārito vijjācaraṇa-sampanno so seṭṭho devamānuse 'ti,* D. 3:24: 17–18). The *khattiyas* knew that the Buddha's religious entrepreneurship would tip the balance of power in their direction.

2) He appealed to the Sākya, for the Buddha belonged to them. They knew that his fame would bring fame to their remote region and their tribe.

3) He appealed to the other Āryans, who also lived liminally in the shadow of Brahmanical expertise.

4) He appealed to those non-Āryans who wanted a way to integrate into the society.

5) And, finally, he appealed to some Brahmins.

Thus, one may argue that the Buddha's ignorance of the Vedas contributed positively to his analysis, realization, and teaching, as well as to the subsequent popularity of his perspective. But, the question might be raised: was the Buddha as indifferent to the status of the *vedagū* as it might seem? Why, for example, did he choose to revalorize certain terms that were central to the Brahmanical tradition? Take the term *ariya*, which hitherto had meant "one of Āryan descent." The Buddha kept the term, but changed the meaning to a "true Brahmin" with the implication that anyone could be a true Brahmin. Why, if he was so critical of the Brahmins, did he want to be a Brahmin, even if a *true* Brahmin? Similarly, why did the Buddha choose to parallel the term *ṭayaveda* (the three Vedas, i.e., *Rk*, *Yajur*, and *Sāma*) with the term *tevijjā*, understood as the three knowledges?<sup>8</sup> Again, was there some special reason why he chose to refer to himself as *vedāntagū*, which may have implied a subtle ambiguity depending on whether *veda* was understood as "text" or "knowledge"; in other words had the Buddha gone *through* to the end or culmination of the Veda proper, or simply to the end or culmination of knowledge, i.e., the perfection of wisdom? This ambiguity was also reflected in the *Kūtandanta Sutta*, where the Buddha did admit that he was a Brahmin in a previous life, which implies that he was a knower of the three Vedas (D. 5.26: 26–29). Because one of the three knowledges that the Buddha claimed to have as a result of his enlightenment was the knowledge of the details of his previous births,

the implication is that he would have remembered his previous memorization of the three Vedas. Thus, the Buddha circuitously suggested, although he never explicitly stated it, that he was *vedagū* according to the Brahmanical understanding. This, coupled with the concept of the Buddha's omniscience, creates ambiguity with reference to the issue of his expertise in Vedic learning. We are led to conclude that he wanted to claim his Āryan heritage and that he indirectly acknowledged the importance of the Brahmins' status. Thus, he used his dialectical skill-in-means to obscure his difference from the Brahmins with reference to learning. This created sufficient scope for his followers to claim that he knew all that the Brahmins did and, in addition, the "other shore." Furthermore, the Buddha's revalorization of terms enhanced the appeal of his teaching, for he knew that the Brahmins' status would not be totally ignored by the people. Thus, his clever device was to argue that they too could be true Brahmins and could be perfect in wisdom (*vedāntagū*).

The outcome of this dialectic over the issue of *vedagū* may be characterized as follows. The Buddha's attempt to bypass and surpass the Vedas, the core of the Brahmanical tradition, encountered formidable opposition. While the Brahmins eventually countered the concept of *vedāntagū* with that of *vedāntajña*,<sup>9</sup> they were not willing to eliminate the Vedas: their "scripture," ancestral memory, definition of identity, and basis of occupation and status. Some of their solutions involved 1) extending the concept of the Veda to the entire corpus of texts ending with the Upaniṣads, and 2) enshrining the Veda so defined as śruti, understood as the one eternal truth. While they now acknowledged the three Vedas as "lower" knowledge, they argued that nonetheless knowledge of the Veda was the prerequisite for mokṣa. By the time of the *Dharmaśāstras* the Brahmanical goal was to encourage *all* Āryans, both Brahmins and non-Brahmins, to become *vedāntajña*. While their attempt to open the tradition of Vedic learning was not as radical as the universal salvation proposed by the Buddha, they did try to consolidate those of Āryan descent and even to propose that all Āryans are śūdra until *upanayana* and initiation into the Vedic education, which entitles them as *dvija* or "twice-born." In addi-

tion, the *sannyāsi* (the renunciate who pursues liberation) was (like the Buddhist monk) beyond identity by caste definition.

While it may be argued that the Brahmins subtly integrated the critique levelled by the Buddha (and often used the tactic of silence in return, as if he and his *Dhamma* did not exist), it may also be argued that the later followers of the Buddha quietly fused the image of the Buddha with that of the Brahmin. For example, the *Jātakas* describe several of the Buddha's previous lives as a Brahmin with expertise in the Veda. In the *Nidāna-kathā*, a story is related about how Yaśodhara wanted to know about the attainments and capacities of the prince before she would consider marriage. Accordingly, the king arranged a display. Gautama was victorious in his knowledge of astrology and other sciences and his "erudition in Brahmanical literature, philosophy, economics, and politics."<sup>10</sup> Aśvaghoṣa, in his *Buddhacarita*, portrays the Buddha as belonging to the Āryan tradition, which upholds the concept of repayment of the three debts, one of which is the learning of the three Vedas, the repayment to the *ṛṣis* (seers). We are told that:

He passed through infancy and in the course of time duly underwent the ceremony of initiation. And it took him but a few days to learn the sciences suitable to his race, the mastery of which ordinarily requires many years.<sup>11</sup>

The immense popularity of Aśvaghoṣa's work, which, according to I-tsing, was sung throughout India and other Buddhist countries, accounts for the propagation of the claim of the Buddha's expertise in the Vedas.

We now are in a position to conclude that the modern divergence of scholarly opinion regarding the Buddha's expertise in the three Vedas is determined by whether one bases his study on the *nikāyas* (in which there is no concrete evidence that he was a *vedagū*) or on the later Buddhist texts (which claim that he was a *vedagū*). Our analysis concludes that he was not *vedagū*, but, more importantly, that the issue of *vedagū* directly affected the formation of the *Dhamma* and the Brāhmaṇa-Bauddha dialectic.

## NOTES

1. A number of scholars have noted the absence of references in the oldest strata of the Pāli Canon to the Buddha's knowledge of the Vedas; however, they do not offer explanations of why he appears to lack this expertise. See Sir M. Monier-Williams, *Buddhism: in its Connexion with Brahmanism and Hinduism, and in its Contrast with Christianity* (Varanasi: Chowkhamba Sanskrit Series Office, 1964), p. 24. See also, Govind Chandra Pande, *Studies in the Origins of Buddhism* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1974), p. 373, hereafter referred to as *Studies*; and Hermann Oldenberg, *Buddha: His Life, His Doctrine, His Order*, trans. from the German by William Hoey (London: Williams and Norgate, 1882), p. 100. J. Kashyap, however, assumes that the Buddha was educated according to highest standard of the times. Presumably, this means the standard of Brahmanical learning. See Kenneth W. Morgan, Ed. *The Path of the Buddha* (New York: The Ronald Press Co., 1956), p. 6.

2. The suffix *gū* is the Prakrit form of the Sanskrit *gah* from the verbal root *gam* meaning "to go." By the time of the Veda, we find that the etymological (*yaugika*) meaning of "going" has expanded to connote "going" in the sense of "moving about easily within a subject," "pervading through in the sense of knowing and understanding," in other words, "expertise." Hence, *vedagū*, "one who has expertise in the Veda." Another stock epithet employed in the Pāli Canon to designate a Brahmin is *tiṇṇam vedānam pāragū*. The same suffix, *gū*, occurs here. *Pāragū* denotes "one who has gone to the other shore" and connotes one who is well-versed or an expert; therefore, *tiṇṇam vedānam pāragū* means "one who has gone to the yonder shore of the three Vedas," that is, "one who has crossed the knowledge of the three Vedas," i.e., is an expert in *Ṛk*, *Yajur*, and *Sāma*.

3. *tena kko pana samayena brāhmaṇassa pokkharasātissa ambattho nāma māṇavo antevāsī hoti ajjhāyako mantadharo, tiṇṇam vedānam pāragū sanighaṇḍukeṭubhānaṃ sakkharappabhedānaṃ itihāsapāñcamānaṃ padako, veyyākaraṇo, lokāyatamahāpurisalakkhaṇesu anavayo . . . anuññātapatiññāto sake ācariyake tevijjake pāvacaṇē — 'yamahaṃ jānāmi taṃ tvaṃ jānāsi, yaṃ tvaṃ jānāsi tamahaṃ jānāmi' ti. Ambatthā Sutta 3:18–23 in The Dīghanikāya, 1. Silakkhandha Vagga (Bihar Government: Pāli Publication Board, 1958), p. 76; henceforth referred to as *Dīghanikāya* 1. All citations of the *Dīghanikāya* are from Vols. 1 and 2 of this source.*

4. It is thought that the Buddha spoke a Prakrit called *ardhamāgadhī*. The Brahmins' spoken Sanskrit was probably close to the prose style of the *Brāhmaṇas*. In its description of the Brahmins, the canon does not point out that they had a separate language. Therefore, *ardhamāgadhī* and Brahmanical prose were close enough to be considered one language in the sense that communication could take place, although grammatical mistakes and fundamental misunderstandings might arise. That the Buddha's discourses were preserved canonically in a more literary Prakrit, which came to be known as Pāli, perhaps obscured further subtle linguistic differences between the speech of the Buddha and that of the Brahmins. Nonetheless, it is striking that there is no indication that the Buddha knew how to speak like the Brah-

mins. Anyone who lives in a bilingual culture is familiar with the phenomenon of switching languages according to the mother tongue of the one who is being addressed or the context. If Sanskrit was the academic and literary language, if the Buddha had received an education in the texts (oral) and disciplines of the day, then we can assume that he was at ease speaking Sanskrit prose, and would have employed it from time to time when speaking with the Brahmins. However, there is no evidence of Buddha's Sanskrit prose. Even if the records were preserved in Pāli, it is linguistically possible to recognize translation.

5. A characteristic of the Brahmanical style of discourse is the tendency to illustrate a point orally with recitation of a Sanskrit *śloka*. To be cultured involved the ability to give ornamentation to speech with appropriate recitations, allusions, figures of speech drawn from the stock of literary examples, etc. It is likely that this idiom of Āryan culture and identity had evolved well before classical Sanskrit. If this is the case and if the Buddha had this type of Sanskrit education, then it is most likely that he would have used it spontaneously and naturally if his aim was to refute the Brahmins. In other words, if one knows a certain language game, one is most likely to use it with others who share the expertise. Thus, even though the Buddha wanted to revalorize certain terms and to change the focus of the tradition, e.g., from *yajña* (sacrifice) to *dāna* (gift), he might have illustrated his point with the citation of a Vedic passage, which would prove that he knew Chandasī, the language of the Vedas. Once again, we would recognize the translation or at least paraphrase in the Pāli Canon. We do not have sufficient examples to the contrary to provide evidence that the Buddha did indeed know the Veda.

6. Sakka is the Prakrit of *śakra*, an epithet of Indra meaning able, capable. In the *Tevijja Sutta*, Indra is mentioned among other gods invoked by Brahmins. Now, it could be argued that if the Buddha had been trained in Vedic recitation, he would be familiar with the Vedic content, even though the popular religion had departed significantly from its roots. Furthermore, it is likely that he would have honoured Indra, even though Sakka was foremost in his mind. On the contrary, Indra is specifically associated with the Brahmins, not with all Āryans.

7. In the *Dharmaśāstras* (c. 200 B.C.—800 A.D.) the Āryans were characterized as the twice-born (*dvija*) organized into brāhmaṇa, kṣatriya, and vaiśya *varṇas*. Some of the differences among the *varṇas* were: the area of specialization, the length of time required for training in the Vedas and the *vedāṅgas* (the branches of knowledge), and the extent of expertise. Many scholars, on the basis of such descriptions in the *Dharmaśāstras*, anachronistically assume that the kṣatriyas of the 6th Century B.C. had some education in the Vedas. While some princes had Brahmins as teachers, probably most non-Brahmin Āryans did not. For example, when Brahmin teachers are mentioned, in the Pāli Canon they are teachers of Brahmin students. For example, Sonadanta instructs 300 Brahmin students from various directions and various countries. Also, the Pāli Canon indicates a considerable segregation of Brahmins. Brahmin villages, often gifts from the king, are repeatedly mentioned as the habitat of the Brahmins. If Brahmins live in their own communities, there is

less chance that Sanskrit learning would extend beyond these villages to others of Āryan descent. Perhaps this is why the Buddha criticizes the "closed fist of a teacher."

8. The three knowledges are 1) remembrance of former lives, 2) insight into the destiny of all individuals, 3) recognition of the origin of suffering and the way to end it, i.e. the path.

9. The words *vedānta* and *vedāntajña* do not appear in the early Upaniṣads. See Colonel G. A. Jacob, *A Concordance to the Principal Upaniṣads and Bhagavadgītā*. Reprint, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1971, p. 894.

10. See Nalinaksha Dutt, *Early Monastic Buddhism*, (Calcutta: Calcutta Oriental Book Agency, 1960), pp. 83–84.

11. See E. H. Johnston, trans., *The Buddhacarita: or Acts of the Buddha* Reprint, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1972, p. 24.