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Vedic Antecedents to Buddhist Mythology: Tvaṣṭṛ's Cup, the Ṛbhus, and the Third Pressing in Comparison to the Several Myths of the Buddha's Bowls*

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Abstract

Several narratives concerning the Buddha's sacred bowls in relatively early Buddhist texts can be read against the backdrop of a set of mythological paradigms from the Vedas and its concomitant ritual practices. I connect the controversial Vedic mythology of Tvaṣṭṛ's unique *soma* cup, its multiplication into four cups by the Ṛbhus, and the invention of the Third Pressing—myths that are only narrativized in the earliest Vedic texts—to two myths, already present *in nuce* in the oldest Buddhist texts, but then more fully narrativized in the Pāli *Nidānakathā*—in which the Buddha receives special bowls:

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one bowl from a woman called Sujātā, and one bowl (originally four) from the Lokapālas. Since the Vedic myths in question appear virtually exclusively in the *Ṛgveda* and its *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa*, before they appear to be forgotten along with their internal tensions regarding the democratization of sacrifice, I argue that the significantly later Buddhist texts are in effect cutting across a set of established orthodoxies in the contemporary Brahmanical traditions, wherein, we will see, there is clear evidence that the tensions surrounding the Ṛbhus had long been resolved. Thus, the Buddhist authors appear to have reached back into the storehouse of recondite Vedic mythology in order to reopen an ancient set of tensions concerning the democratization of religious practices that is then adapted to give a specific weight to this important moment in the life of the Buddha. I will argue that they do so both to ground themselves in that ancient tradition and to also differentiate Buddhist mythology from that of its Brahmanical contemporaries. In conclude by observing that at times the Buddhist texts thus attempt to be hyper-Vedic in their negative acculturation from their contemporaries. This conclusion, and the methodological profile of the article, invites scholars to raise broader questions about the comparative mythology of Buddhist materials to their sources—specifically to those sources that might otherwise seem historically out of reach, but which have left a clear imprint in the formation of stories about the life of the Buddha.

Keywords: Mythology, Jātakas, Vedas, Sujātā, Ṛbhus

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1. Introduction

Several very ancient stories concerning the Buddha's sacred bowls in early Buddhist texts can be read against the backdrop of a broader set of mythological paradigms that go back to Vedic mythology and ritual practice. Specifically, these texts seem to draw on Vedic mythology surrounding the invention of the Third Pressing of *soma* in the way that they narrate the Bodhisattva's enlightenment. The two key examples are the accounts of the Lokapālas' gift of the four bowls to Śakyamuni after his forty-nine-day meditation and the story of Sujātā's preparation of rice-milk as his meal preceding the meditation. These two Buddhist myths are implicitly connected to one another because they bookend the Buddha's forty-nine days of ascetism in which he famously attains enlightenment, thus forming something of a framing device for a clearly important moment in the life of the Buddha. I will connect these episodes, respectively, to the Ṛbhus' transformation of Tvaṣṭṛ's unique *soma* cup into four identical cups, and to debates surrounding the role of the sacrificer's wife at the Third Pressing.[1] In doing so, I will shed light on new coordinates of influence within Buddhist scriptures.

This argument requires engaging with a problem of explicit or implicit mechanisms of transmission. I front this discussion here to avoid any confusion as I develop my argument in more detail after this introductory section of the article. The Vedic material in question plays a relatively minor role in the *Ṛgveda* and in its *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa*

[1] Throughout the article, I have standardized transliterations so as to aid legibility (including in quoted passages from translations and secondary literature).

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(i.e. in the oldest stratum of Vedic mythology, ca. 1200 BCE and following). It is then effectively left to the wayside, although in this early stage there is evidence of an even older debate about the Ṛbhus' standing in Vedic ritual lore. The Buddhist myths, instead, are already partly present among early Buddhist texts, such as those in Gāndhārī (dating back as early as to the first centuries of the first millennium), but find their fullest extant exposition in the in the Pāli *Nidānakathā* (ca. 500 CE), the introduction to an ancient commentary to older Jātaka tales or "birth-stories" of the Buddha, which contain snippets of the myths (ca. 300 BCE and later). Thus, we encounter a clear problem of chronology—since the Vedic material antedates that of the Buddhist texts by roughly one millennium. One potential vector of transmission might appear to be the Brahmanical traditions themselves, which evidently preserved the Vedas, although we will see that, significantly, they do not return to the tense mythology surrounding the Ṛbhus and indeed appear to have actively moved on from them.

Therefore, in connecting these Buddhist myths to the Vedic ones, I will not merely be arguing that the Buddhist texts drawn on Brahmanical lore (that in turn drew from Vedic materials). Rather, since the Vedic myths in question appear virtually exclusively in the *Ṛgveda* and its *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa*, I will need to argue that the Buddhist texts are in effect cutting across or otherwise circumventing the Brahmanical tradition, reaching more directly into the storehouse of recondite Vedic mythology in which the question of the Third Pressing was still contested. This metaphor of an oblique movement across the tradition is necessary to our understanding of the vectors of

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transmission. Since, it is not merely that the debates surrounding the Ṛbhus and the democratization of sacrifice they imply fall out of view after the Vedic period, but we also see the emergence of a new and unrelated mythology of Ṛbhus (indeed, a singular Ṛbhu) in a period roughly contemporary to the Buddhist texts in question—showing that the authors were in effect returning to the scene of an old debate rather than accepting a new orthopraxis that enabled the creation of a new, disconnected mythology. Further, since we know that the continued recitation of the Vedas in Brahmanism is not automatically any guarantee of thorough knowledge of the Vedas' content, the metaphor of cutting across to or returning to the Vedas is all the more apt.[2] Thus, while it is axiomatic that the material remained *potentially* available in the Vedas, which were recited and memorized continually, and while it not unlikely that the early debates within the Vedas may have had long afterlives outside of the extant texts, the state of the extant evidence actually suggests that debates about the Ṛbhus were not, in

[2] On the manner in which the Vedas were preserved more for their form than their content, seminal works include: David Carpenter, "Language, Ritual and Society: Reflections on the Authority of the Veda in India," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 60, no.1 (1992): 57–77; Wilhelm Halbfass, *Tradition and Reflection: Explorations in Indian Thought* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990); Louis Renou, *The Destiny of the Veda in India* (Delhi: Motilal Bonarsidass, 1965). The general arguments are that, on the one hand, preservation of the Vedas in oral form constituted a structuring formal component of Brahminical societies, regardless of the content of the text, as evidenced by a lack of continued commentarial tradition; that the more we find references to the Vedas the less these tend to be grounded in the texts of the Vedas themselves, as for instance in early thought on the origin of *dharma*; and, briefly put, that the very language of the Vedas may have obscured much of the content from its later readers, as already evidenced in certain difficulties encountered by glossators and commentators in the late first millennium BCE.

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fact, ongoing in the long period that spans between the two corpora, and the persistence of the Vedas is in and of itself little guarantee of ongoing debate. In sum, is not immediately clear in philological terms how the compilers of Buddhist texts could have come to draw on such sources—beyond a new and sustained examination of the Vedas themselves.

The metaphor of "cutting across" I invoked to sketch out the stakes of the argument should not be taken to obscure the fact that, however we may want to define the post-Vedic "Brahmanical tradition," we must consider it a fuzzy and underdetermined category—a product both of its putative and alleged sources, as well as of an ongoing dialectical relation to the emerging and equally diverse *śramaṇic* traditions of Buddhism, Jainism, and other contemporary religions. In a recent study, Nathan McGovern speaks cogently of a period of "dialectical identity formation" out of which Hinduism, Jainism, and Buddhism emerge in conversation with one another—shifting the paradigm of scholarly consensus away from an assumption that there can be said to exist an "intrinsic dichotomy" between Brahmanical and non-Brahmanical traditions.[3] Similarly, we will see that the transformation of the Vedic myths into Buddhist ones needs to be contextualized within this matrix that more properly understands the development of Brahmanical and Buddhist ideas as parallel developments crisscrossed by each other and by a number of extrinsic sources as well. In these terms, my comparisons across Buddhist

[3] Nathan McGovern, *The Snake and the Mongoose: The Emergence of Identity in Early Indian Religion* (New York: Oxford UP, 2019), 4.

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and Vedic myths strengthen our understanding of the complexity of the interactions, diachronic as well as synchronic, between these strands of sometimes divergent and sometimes convergent traditions, whose internal logics often reveal the many unexpected paradoxes of complex intraregional identity formation.[4]

However, I want to emphasize again that the key contribution made below rests on a peculiar fact that it is worth restating in full, since it is so surprising. The mythologies of the Ṛbhus, on which the Buddhist texts appear to draw, is *not* mixed in with the Brahmanical tradition, except insofar as the earliest Vedic texts *de facto* come to be included in that tradition. Following those early texts, it is as if the Ṛbhus' Vedic mythology simply disappeared from view. Their names, their miraculous deeds, their controversial ascension to divine status—and, as spelled out in several Vedic hymns—their ambiguous relation to Tvaṣṭṛ, all cease to be a topic of direct narrative and/or ritual deliberation. The scant and scattered references to the Ṛbhus in later texts may still recognize them as minor but important figures, but they do so without returning to their mythology or expounding explicitly on their position among the divine ranks. But it is not merely a matter of their apparent absence. The later tradition does preserve a character called Ṛbhu, who is an ascetic sage that dispenses all manner of wisdom and colloquies with Śiva.[5] Yet, except for his name, this

[4] On this topic, see the work compiled in Patrick Olivelle, ed., *Gṛhastha: The Householder in Ancient Indian Religious Culture* (New York: Oxford UP, 2019).

[5] This Ṛbhu can be found in the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* (1.2.14–15) and in the *Śivarahasya Purāṇ*a, the sixth part of which is known as the "Ṛbhu Gita" (*ṛbhugītā*).

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character bears no resemblance at all to the Vedic Ṛbhus.[6] Although the background to this figure remains somewhat of a mystery, the fact of his presence in the tradition should alert us to the fact that it would be highly unlikely for the old debates about the Ṛbhus to still be open. Whatever his name may have meant by this stage, the mythical associations were mostly lost from memory, likely because—as we will see—the old debate developed into a stable orthodoxy, probably very early after the Vedas were compiled.

Thus, given that the Buddhist texts interact with material related to Ṛbhus and the Third Pressing, we must ask just how familiar their authors might have been with some mythic and ritualistic debates internal to the *Ṛgveda*'s heterodoxies. It is striking that these authors appear to thus plunge back into the depths of an ancient controversy as a tool for defining themselves through and against something that had at some point been a controversial question within Vedism. And while a clinical periodization of the textual evidence related to this maneuver remains, for now, impossible, the bare fact of this kind of mythic survival poses questions that urgently require assessment, even where final answers may not be available, since it cannot be said that these authors were reacting to ongoing debates in the textual tradition

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[6] I plan to publish a separate article on the long tradition of the Ṛbhus, detailing the scant evidence of their post-Vedic survival and transformation—exploring how they are ultimately rewritten into this new, singular figure. I have adumbrated these arguments in my dissertation work on the Ṛbhus. There, I also explore the possibility that some elements of the Vedic Ṛbhu lore survives in a tale from the *Mahābhārata* (but in the *Mahābhārata* there is no mention of or even allusion to myths surrounding the multiplication of the *soma* cup). Claudio Sansone, *Poetics of Unease: Affect and Labor in Ancient Greek, Near Eastern, and Indic Poetry* (PhD. Diss., University of Chicago, 2021), 273–294.

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of their neighbors and/or antagonists.

Notwithstanding these uncertainties, we will come to see that one option is to interpret these choices as part of a strategy of both adaptation and differentiation. To front my conclusions, the recovery of the controversies surrounding the Ṛbhus and the Third Pressing may have been way to generate a mythic matrix for the story of the Buddha's enlightenment—one that might allow Buddhist authors to at once ground their new myths in the established context of a very ancient tradition. Furthermore, since it was precisely that Vedic tradition that was so often co-opted by their Brahmanical contemporaries, by stepping into this terrain the Buddhist authors would have been able to offer an indirect critique to certain discontinuities and paradoxes of the Brahmanical mythologies from within, emphasizing something that had been otherwise left in the margins. We might even say that the Buddhist texts attempted to be hyper-Vedic in their negative acculturation from their contemporary antagonists.

In order to focus on this more striking aspect of the history of the myths in question, and since the relevant Vedic and Buddhist stories discussed below have independently received a great deal of academic attention, this article proceeds by merely drawing a quick sketch of the narrative evidence from the two corpora. It then focuses more heavily on their comparison, rather than deliberating over many interesting minutiae of interpretation that may be relevant to the specific traditions. My hope is that, by presenting this broader picture, others may find an opportunity to explore similar patterns of comparative

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mythology in their own comparative studies. However, while I am excluding for the moment some more fine-grained textual analyses of the primary sources, I will instead be emphasizing a philological approach that rests on recognizing the importance of working backwards toward our sources from intermediary ones—in practice, using the work of several medieval Buddhist writers to gain a vantage on these myths and their afterlives, and on the relation of Buddhism to Vedism more broadly. The reason for doing this is that it allows us to develop a quick sense of the kinds of values attached to these stories as they traveled through time, making the final assessment of the possible transformations the myths underwent more rewarding, not least because they open new questions about the history of the *soma* ritual and new avenues for the study of comparative mythology.

2. The Buddha's Bowl(s)

In a letter dated to 1277, Nichiren Daishōnin (日蓮大聖人), the controversial founder of an eponymous school of Japanese Buddhism, wrote a letter to the wife of his follower Ikegami Munenaga (池上宗長). In it, he praises her for sending him two copper vessels, drawing an analogy between her deed and an episode from the Buddha's life.

> When Śakyamuni Buddha was thirty years old and about to attain Buddhahood, a woman, known as the cowherd girl, boiled rice in milk and prepared gruel to offer to the Buddha, but she had no vessel to put it in. The four heavenly kings, Vaiśravaṇa and the others, had presented the Buddha with four bowls. The woman placed the bowls one within another and

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> made her offering of gruel in these, and the Buddha was thus able to attain enlightenment.
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> Thereafter, though no one filled the bowls, they were always full of food. Later the bodhisattva known as Aśvaghoṣa handed them over [to King Kanishka] in lieu of a payment of three thousand coins.
>
> And now you have sent these two vessels a thousand miles, an offering to Śakyamuni Buddha, and you will receive similar good fortune.[7]

Whether Nichiren was drawing on a source that is no longer available, or whether he was paraphrasing from memory, we have here what appears to be a conflation of two distinct mythic episodes in which the Buddha was gifted a rather special bowl.[8] The first is the story of the cowherd girl, who gives the Buddha one precious bowl. The second is the story of the four bowls brought to the Buddha by the four heavenly kings, which the Buddha himself transforms into a single bowl (it is never another character that performs this magical or miraculous deed). Both stories are already extant in the *Nidānakathā*, the biographical introduction to a commentary on the Pali Jātakas, and, as some earlier evidence mentioned below may suggest, this may in turn rest on an even longer textual and oral tradition that stretches

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7 Nichiren Daishonin, *The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin* (WND), vol. 2, 719–720, https://www.nichirenlibrary.org/en/wnd-2/Content/282. Accessed: Oct 11 2024.

8 The annotations to the WND, cited above, suggest the *Causality Sutra* (過去現在因果經) may be a possible source for this confusion. However, on my analysis of that text, the *Causality Sutra* merely tells both narratives briefly, without conflating them in any way. The true source of Nichiren's confusion remains a mystery.

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back toward the beginnings of Buddhism.

In that text, the two stories bookend the Buddha's forty-nine days of meditation, through which he attains enlightenment. Extant versions of each episode in Pali, Sanskrit, Chinese, Tibetan and other languages tell the story differently—adding details, subtracting them, and sometimes even altering the chronological sequence of events.[9] Reviewing the stories, below, I want to set the groundwork for a broader analysis of these narratives as living myths—i.e., as traditionally significant narratives, the reworkings of which deliberate over contested elements of cultural self-understanding, or as stories that were used to define aspects of Buddhism in contrast to preceding and contemporary systems of belief. In other words, undoing Nichiren's knot will show us that the Buddha's bowls were embedded in a complex network of mythic associations, a least a part of which, I will argue, is much older than Buddhism itself, reaching back into the Vedic past.

The cowherd girl who gives the Buddha a bowl of rice-milk at the beginning the forty-nine days of meditation is variously called Sujātā or Nandabalā, although in some texts she is not named at all.

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[9] See, for example, the catalogue of sources listed in Sean D. Gaffned, "The *Jātakanidāna*: A Critical Study, Tibetan Edition, and Annotated Translation" (PhD diss., SOAS University of London, 2002); Shoshin Kuwayama, "The Buddha's Bowl in Gandhāra and Relevant Problems," in *South Asian Archaeology 1987*, pt. 2, ed. M. Taddei (Rome: Istituto Italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente, 1990), 945–978. References to variant editions of texts throughout my article rely on the various tabulations made in these two resources. The main texts I have examined firsthand, beyond the *Nidānakathā*, are the following: *Buddhacarita* of Aśvaghoṣa (ca. 2nd c. CE); *Lalitavistara Sūtra*; several Jātakas (as discussed below); and a Tocharian version of the Jātaka tale (THT 107).

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Upon receiving boons that were requested as a part of a vow made in her youth, she decided to offer exquisitely prepared rice-milk to the local tree-deva. The *Nidānakathā* is particularly detailed in its description of how the meal is prepared. First, the milk was "worked in and in"—the milk from a thousand cows was fed to five hundred cows, then the second group's milk to two hundred and fifty cows, and so on down to eight, thus guaranteeing its sweetness and strength. This milk miraculously shot out from the cows' udders and into the pails when she went to collect it.

> Now at that time, at Uruvela, in the village Senani, there was a girl named Sujata, born in the house of Senani the landowner, who, when she had grown up, made a vow at a Nigrodha-tree, saying: "If I am married into a family of equal rank, and have a son for my first-born child, then I will spend every year a hundred thousand on an offering to thee." And this her vow took effect.
>
> And in order to make her offering, on the full-moon day of the month of May, in the sixth year of the Great Being's penance, she had driven in front of her a thousand cows into a meadow of rich grass. With their milk she had fed five hundred cows, with theirs two hundred and fifty, and so on down to eight. Thus aspiring after quantity, and sweetness, and strength, she did what is called: "Working the milk in and in."
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> And early on the full-moon day in the month of May, thinking: "Now I will make the offering," she rose up in the morning

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> early and milked those eight cows. Of their own accord the calves kept away from the cows udders, and as soon as the new vessels were placed ready, streams of milk poured into them. Seeing this miracle, Sujata, with her own hands, took the milk and poured it into new pans; and with her own hands made the fire and began to cook it. When that rice-milk was boiling, huge bubbles rising, turned to the right and ran round together; not a drop fell or was lost; not the least smoke rose from the fireplace.[10]

Next, the rice-milk is prepared in very special circumstances: the fireplace was protected by the four heavenly kings (the Lokapālas), Brahma held a canopy over it, Sakka (Indra) gathered the sticks and lit the fire, and the devas all together infused the food with a mysterious and underdetermined "sap of maintenance" (*upakappanaojaṁ*).

When Sujātā's slave girl reports that the "deva" had come down from the tree, Sujātā brings the deva the rice-milk in a golden bowl. It is clear she did not know to whom she was making her donation. Indeed, the Bodhisattva has come to the tree following a series of dreams the night before, the interpretation of which led him to understand that on this day he was ready to become Buddha. As Sujātā approaches with the golden bowl of rice-milk, the earthenware bowl that had previously been given to the Buddha by the potter Ghaṭīkāra

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[10] All translations from the *Nidānakathā* are taken from T. W. Rhys Davids, *Buddhist Birth-Stories (Jataka Tales): The Commentarial Introduction Entitled Nidāna-Kathā, The Story of the Lineage*, translated from V. Fausböll's ed. of the Pali text by T.W. Rhys Davids, new and rev. ed. by Mrs. Rhys Davids (London: George Routledge & Sons, 1878). This passage, 184–185.

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suddenly disappears. Since he has no bowl of his own, she leaves him the golden bowl before leaving. At this stage, after bathing in the river, the Buddha separates the rice-milk into forty-nine portions and spends forty-nine days at the foot of the tree without eating further, bathing, or washing his teeth—without feeling any natural desires. At the end of this period, he takes the golden vessel and throws it into the river saying, "if I shall be able today to become a Buddha, let this pot go up the stream: if not, let it go down the stream!" The bowl goes up the river, against the current, into a whirlpool that leads it to the palace of a Naga king, where it strikes against the bowls from which three previous Buddhas had eaten. Hearing the noise, the Naga king recognizes that a new Buddha has arisen. Among minor variants to the story in later versions, there is one that is particularly interesting in terms of the mythological contexts for this episode. From texts like the *Lalitavistara*, we learn that Indra (disguised as a *garuḍa*-bird) steals the bowl from its resting place in the Naga palace to worship it.

One reason a reader like Nichiren might have conflated this story with that of the bowl the Buddha receives after the forty-nine days of meditation is that the tradition also preserves a version of the Sujātā story in which she brings him food not before but after the attainment of enlightenment. This kind of chronological inconsistency is also present between versions of the story of the Buddha's transformation of four bowls into one bowl, where the Lokapālas once again play an important role. Rather than attempt to schematize all such inconsistencies (see note above), I think it is sufficient to note that there is a great deal of attention played on how the Buddha's meals

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are timed in relation to his attainment of enlightenment. These details, evidently contested, created a certain mythic porosity that—along with other details mentioned above—might explain both why Nichiren was confused and why the tradition rehearses these episodes with due modifications across time. But it also emphasizes the importance of these specific characters and stories in a definitional moment of the Buddha's biography—establishing, at a moment far beyond that of the key evidence I will go on to discuss below, the continued relevance of these myths as a deliberative framework rather than as calcified narratives.

The second story of the Buddha's bowl, much studied for what it tells us about the history of Buddhism in Gandhara (and Gandharan art history) as well as about the geographical spread of relics, is also extant in many versions. It is commonly known as the story of the "Two Merchants," who become the Buddha's first two devotees after his enlightenment. The oldest, albeit incomplete, version is in Gāndhārī, showing that it was known among the earliest Buddhist texts—but it too is told in fuller detail in the *Nidānakathā*.[11] Trapusa and Bahalika chanced upon the Buddha in his newly enlightened state.

> At that time two merchants, Tapassu and Bhalluka by name, were travelling from Orissa to Central India with five hundred carts. And a deva, a blood relation of theirs, stopped their carts, and moved their hearts to offer food to the Master. And they

[11] For a summary and discussion of the Gandhari text in relation to its parallels, see Mark Allon, "A Gāndhārī Version of the Story of the Merchants Tapussa and Bhallika," *Bulletin of the Asia Institute* 23 (2009): 9–19.

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> took a rice cake, and a honey cake, and went up to the Master, and said: "O sir, Blessed One! out of compassion for us accept this food."
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> Now, on the day when he had received the sweet rice-milk, his bowl had disappeared; so the Blessed One thought: "The Buddhas never receive food in their hands. How shall I accept it?" Then the four Guardians knew his thought and, coming from the four quarters of the sky, they brought bowls made of sapphire. And the Blessed One accepted them. Then they brought four other bowls, made of jade; and the Blessed one, out of kindness to the four devas, received the four, and placing them one above another commanded, saying: "Let them become one." And the four closed up into one of medium size, becoming visible only as lines round the mouth of it. The Blessed One received the food into that new created bowl, and ate it, and gave thanks.[12]

Moved by the deva, they decided to offer the Buddha some food. But since he had thrown the golden vessel in the river, and the earthenware pot had disappeared when Sujātā gave him the golden one, the Buddha realizes he has no way to accept their donation. The Lokapālas become aware of this and bring the Buddha four bowls, variously made of precious materials or stones (different versions record different materials).[13] The Buddha accepts all four—so as to not

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[12] T.W. Rhys Davids, *Nidānakathā*, 205–206.

[13] One curious feature of the *Nidānakathā* is that the Buddha is first brought four crystal bowls, which he accepts without transforming them into a single bowl.

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offend any of the Lokapālas—and transforms them, magically, into a single bowl. It is sometimes specified that the resultant bowl has four rims, as if containing a memory of the original four. Indeed, there are many visual representations of this bowl, particularly from Gandhara. Recently, I have even found a previously unnoticed one in Cambodia, housed in The National Museum of Cambodia in Phnom Penh, and originally from Angkor Thom. The story was evidently extremely well-known and its representation widespread.

This special bowl then becomes in effect *the* Buddha's bowl. It is only in much later texts that we hear about the bowl's history as a relic traveling across South Asia, as well as several stories about the bowl's destruction—or breaking back into four pieces—at the hands of evil kings who despise Buddhism, or because of the waning piety of mankind. These quasi-eschatological concluding episodes reinscribe the bowl in a cyclical vision of Buddhist time, since the restoration of the fragmented bowl—or the reincorporation of the four into one—clears the path for the mythic stories to repeat themselves for the next Buddhas, who will forever use this bowl or these bowls to articulate the moment of their own enlightenment. I will return to an example of this narrative later. But it should be clear from the summaries above that the texts' insistence on there being only one Buddha's bowl belies a complex mythic background of the multiple bowls that iteratively

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Then he is brought four bowls made of jade, which he transforms into one bowl with four rims. This accretion or doubling in the narrative may be the result of several versions in which the Buddha rejects bowls that are made of materials that are too precious. Indeed, in later versions he only accepts the gift of the bowls once (four bowls of simple stone are presented to him).

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punctuate the life of every Buddha—placing a special emphasis on the threshold of the attainment of enlightenment.

In sum, we can draw several preliminary conclusions that could motivate a turn to the Vedic or pre-Buddhist background of the mythology of the bowls, without yet making recourse to a specific mythic antecedent. Firstly, the plurality of significant bowls in an interlocked mythic sequencing suggests that the matter of the Buddha's bowl was clearly a hotly contested topic that writers explored by marshalling diverse and even conflicting mythic traditions to their cause. Secondly, in both sets of stories summarized above, the bowls are discussed in relation to divine figures that have clear Vedic (although not *exclusively* Vedic) antecedents—Brahma, the four Lokapālas, and Sakka/Indra.[14] Thirdly, in the story of Sujātā, there is a clear reference to *de facto* pre-Buddhist sacrificial practices: the girls are convinced that they are dealing with a local tree-deva. What might the origin of these practices be? Fourthly, in the same narrative, the preparation of the food is described in great detail in a manner reminiscent of the preparations involved in performing a Vedic sacrifice. What exactly is the "sap of maintenance" (*upakappanaojaṁ*) with which the devas infuse the rice-milk? Later in this article, I will explore how it might this relate to the *soma* rituals of the Brahmans, or

[14] It is worth underlining here, briefly, that the Lokapālas, as guardians of the four directions, may hearken back to an important Vedic theme of the projection of authority in the four directions—against tribes or clan that occupied neighboring regions relative to the speaker's central position (i.e. the "fifth" direction or *pradíś*). See Charles C. Smith, "Sources of Authority: The Invention of Vedic Authority," in *A Cultural History of Hinduism in Antiquity*, ed. J. Whitaker (London: Bloomsbury, 2024), 17–39.

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that of the Vedas.

But at this stage, it is worth remembering that in later Buddhist writings the influx of Vedic rites (including the *soma* and fire ritual) into Buddhist texts and practices was emphatically remarked upon as a process of skilled appropriation. In his *Mahāvairocana-abhisaṃbodhi-tantra* (大毘盧遮那成佛經疏 , T 1796.39.579a–649c), the seventh-century commentator Yixing (一行) went as far as to explain that "Śakyamuni understood the allure of these popular rites, and so he intentionally appropriate them and imbued them with Buddhist meanings," resulting in what he terms a "Buddhist Veda (*fo weituo* 佛韋陀)," characterized by an externally Brahmanical sacrifice that is reworked to serve orthodox Buddhist goals.[15] Although Yixing writes several centuries after the material in question, he seems to in effect be pre-empting some components of the argument I am making here—and that others have made, regarding the familiarity not just of the Buddha with the Vedic materials, but also of the earlier Buddhist authors with the same.[16] This raises the urgency with which we might ask whether the entanglement of the stories of the Buddha's bowl(s) represent an early version of this phenomenon of a "Buddhist Veda," and what that might mean more concretely in terms of the formation of mythic narratives.

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[15] R. H. Sharf, "Buddhist Veda and the Rise of Chan," in *Chinese and Tibetan Esoteric Buddhism*, ed. Y. Bentor and M. Shahar (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 85–120.

[16] On whether the Buddha is understood to "know" the Vedas, and the deliberation with a heterogenous inter-religious tradition, see Katherine K. Young, "The Issue of the Buddha as *Vedagū* with Reference to the Formation of the *Dhamma* and the Dialectic with the Brahmins," *The Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 5, no. 2 (1982): 110–120.

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3. The Vedic Antecedents

The Vedic myths on which I will now focus relate to that Tvaṣṭṛ's cup, which is multiplied into four cups by certain figures known collectively as the Ṛbhus—a gesture that the Buddhist myths above appear to controvert. This set of myths is closely associated with the establishment of the Third Pressing of *soma*, an initially controversial rite that was then clearly folded into the orthodox view of Vedic and then Hindu ritual activity. Below, I will therefore also offer some insights into the ritual details of the Third Pressing, since the fact of its establishment and some of its peculiarities may in and of themselves also have provided Buddhist authors a set of conceptual instruments for the development of the two bowl narratives outlined above.

In several Ṛgvedic hymns, we learn that Tvaṣṭṛ fashioned a special cup for the gods. It is from this cup that the gods drink *soma*, the mysterious drink of the immortals and the key ingredient of Vedic sacrifice. The crucial symbolism of this cup as *the* cup of the gods is then reflected in the use of cups and vessels throughout Vedic rites, which are believed to reflect and perpetuate the cosmic order on earth, when properly executed by the priestly class. Tvaṣṭṛ is more broadly a divine demiurge that makes objects for the gods—including Indra's thunderbolt and Surya's chariot. He is a member of what might be termed the older strata of the Vedic pantheon. He is part of a generation of gods that includes Mitra and Varuṇa—a generation that notionally stands above and apart the so-called younger and more clearly personified gods, like Indra, and instead represents, in

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various guises, natural forces that structure the cosmos.[17] This gap creates some natural tensions between divine figures, since it reflects several questions of ritual priority in a textual corpus that is hardly homologous and that reflects the practices of many different people in different places at different times.[18] From the outset then, we should recognize that the mythology I outline in this section is not homologous—but its internal tensions will be precisely one reason for treating it seriously as a possible antecedent to the Buddhist materials.

In a handful of Ṛgvedic hymns, Tvaṣṭṛ's demiurgic monopoly is extended (or challenged) by three "new" figures, collectively named Ṛbhus (which is also a noun that means "laborer" or "craftsman" in the Vedas).[19] The Ṛbhus were mortals who attained a share of *soma* and thus attained immortality. They were granted this honor through or because of several feats of practically miraculous demiurgic activity. For instance, they appear to bring a cow back to life after it had been sacrificed, they made divine chariots that required no horses, and

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17 Joel P. Brereton and Stephanie Jamison. *The Rigveda: A Guide* (New York: Oxford UP, 2020), 86–89, 97.

18 See Charles Caley Smith, "Exploring 'impossible authors'," in *Veda and Vedic Literature: Select Papers from the Panel on "Veda and Vedic Literature" at the 16th World Sanskrit Conference (28 June – 2 July 2015) Bangkok, Thailand*, ed. H. H. Hock (DK Publishers, 2016), 209–225.

19 The etymology of the word is rather more complex, although it is not necessary to explore this here. Although I have some doubts as to the current scholarly consensus that I will explore elsewhere, interested readers can turn to a recent and sophisticated summary of the relevant evidence in Laura Massetti, "Gr. Ὀρφεύς, ved. Ṛ̱bhú- und heth. ḫarp(p)mi," in *Miscellanea indogermanica. Festschrift für José Luis García Ramón zum 65. Geburtstag*, ed. D. Kölligan and I. Hajnal (Innsbruck: Institut für Sprachen und Literaturen der Universität Innsbruck Bereich Sprachwissenschaft, 2017), 457–470.

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they were even able to make old people young again.[20] They more broadly helped the community secure military safety and agricultural prosperity. In sum, they performed several godlike deeds and often even went further than the gods might. For our purposes, however, we need but focus on what is perhaps their most important miracle: in several hymns, we learn that the Ṛbhus took Tvaṣṭṛ's cup and made four identical cups from it.

In some hymns, this miracle is praised both by Tvaṣṭṛ and other gods like Agni, who grants them immortality precisely because of this impressive feat. However, in another Vedic hymn this miracle is sternly rebuked. Tvaṣṭṛ even threatens to murder the Ṛbhus for making four cups, pushing them into a temporary exile, claiming they had defiled the sanctity of the one cup by making four copies. The Ṛbhus are sometimes represented as speaking defensively about their action, going as far as to explain that they did not mean to insult Tvaṣṭṛ's cup through their multiplicative magic. This back and forth over the propriety of their action has been read as a layer of *Ṛgveda*-internal tension—evidence of disagreements between clans of priests who saw the Ṛbhus in a different light and may have found their deeds more or less worthy of praise so as to position them as recipients of *soma* at the

[20] Citations to the relevant verses, along with references to the basic interpretations I offer, can be found in J.P. Brereton, "Gods' work: The Rbhus in the Rgveda," in *Indologica: T. Ya. Elizarenkova Memorial Volume*, vol. 2, ed. L. Kulikov (Moscow: Russian State University for the Humanities, 2012), 111–134. Further primary references are collected in Uma Chakravarty, "The Rbhus," *Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute* 71, no. 1 (1990), 139–154, and in the relevant portions and Abel Bergaigne, *La religion védique d'après les hymnes du Rig-Veda*, 3 vols. (Paris: F. Vieweg, 1878–1883).

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Third Pressing.[21] Practically speaking, the only piece of robust extra-Ṛgvedic evidence (from the *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa* to the *Ṛgveda*) also confirms that there were anxieties surrounding the Ṛbhus' inclusion at the Third Pressing. After the Ṛbhus attain immortality, they try to participate in the morning offering of *soma* and are turned away by Agni with the Vasus. Next, they try to participate in the midday offering but are rejected by Indra with the Rudras. When it came to the third, evening pressing—at which the *Rigveda* appears to place the Ṛbhus, the plot thickens (given the etiological purposes of the passage). Initially, the Ṛbhus are rejected by all the gods (to whom the third offering is reserved), until Prajāpati points out to Savitṛ that they are his pupils, so he should not refuse to drink *soma* with them. Savitṛ consents and also instructs Prajāpati to participate. We are thus shown that the older gods only accept this addition with great reluctance.[22]

Several things may underlie this tension. On the one hand, we have here a philosophical problem tied to a theological one. Roberto Calasso has suggested that the myths of the Ṛbhus highlight the breakdown of the view that only gods can create things, since the human Ṛbhus, when still mortal, garner their own power through the work of imitation. For Calasso, this further allegorizes a tension between the religious labor of gods (or even priests) and the work performed by artisans and artists. When its interpretation is taken to

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[21] Thus Brereton, cited above, invites us to "recall that the Ṛbhus likely did not enjoy rousing popularity among some priestly families, and those who did honor them might well have had to make the mythological case for their inclusion [as recipients of *soma* at the Third Pressing]" ("Gods's Work," 119). Discussed further, below.

[22] This passage can be found in the *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa* (III.30).

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a certain extreme, the myth might even imply a view of how humans can see themselves as creators of the gods, and not vice versa, since the ability to generate copies of the transcendent cup destroys the myth of its uniqueness. On the other hand, a more historical interpretation centers on the establishment of the Third Pressing, to which the Ṛbhus are elsewhere associated through Indra (sometimes given the epithet "lord of the Ṛbhus," e.g. I.162.1). By making more cups they restructure the ritual day and grant broader access to *soma*, in effect democratizing access to the ritual. As mentioned above, whatever the precise change in ritual practices, it may or may not have been appreciated by some families of priests and not by others, explaining why the Ṛgvedic hymns (likely composed by members of clans with competing viewpoints) explore different perspectives on the Ṛbhus' miraculous deed. Indeed, in the *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa* summary epilogue to the story, even the gods did not want to share *soma* with the Ṛbhus, but they ultimately conceded to do so since they recognized that the Ṛbhus' ingenuity stemmed from the gods' teachings. Nonetheless, even though they accept their inclusion in the *soma* sacrifice, some of the gods continue to shun the now-immortal Ṛbhus because they still "smell like humans" (or, more precisely, "the gods just abhorred [the Ṛbhus] because of their human smell" *tebhyo vai devā apaivābībhatsanta manuṣyagandhāt*, III.30.4). This story of reluctant concession skillfully papers over various issues to provide an as non-controversial-as-possible explanation for the institution of the Ṛbhus at the Third Pressing, carefully incorporating existing discomforts about them but clarifying the status quo—after all, it is clear that the Third Pressing has been around for a very long time, and its existence

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was hardly a matter of overall contention in the Vedic sources.

In sum, the myths of the Ṛbhus and of Tvaṣṭṛ's cup offer several intriguing grounds for comparison to the story of the four bowls gifted to the Buddha by the Lokapālas. The most obvious is the similarity of the four-to-one shift in the bowl(s), inversely complemented by the one-to-four transformation of the cup(s). A second is the similarly transitional nature of the narratives punctuated by these miracles: both occur at a moment of transformation for the individuals in question—as the Buddha attains enlightenment, as the Ṛbhus attain immortality. Furthermore, in both traditions the various versions appear to be engaged in an active debate about the precise sequence of events. As we saw above, it is sometimes unclear whether the Buddha was offered the food or the bowl(s) first, which bowl(s) are at stake, etc. Similarly, there is some hesitation between the Vedic hymns about the priority of the Ṛbhus' miracle and their attainment of immortality. There are other, smaller similarities—such as the involvement of Indra/Sakka in both sets of myths, as if the miracles of the cups or bowls in some way clarified his own position vis-à-vis the other gods and the specific agents of the miracles, but I shall discuss that below in reference to Sujātā.

There is a further similarity that in some ways might show the importance of this borrowing from a different perspective than a merely mythological one. The efficacy of words alongside deeds is an issue that cuts to the core of several philosophical and theological concerns central to both traditions being discussed here. In both mythologies there are versions of the myths in which the miraculous

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deed of multiplication or unification is preceded by a very distinctive, quasi-performative speech act. In one of the Ṛgvedic hymns, for instance, the three Ṛbhus each explicitly announce the creation of a further cup before they go on to actually make it.

> The eldest said, "I will make two cups (from one)." The younger said, "We will make three."
> The youngest said, "I will make four." O Ṛbhus, Tvaṣṭṛ wondered at that speech of yours.[23]

> jyeṣṭhá āha camasā́ dvā́ karéti kánīyān trī́n kṛṇavāméty āha | kaniṣṭhá āha catúras karéti tváṣṭa ṛbhavas tát panayad váco vaḥ || IV.33.5

Following the work of George Thompson, we can read these utterances as akin to "acts of truth" (Pāli: *saccakiriyā*; Sanskrit: *satyakriyā*), or as verbal forms of craftsmanship—forging reality through speech acts. The Buddha's own locution as reported in the *Nidānakathā*, "let them become one" (*eko hotū*), might offer a similar mythic narrativization, underscoring the efficacy of his speech alongside that of his actions, at the same time as it shows one fact about the Ṛbhus' mythology that might have been appealing to Buddhist authors.[24]

To my knowledge, Stella Kramrisch was the first and only scholar to speculate in a similar direction, exploring the connection between

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[23] Stephanie Jamison and Joel Brereton, trans., *The Rigveda: The Earliest Religious Poetry of India*, 3 vols. (New York: Oxford UP, 2014), 611.

[24] See George Thompson, "On Truth-Acts in Vedic," *Indo-Iranian Journal* 41, no.2 (1998): 125–153.

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the Ṛbhus and the Lokapālas in a closing footnote to one of her own articles on the Ṛbhus.

> Readers familiar with the legend of the Buddha will recognize an adaptation of the cup theme in the story of the four alms-bowls given to the newly enlightened Śakyamuni by the Lokapālas, the rulers of the four quarters. His miraculous joining of the four into one — explained in the Sūtras as a mere gesture of tact toward the givers — may well have had to Buddhist initiates the deeper significance of a new restoration of Wholeness.[25]

Kramrisch is confident that modern readers will see the connection between the myths but is vague in her explanation of how this might have been taken by ancient ones, such as the "Buddhist initiates" she mentions. Certainly, it is difficult to reconstruct how a Buddhist reader would have perceived a connection between the mythologies to appreciate the significance of the Buddha's act as a restorative reintegration of a whole that had been broken apart. We did see that in the Ṛbhu mythology there is at least some concern expressed, within the *Ṛgveda*, as to the consequences of their multiplication of the *soma* cups. However, even when there is internal resistance, the concerns and consequences are not exactly spelled out—we merely see Tvaṣṭṛ's murderous ire (*hánāmainām̐ íti tváṣṭā yád ábravīc camasáṃ yé devapā́nam ánindiṣuḥ*, I.161.5) and then the narrative in effect moves on. Even if we accept the views I expressed above in my review of

[25] Stella Kramrisch, "The Ṛg Vedic Myth of the Craftsmen (The Ṛbhus)," *Artibus Asiae* 22, no.1/2 (1959), 120, note 26.

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Calasso's own conclusions on the Ṛbhus, it still remains an open question how the initiate that Kramrisch imagines may have had the requisite familiarity with this very ancient (and by now outmoded) Vedic knowledge—and a detailed enough familiarity to splice the Vedic myths into their new Buddhist versions. It could be that we are reading the evidence "backwards," and ought to take the persistence of these myths into the Buddhist texts (covert as it may be) as evidence of broader ongoing debates about the Ṛbhus that far outstrip the narrative of the controversies surrounding the Third Pressing in terms of how we can reconstruct them according to the extant textual record. Or it could be that, if we imagine the initiate to be a convert, he might have held to particularly arcane knowledge with special fervor, perhaps a result of his own training in the Vedas. This, we cannot ultimately determine.

However, Kramrisch's interpretation sheds light on at least one clear mechanism of differentiation within the model of appropriation we have been exploring: the Buddhist authors may have developed an attachment to the inversion of the Vedic myth of the cups because the Buddha's own unification of the four cups offers an important affective attachment to the Buddha as a symbol of restoration and "wholeness." As mentioned above, the bowl that the Buddha creates by fusing the four gifted to him by the Lokapālas has a long afterlife in the Buddhist imaginary. It becomes *the* bowl of the Buddha—and it is said to be the same bowl for all of his reincarnations. In order to explain the mythic mechanics of its inscription into a cyclical temporality, several texts in the Chinese canon offer us a vision of its future mythological roles,

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following on the death of Gotama, that might also be considered in relation to these reasons for the appropriation of the Ṛbhu mythology.

Perhaps the most interesting version of the story can be found in the chronicle of Faxian (法顯), a Chinese Buddhist monk that traveled in Southeast Asia visiting Buddhist sites and recording Buddhist texts between 399 and 410 CE. In his *Foguoji* (佛國記 , but commonly given other titles and often known in English as the *Record of the Buddhist Kingdoms*), he presents an extremely peculiar episode in which he is offered a recitation of a previously unrecorded *sūtra*. However, the speaker then confesses that the *sūtra* is not a *sūtra* at all, rather it is a figment of his own imagination. This work within a work, uncanonical as it may be and unconventional as its framing device is, contains some extremely consequential details in understanding the importance of the unity of the Buddha's bowl. The Indian devotee begins by describing in detail the journey of the relic of the bowl to Gandhara, and then its future journeys, until it will "ascend to Tushita heaven," at which point,

> when the Bodhisattva Maitreya sees it, he will say with a sigh, "The alms-bowl of Śakyamuni Buddha is come;" and with all the devas he will present to it flowers and incense for seven days. When these have expired, it will return to Jambudvīpa, where it will be received by the kind of the sea nagas, and taken into his naga palace. When Maitreya shall be about to attain perfect Wisdom (and become Buddha), it will again separate into four bowls, which will return to the top of mount Anna [or Vina], whence they came. After Maitreya has become

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> Buddha, the four deva kings will again think the Buddha (with their bowls as they did in the case of the previous Buddha). The thousand Buddhas of this Bhadrakalpa, indeed, will all use the same alms-bowl; and when the bowl has disappeared, the Law of Buddha will go on gradually to be extinguished. After that extinction has taken place, the life of man will be shortened, till it is only a period of five years. During this period of a five years' life, rice, butter, and oil will all vanish away, and men will become exceedingly wicked. The grass and trees which they lay hold of will change into swords and clubs, with which they will hurt, cut, and kill one another.[26]

The narrative goes on to describe how the Law of the Buddha is recovered by those blessed who had hidden in the mountains while the wicked people all killed each other. Evidently, the integrity of the bowl plays an important part in the maintenance of the cosmic order and its integration is explained to be a cyclical process that gradually restores order. The importance of the bowl's integrity is also a feature of other texts such as the *Lianhuamianjing* (蓮華面經, T.12: 1075b–1077b), in which the heretical king Mihirakula will destroy the Buddha's Law—as the Buddha puts it, "this blooming fool will break my bowl to pieces."[27] These later texts thus make clear how the conceptual unification of the bowl was taken to be a symbol of definitional and foundational importance, explaining perhaps how a Buddhist reader might have read into the mythology of the Ṛbhus and

[26] James Legge, *The Travels of Fa-Hien* (Delhi: Oriental publishers, 1971), 109–110.
[27] Kuwayama, "Bowl," 965.

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may have wanted to invert it for his own purposes. Indeed, it may very well be the case that there is here evidence of a broader mythological background in which the stories of bowls of cups coming together or breaking a part carried enormous weight—and that the Vedas and the Buddhist texts are directly or indirectly drawing from such a silent tradition alongside the latter's possible borrowing from the former.

Having thus established possible grounds of comparison between these two mythological narratives, I will now turn to the more complex case of the story of Sujātā and its possible Vedic antecedents. Things are somewhat trickier here as there is no straightforwardly analogous figure in the mythologies of the Vedic hymns. Some have argued that we can see in the Vedic myth of Indra's wife Apālā a predecessor to the Sujātā and Buddha mythology of the *Nidānakathā*, since in several Jātakas we can find a complex story relating how Sujātā marries Indra, rather than Buddha, perhaps because the new mythology requires that the non-Indraic Bodhisattva not marry.[28] This is an ingenious argument, and may have contributed to the prominent role of Sujātā at the opening of the Bodhisattva's meditation, and it is not impossible that the Buddhist texts might also be negotiating a gendered and even sexual set of undertones from the Vedas (discussed below). Others have preferred to speculate as to a non-Vedic and non-Brahmanical origin for the Sujātā myths—i.e., taking them as a remnant of indigenous mythologies now beyond our range of possible knowledge. After all, it is true that in the story described above the

[28] Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy, *The Darker Side of Dawn* (Washington, D.C.: The Smithsonian Institution, 1935), 1–18.

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two women originally think that the Buddha is merely a tree-deva. These are not mutually exclusive options: the *Nidānakathā*'s Sujātā need not be drawn from any one specific source, after all. However, it is also possible that in these myths "a veiled reference is made that links the Buddha's actions to those performed by brahmans during the *śrāddha* funerary rites," particularly if we focus on potential funerary aspects of the ritual landscape of the Sujātā myths (e.g., in the earlier *Lalitavistara Sūtra*, in which the Buddha also receives the clothes of the dead Sujātā).[29] This only extends the range of possible accretions within this mythic tale—spanning from the Vedic well into the Brahmanical, and perhaps even drawing on lost native traditions.

Nonetheless, given that we have established with a certain degree of confidence that the Ṛbhus' mythology contributed to that of the four bowls of the Lokapālas, it may be worth entertaining more explicitly how and to what extent the Sujātā narrative might be read as similarly related to the establishment of the Third Pressing, circling back naturally also in the direction of connecting the Buddha in several ways to Indra, as I began to do above. This is a tricky question, since the literature describing and indeed schematizing the Vedic rites is famously complex and thorny. The ritual details must be reconstructed, speculatively and tentatively, from a wide variety of sources, many of which spread across centuries—frustrating neat symbolic connections between hymns and rites. Firstly, the *Ṛgveda* itself seems to tell us that very establishment of the Third Pressing was not immediately

[29] Robert DeCaroli, *Haunting the Buddha: Indian Popular Religions and the Formation of Buddhism* (New York: Oxford UP, 2004), 108.

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accepted by all clans.

> In the classical śrauta ritual, the soma is pressed three times on the central day of the sacrifice. However, at least certain Ṛgvedic clans seem to have had only two pressings; for example, in V.77.2 strong disapproval is expressed for sacrificing at evening. The Third Pressing, which takes place in the evening, would then be an innovation in particular circles, an innovation that then spread and was adopted into the ecumenical ritual.[30]

Among the particular innovations in the Third Pressing there are: questions related to the number of cups used, which is expanded to welcome a larger set of priests symbolized (or etiologized) by the Ṛbhus; the kinds of pure and mixed *soma* prepared at different stages of the rite; and, a change in the views related to women's access to the *soma* rites. Indeed, the wife of the sacrificer is—strikingly—a required participant at the Third Pressing, and the etiologies behind the Third Pressing may have represented an attempt to negotiate the tension between the universal need for access to *soma* as a component of social life and the restrictions placed on access in earlier rites. Hence what we might term the democratizing the emphasis on the craftsmen and at least one woman.[31]

Even on this summary basis, we can begin to see some elements of the Third Pressing that are particularly unusual and

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[30] Brereton and Jamison, *Guide*, 49.

[31] Brereton and Jamison, *Guide*, 49–50 (with several further references to the work of Jamison cited therein); Brereton, "Gods's Work," 116–121.

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striking in connection with Sujātā as a woman who is not of priestly caste. Certainly, we can see how Sujātā herself might be seen as a reinterpretation of the sacrificer's wife, or of the new prominence given to women in the expansion or democratization of the ritual processes. Further, there is the complex use of left-over *soma* remixed with milk that plays a central role in the Third Pressing.[32] Might then the unusual narrative about the cows re-filtering the milk in the *Nidānakathā* represent an echo of this process? In turn, the mysterious added substance—the "sap of maintenance" (*upakappanaojaṁ*)—might be compared, for lack of a better alternative, to some of the other ingredients peculiar to the Third Pressing, whether the leftover materials specific to the Third Pressing or even to the specific kind of *soma* that is prepared with them. This would then also grant another meaning to the presence of Sakka/Indra during Sujātā's preparation of the rice-milk, when we recall that as the erstwhile leader of the Ṛbhus he is centrally related to the myths behind the establishment of the Third Pressing.

Building on the several points of contact between the Buddha and Indra discussed above, we may also want to see this rehashing of the Vedic myths as an attempt to develop a kind of surprising enmeshment between Indra as the idealized *soma* drinker and the Buddha. Whether we want to see this as the development of a kind of continuity or a transposition of Indraic features into another key, the role of Indra as a leader of the Ṛbhus may shed some light on his importance in

[32] Stephanie Jamison, *Sacrificed Wife, Sacrificer's Wife: Women, Ritual, and Hospitality in Ancient India* (New York: Oxford UP, 1996), 127–136.

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the Sujātā narratives—in the *Nidānakathā* and beyond—whether in protecting the preparation of his meal, helping him with his bowls, or acting as a (substitute) husband for Sujātā. One way to interpret this is to imagine that Indra's roles could have shifted on the basis of perceived orthodoxies related to the Buddha's relationship to *soma*. Although the Buddha is definitionally a renouncer of *soma* and, as a *śramaṇa*, is thus opposed to the tradition of householder, this contrast was not always as neat as it is often taken to be.[33] Indeed, the life stories of the earlier Kāśyapa/Kassapa Buddha, whom the *Nidānakathā* specifies was raised a Brahmin that "had thoroughly learnt the three Vedas," sometimes includes an episode analogous to the Sujātā narrative discussed here, in which the Buddha receives his pre-enlightenment meal of milk-rice from his wife (Sunanda), but is also gifted grass for a seat by a figure named Soma, who is a guardian of a nearby barley-field.[34]

This oblique proximity to *soma* appears again in relation to narratives relating another extraordinarily important meal in his life—his last one—as told in the canonical *Dīgha Nikāya*. As Wasson has argued, building on intense modern debates that have an antecedent in the ancient commentarial tradition, the mysterious foodstuff of the Buddha's last meal (the *sūkara-maddava*) may have been a kind of

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[33] See Olivelle, *Gṛhastha*, cited above in my introductory discussion of the porosity of the Brahminical and the so-called "non-Brahminical" traditions. On renunciatory traditions in Hinduism itself, see also Patrick Olivelle, trans., *Samnyasa Upanisads: Hindu Scriptures on Ascetism and Renunciation* (New York: Oxford UP, 1992).

[34] T.W. Rhys Davids, *Nidānakathā*, 130. A more extensive account, with the figure named Soma, is in the *Kassapa Buddhavaṃsa* of the *Mahā Buddhavaṃsa*.

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surrogate for *soma*:

> Here was the Buddha, at one of the supreme moments of his life, unexpectedly offered as his last meal a dish that Hindus of upper castes were forbidden to eat, an edible mushroom, a dish that was the surrogate for Soma when formally sacrificed in an utterly different manner and setting.[35]

The mushroom is the *pūtika*; the context for the formal sacrifice in which it acts as a surrogate for soma is the Pravargya sacrifice (known from the Brāhmaṇas) in which enacts the initiation to the craft of the potter through the creation of the Mahāvīra vessel, made partly of a clay mixed with that mushroom, and in which Indra plays an important role.[36] Points of possible contact proliferate—we might for instance note overlaps between this ritual and the role of pots or cups in the Third Pressing, and then think of Indra as a thief of *soma* from Tvaṣṭṛ, in turn developing an analogy to the Ṛbhus' "theft" of the cups from the same. But it would be tedious to pretend that an overt schematization would somehow allow us to resolve the matter, rather than merely extend a series of coordinates for a complex ritual and religious discourse the contours of which are not extant and unlikely to be fully recoverable. It suffices here for us to recognize that the *upakappanaojaṁ* of the *Nidānakathā* is not the first difficult-to-determine foodstuff that seems to tie the Buddha, Indra, and *soma*

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[35] R. Gordon Wasson, "The Last Meal of the Buddha," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 120, no.4 (1982): 591–603.

[36] On the mushroom, the ritual, the vessel, and on Indra's role in the attendant mythology, see Stella Kramrisch, "The Mahāvīra Vessel and the Plant Pūtika," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 95, no.2 (1975): 222–235.

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together in a contentious relationship of proximity and substitution—in turn raising the question of just how much we are being asked to see the Buddha as a reconfiguration of Indra in his role as the receiver of the unified bowls that derive conceptually from the mythology surrounding the Ṛbhus' multiplied cups.

The looseness of the associations may also help us to discern an aspect of the impetus behind how the Buddhist narrative derived its conceptual momentum from an earlier shift in Vedic priorities. Namely, the degree to which the Third Pressing extends more lenient access to the rites to at least some women, representing something of a democratization that the Buddhist authors may have seized upon for their own purposes in outlining a view of Buddhism that stands in stark contrast to the orthodox rigidity of much of the Brahmanical tradition—something it would then be repeating in terms of determining exactly what foodstuffs are appropriate for the Buddha as a figure who stands at the intersection of Brahminical practices and moves in a new direction whilst remaining in conversation with different Hindu orthodoxies, as well as those of other religions. After all, Sujātā, like the two merchants in the story of the Lokapālas, is an essentially lay figure. That the narrative of the Buddha's life has his attainment enlightenment bookended by these two stories is then particularly significant in what it tells us about the relationship between the Buddha and his first followers.

In sum, if we accept that these two episodes are drawing—however loosely—from Vedic antecedents, we must now face an even more perplexing and interesting set of questions related to how these

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mythological strands are responsive to a series of complementary anxieties related to old and new forms of religious self-conception in both traditions. For the Ṛbhus, this was most evident in the divergent reactions that even the same god—Tvaṣṭṛ—gave to their act, praising it in some hymns and demonstrating his outrage in others. They thus can be read as a kind of symbol of competing ritual practices and religious views, whose establishment of the Third Pressing is as quickly taken for granted as it is then, at least narratively, forgotten in the late-Vedic and post-Vedic tradition. Similarly, the fact there are many versions of the eternal bowls of the Buddha—even preceding the four gifted by the Lokapālas—might suggest that the source of this crucial object was deliberated over in several directions, allowing different people to articulate a relationship to the Buddha and his biography according to a range of possible prerogatives. We need but recall Nichiren's desperately confused attempt to thank his friend's wife for sending him two copper vessels—his version, fraught as it may be, served to flatteringly compare the friend's wife to an important figure in the life of the Buddha, and then to compare himself, even more flatteringly, to the Buddha, showing us how the revision of these myths might operate (accidentally or otherwise) to create fresh associations and contrasts.

In the next and final section of this article, I will now explore how these Buddhist appropriations of material from the Vedic tradition are more akin to a diffuse and perhaps gradual appropriation of an entire mythological register—of an entire deliberative matrix through which to narrativize several ideological, ritual, and religious differences. This will allow us to raise some further questions about the future of studies

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in Buddhist mythology.

4. Concluding Remarks

Buddhist studies has undergone several important paradigmatic shocks in recent decades, from several disciplinary directions. One revolution in early Buddhist textuality has been ushered in by the entrance of relatively recently discovered materials into the academic mainstream. Principally, but not exclusively, I am referring to documents in Gandhari.[37] Scholarly work on these materials has only intensified the already in-progress revision of outmoded views regarding Buddhism as a derivative religion that emerged reactionarily from Hinduism or Vedism.[38] Indeed, as discussed in the introduction, this corrosive view has been understood be a carefully constructed mirage developed in Hindu historiography and literature, alongside other forms of less discursive violence and repression.[39] We are now, more than ever, in a position to see Buddhism as a clearly parallel development, with

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[37] An introduction to the Gandhari materials can be found in: Richard Salomon, *Buddhist Literature of Ancient Gandhara: An Introduction with Selected Translations* (Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2018). These discoveries have dovetailed with a broader shift in how we view the Middle Indic languages within the milieu of the literary production of Southeast Asia. In a sentence, the languages that were previously commonly grouped together as the Prakrits—including Pali, Gandhari, and other languages employed in the preservation of Buddhist texts—have now been located with greater sophistication within the premodern "language order" of India and its environs. See, among his other works, Andrew Ollett, *Language of the Snakes: Prakrit, Sanskrit, and the Language Order of Premodern India* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017).

[38] See *inter alia* Johannes Bronkhorst, *Buddhism in the Shadow of Brahmanism* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), which builds on the same author's *Greater Magadha: Studies in the Culture of Early India* (Leiden: Brill, 2007).

[39] Giovanni Verardi, *Hardships and Downfall of Buddhism in India* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2014).

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some roots that go just as deep into the folkloric substrate and into the Indo-European background as Vedism—with a history complicated by horizontal interactions with neighboring religious systems, but not for that reason reducible to a product of those interactions.

One field has tracked far behind these rapid and dramatic shifts: the study of Buddhist mythology. On the one hand, we could put this down to a tired and superficial narrative about the nature of the materials in question. On this view, the term "myth" is poorly applicable in the context of Buddhist Studies, partly because there are fewer primarily mythological Buddhist texts than there are in the Hindu and Jaina traditions.[40] While the quantitative element may hold, depending on where we draw the line between myth and legend, recent work has qualitatively challenged this perspective, even offering compendiums of Buddhist myths.[41] On the other hand, the problem is also conceptual or disciplinary: scholars of Buddhism, for the most part invested in philosophical analyses and comparisons, have been reluctant to locate Buddhist religiosity in a broader mythological and religious framework, except with respect to certain figures clearly developed in conversation with Hinduism, such as Mara, Yama, and the like.[42] One accidental result of this reluctance is that Buddhist studies has, I think profitably, side-stepped some of the problems of

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[40] For an early debate on this issue, see Winston L. King, "Myth in Buddhism: Essential of Peripheral?" *Journal of Bible and Religion* 29, no. 3 (1961): 211–218.

[41] Martin J. Dougherty, *Buddhist Myths: Cosmology, Tales, & Legends* (London: Amber Books, 2022).

[42] For two examples, see Bulcsu Siklós, "The Evolution of the Buddhist Yama," *The Buddhist Forum* 4 (1996): 165–189, and James W. Boyd, "Symbolism of Evil in Buddhism," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 31, no.1 (1971): 63–75.

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mythological study. I am referring to the problems of Indo-European comparative mythology, which has had a turbulent political history in the last century—not least in its association with racial sciences and Western exceptionalism. Indeed, some recent work that has broached the terrain of a more comparative approach to Buddhist mythology has carefully alighted on typological analyses that, in rejecting the pressures of "rigorous" genealogical analysis, eschewed the fraught urgency of any search for originary truths that might in turn be instrumentalized in the service of dire political programs.[43]

However, even in the face of such conscientious prudence, typological and genealogical analyses each have their distinct if overlapping domains. The mythological entanglements of the *soma* cup of the Vedic gods and the Buddha's alms bowl appear to pose important genealogical questions that cannot otherwise be answered, as does the observation that the Buddhist texts may be drawing on *specifically* Vedic sources among others that are clearly Brahmanical. Faced with an improbably clear mythic echo, we are tasked with the difficult philological objective of reconstructing patterns of transmission, influence, adaptation, and translation. Throughout my article, we have seen how many obstacles there are on the way to reaching solid conclusions. However, this in and of itself does not diminish the importance of principled, even partial attempts at recovering certain connections between distant texts in the past.

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[43] One excellent example is Nina Beguš, "A Tocharian tale from the Silk Road: A Philological Account of The Painter and the Mechanical Maiden and its Resonances with the Western Canon," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 30, no. 4 (2020): 1–26.

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Furthermore, there are new kinds of genealogical analyses that can still make use of partial data. I tried to exemplify this by using some medieval sources to frame my analyses of the more ancient texts—showing that in reaching back to these questions we are also re-activating existing, premodern lines of thought and commentary. Such reconstructions have their own value, showing the persistence of certain mythic "problems" across centuries.

In brief, we have seen that the degree to which we can learn about early conceptions of Buddhism by engaging with Buddhism's relationship to the Vedas is likely underestimated. At the same time, the risk of overstating the relation is also great—if we do not carefully take into consideration that the borrowing, adaptation, and transformation of mythological narratives entails a clear shift in ideological prerogatives, which may be more or less transparent. In the case of the *soma* cup and the Buddha's bowls—particularly in terms of the story of the two merchants and the gifting of four cups by the Lokapālas—the relations had been noted for some time. However, the reasons behind the transformation of the mytheme of the multiplication of the cups into the unification of the bowls is more difficult to determine. This is particularly complicated in the triangulation of Vedism, Brahmanism, and Buddhism—since the latter, in rejecting the cultural strands of Brahmanism, might be taken to also automatically contrast with the Vedic inheritance in Brahmanism. This is a thesis I ultimately controvert in this article, by reading into the traces of mythological deliberation in the Vedas a series of controversial etiologies for ritual practices that, taken as a kind of

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register of a broader discourse, provided a matrix for different genres of mythicizing narratives to emerge in Buddhist texts.

I have suggested, following both previous scholars and medieval sources, that the authors of the Buddhist texts saw in the story of the Ṛbhus and the four cups a possible template for a new, more open-minded orthodoxy of ritual gesture. In turn, I read the story of Sujātā in terms of an extension of these concerns—to which the Buddhist texts lent a new mythological armature, perhaps building on indigenous myths or other Brahmanical notions. Although there is not enough room to discuss it here, more could be said about the unique cows that spontaneously milk themselves in relation to Hindu texts in which other, similar cows spontaneously participate in ritual. More could also be said on the specific mythologies of other important bowls of the Buddha that were either mentioned briefly or not at all in my analyses. Finally, in a future publication I hope to return to the Ṛbhus themselves to argue about the specific class dynamics of the challenge they pose to an older set of Vedic ideologies. But it is my hope that this first essay into the question of the Buddhist texts and their possible Vedic antecedents may inspire others to find new and surprising threads to unravel, across the vast corpus of Buddhist mythology and its many linguistic and regional divisions.

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