

A Conference on Buddhism and Social Justice  
23-25 April 2014

TENTATIVE PROGRAM

Wednesday 23 April

|               |   |
|---------------|---|
| 9.30-10.30    | <b>Jonathan Silk</b> - Buddhism and Social Justice: What are we doing?  |
| 10.30-10.50   | coffee break  |
| 10.50-11.25   | <b>Claudio Cicuzza</b> - Buddhist notions of justice and modern concepts of Human Dignity                       |
| 11.25 - 11.45 | <b>Paulus Kaufmann</b> - Roles of Justice in Kūkai's Ethical Theory   |
| 12.00- 12.15  | coffee break  |
| 12.15-13.00   | <b>Vincent Eltschinger</b> - The Yogācārabhūmi's Critique of the Brahmanical Account of the Caste-Classes       |
| 13.00-14.30   | Lunch   |
| 14.30-15.30   | <b>Steve Collins</b> - On the 'gentle violence' of a stable social order  |
| 15.30-15.45   | coffee break  |
| 15.45-16.15   | <b>Berthe Jansen</b> - The Impact of the Monastic Institution on Society and Social Justice in Pre-modern Tibet |
| 16.15-16.45   | <b>Johan Elverskog</b> - Buddhism as Colonialism: Mining and Social Exploitation on the Commodity Frontier      |
| 17.15~        | <b>Open reception hosted by Town Hall</b>   |

Thursday 24 April

|               |   |
|---------------|---|
| 9.30-10.30    | <b>Nam-Lin Hur</b> - Buddhism and War: Senriji's Monthly Newsletters and Shinshū Teachings in Modern Japan, 1929-1944                       |
| 10.30-10.45   | coffee break  |
| 10.45-11.15   | <b>Vincent Breugem</b> - Ghosts Under the Bridge: Famine and Segaki Rituals in Medieval Japan.  |
| 11.15 - 11.45 | <b>Thomas Kim</b> - Temple Slaves and Monks as Landlords: Issues of Doctrinal Allegiance and Institutional Pragmatism in the Joseon Period. |
| 11.45- 12.00  | coffee break  |
| 12.00-12.30   | <b>Ian Harris</b> - Kingship, colonialism and republic: Rethinking issues of social justice in modern Cambodia                              |
| 12.30 ~       | Lunch + afternoon visit to Keukenhof  |

Friday 25 April

|               |   |
|---------------|---|
| 9.30-10.00    | <b>Joanna Gruszevska</b> - The rhetorics of the caste criticism in Vajrasūcī  |
| 10.00-10.30   | <b>Jonathan Silk</b> - What Remains: Anti-caste Rhetoric and Anti-Outcaste Rhetoric in Indian Buddhism                  |
| 10.30-11.00   | <b>Vincent Tournier</b> - Cosmogony, Anti-caste Arguments and Royal Epics: the Aggañña Myth and Its Scriptural Contexts |
| 11.00-11.15   | coffee break  |
| 11.15 - 11.45 | <b>Iselin Frydenlund</b> - Law and religion in contemporary Sri Lanka   |
| 11.45- 12.15  | <b>Jacques Leider</b> - Buddhist Rakhine and Muslim Rohingyas in Arakan - Historical grief and ethnic tensions          |
| 12.15-13.30   | lunch break   |
| 13.30-14.00   | <b>Christian Lammerts</b> - Contested histories of Buddhist law in Burma, c.1200-1800 C.E.                              |
| 14.00~        | coffee + Round Table Discussion   |

**Dr. Vincent Eltschinger will act as respondent and moderator of the RTD**

## Abstracts

**Vincent Breugem**

**Ghosts Under the Bridge: Famine and Segaki Rituals in Medieval Japan.**

At the heights of two major famines that struck Japan in the fifteenth century, Buddhist monks of the Five Mountain Zen Monasteries in Kyoto repeatedly gathered on the city's major bridges to perform rituals for the wandering spirits of the many who died of starvation. These rituals of "feeding the hungry ghosts" (*segaki*) were combined with the Buddhist practice of actually feeding the living poor, sick and hungry (*segyō*). These famines and rituals engaged various social agents who moved in a complex of religious, political, economic and symbolic forces. I will highlight these Buddhist rituals as elements within a politics of disaster that reinforced the ambivalent subordinate position of marginalized groups (*hinin*) in medieval Japan.

**Claudio Cicuzza**

**Buddhist notions of justice and modern concept of Human Dignity**

In my contribution I will propose possible analogies between the modern meaning of the word “dignity” and the idea of justice and social harmony as they appear in specific *suttas* of the Pali canon.

My research is mainly based on primary sources: I analysed the ideas expressed in few selected discourses of the Buddha, which are largely dealing with social issues, and then I tried to understand if some of these concepts could be helpful in understanding the modern idea of “human dignity”. I considered the notion of “dignity” as it appears in constitutions, charters, and declarations formulated and promulgated in European and South/Southeast Asian countries, mainly after the Second World War, as result of a complex historical, linguistic and cultural process. I am not going to offer any jurisprudential interpretation of the word “dignity” contained in these documents, but I will be mostly interested in outlining its ethical dimension.

A significant part of this research will deal with the interpretation of the concept of human dignity in several South and Southeast Asian official documents and constitutions, and the actual perception of this idea in the modern society, particularly in Thailand.

Concerning the meaning of the word “dignity” as used in the official documents I analysed, there are objective difficulties to clearly define it. This led me to analyse the explanation of this term offered by survivors of genocides, concentration camps, and so on. One of the best depiction of the methods and the aims of the “dehumanization” that was carried on in those anguishing places is contained in the cogent writings of Primo Levi. I will be focused on his vivid description of the concept of “human dignity” and I will compare it with some passages of the Pali canon.

**Steven Collins**

**On the 'gentle violence' of a stable social order.**

Abstract: This paper will look primarily but not exclusively at Theravada Buddhism in South and Southeast Asia. It will depict that tradition as an intrinsic part of the formation and maintenance of supra-local, hierarchical political formations ('states'), and it will consider the ideological function of the Buddhist discourse which wishes violence away. It will draw on but go beyond the General Introduction and Chapter Six of my book *Nirvana and other Buddhist Felicities* (1998).

**Dr. Vincent Eltschinger**

**The Yogācārabhūmi's Critique of the Brahmanical Account of the Caste-Classes**

The Indian Buddhist collections of *sūtras/sutta(nta)s* are replete with arguments designed to neutralize the Brahmins' pride in caste (*jāti, varṇa*). Some of these arguments are "biological" in nature (e.g., criticizing the Brahmins' attempts to construe the caste-classes on the model of animal or vegetal species, etc.), others are genealogical (e.g., challenging the Brahmins' claim to go back to the mouth of Brahman/Prajāpati, the alleged purity of their descent, etc.). Most of these arguments recur in the later Buddhist philosophers' polemical treatment of the caste-classes (Saṅghabhadra, Vasubandhu, Candrakīrti, Śāntarakṣita, Kamalaśīla, Prajñākaragupta, etc.) as well as in narrative literature (*Śārdūlakarṇāvadāna, Kalpadrumāvadānamālā*, etc.), not to speak of the pseudo-Aśvaghoṣa's systematic anti-caste tract *Vajrasūcī*. However, the gist of the arguments contained in the *sūtras/sutta(nta)s* can already be found in a hitherto neglected passage of third-century (?) *Yogācārabhūmi*. The aim of this paper is to discuss this passage's arguments as regards their sources, structure and targets and to provide a new critical edition of the Sanskrit original as well as an annotated English translation.

**Johan Elverskog**

### **Buddhism as Colonialism: Mining and Social Exploitation on the Commodity Frontier**

Although Buddhism spread from Sri Lanka to Siberia and Iran to Japan - thereby covering a territory larger than any other "world religion" in the pre-modern period - few people today conceptualize the Dharma as a colonizing force. Yet, if we are to better understand the remarkable success of the so-called "Buddhist international," it is clear that facets of the Dharma's exploitative nature need to be better understood. To this end this paper investigates early Buddhist notions about both nature and peripheral peoples in order to explore how Buddhists expanded the Dharma on the commodity frontier through its logic of extraction and exploitation.

**Iselin Frydenlund**

### **Law and religion in contemporary Sri Lanka**

The aim of this paper is to analyse Buddhism's relation to other religions based on legal texts in contemporary Sri Lanka, using these texts as a tool to explore tensions between hierarchy and equality, particularism and universalism in the field of religion.

While such tensions in the Sri Lankan Constitution can be captured in notions like 'hierarchy in equality', this paper suggests that universalism and particularism are expressed at different legal levels in the Constitution, allowing for both state protection of Buddhism and individual religious freedom. However, two proposed Bills against 'unethical conversion', one proposed by the All Monk's Party (Jathika Hela Urumaya), the other by the government, might challenge individual freedom of religion and belief in Sri Lanka. The paper will explore notions of universalism and particularism in the two Bills with relation to the Sri Lankan Constitution.

**Joanna Gruszewska**

**The rhetorics of the caste criticism in *Vajrasūcī***

The *Vajrasūcī* is a Sanskrit treatise of unknown author and date, although the Buddhist tradition ascribes it to the famous poet Aśvaghoṣa. It is particularly interesting because, according to J. W. de Jong, it is one of only three paracanonical Sanskrit texts which deals with the caste system from a Buddhist perspective. It criticizes the traditional model of social hierarchy, the division into four classes, in a manner similar to some fragments of the Pali Canon, such as the *Vāsettha* Sutta, the *Aggañña* sutta or the *Tevijja* sutta. Contrary to the criticism found in the Nikāyas, the *Vajrasūcī* refers to Hindu literature; namely, the *Harivaṃśa*, the *Puruṣasūkta* of the *R̥gveda*, and the *Manusmṛti* (or possibly the lost *Mānavadharmasūtra*). It also mentions legends from the lives of distinguished sages and philosophers, which can be found in the *Mahābhārata* or the *Purāṇas*. The aim of the paper is to present the means used by the *Vajrasūcī*'s author to criticize orthodox stances and to trace the sources of his arguments.

**Ian Harris**

**Kingship, colonialism and republic: Rethinking issues of social justice in modern Cambodia**

The righteous Buddhist king as prime guarantor of social justice is a dominant theme in the Theravāda *Jātaka* and *Vaṃsa* corpus. The notion is also common in Pāli and vernacular works of moral and political guidance, comprising the genres of *Nīti* and *Cpāp'*. But the authors of such sources found it difficult to envision an alternative to monarchism, meaning that their approach to unjust rule was restricted to passivity and exhortation, with only very infrequent reference to the possibility of alternative forms of governance. In mid twentieth century Cambodia an expansion of the concept of *sangha* combined with a “nationalization of inner space”, in which all Cambodians were now seen to be Buddhist, to bring the issue of governance into new focus. A vision of the just society, one in which the notion of Buddhist kingship was now redefined as an oxymoron, may be traced to the influential writings of the monk Khieu Chum (1907-75), a participant in the overthrow of Norodom Sihanouk in March 1970 and major ideologue of Buddhist republicanism. This paper will outline Khieu Chum's religio-political project and identify the sources on which he drew – from *Jātaka* and *Cpāp'* to the EFEO's ethos as a *république des professeurs* – in an attempt to illuminate how Buddhist concerns about social justice were reworked under colonial conditions.

**Hur Nam-Lin**

**Buddhism and War: Senriji's Monthly Newsletters and Shinshū Teachings in Modern Japan, 1929-1944**

Buddhism is a religion that promotes peace and justice and forbids killing. Nevertheless, many Buddhist leaders in prewar Japan encouraged young men and women, both Japanese and colonial subjects, to kill enemies and to sacrifice themselves for the glory of Imperial Japan. Throughout the country, Japanese Buddhism remained an integral part of Imperial Japan's war drive and colonial rule to 1945. How can we make sense of Japanese Buddhists who brought Buddhism into the service of Japanese expansionism and promoted destruction? What caused them to run counter to the ideals of peace and justice which Buddhism was supposed to teach?

In my paper I will focus on this type of aberrant prewar Japanese Buddhist behavior which I label "Buddhist imperialism" and explore the context of Japanese Buddhism's indulgence in destruction and injustice. I suggest that Buddhist imperialism in prewar Japan was grounded, more than anything else, in three key elements embedded in Japanese Buddhist tradition and prewar polity. First, in prewar Japan, Buddhism remained the dominant religious agency of death rituals, ancestor worship, and the repository of filial piety. Second, Buddhist leaders competed to offer their service to the polity of "family-state" (*kazoku kokka*) in which the value of filial piety nourished in Buddhist rituals was merged into that of loyalty toward the emperor. Third, Buddhists, who refashioned their religion as an arena of family business dealing with the values of filial piety and loyalty, collaborated with Imperial Japan for financial gains, survival and social prestige. Among these three elements, I will focus on the ways in which Japanese Buddhism was integrated into the spiritual collectivity of the emperor system (*tennōsei*) and volunteered to serve the cause of Japan's prolonged war efforts. For this task, I plan to analyze Senriji's (a Nishihonganji temple in Osaka) monthly newsletters entitled *Nyoze* 如是 which were published in 1929 to 1944.

**Berthe Jansen**

### **The Impact of the Monastic Institution on Society and Social Justice in Pre-modern Tibet**

In a country where up to 20 percent of the population was ordained, where Mahayana ideals of love and compassion were treated in thousands of books, and bodhisattva-vows were held by many if not most people, one would expect to find a close to ideal Buddhist society. The history of pre-modern Tibet paints a different picture however. Although we are not able to comment on how people treated each other on the small scale, we can see that there existed no institutions that promoted social justice, such as schools, universities, hospitals, and courts that were available to all. This is in sharp contrast with developments in the west: it has been argued that Christian monasteries gave rise to and provided a template for most of the institutions we know to encourage social justice today. In this paper I examine the role of the monks and monasteries in Tibetan society, and explain my hypothesis that while – on an institutional level – the main driving forces were not love and compassion, the first and foremost motivation for the way they treated people and viewed their role in society as a

whole was thoroughly grounded in Buddhist doctrine. To view the Tibetan monasteries as having diverted from the ‘original Buddhist ideals’ and on a par to the modern-day money-grabbing bankers is not doing the topic any justice. At the same time, I here want to move away from the doctrine of karma as an explanatory model for social injustices, but rather I argue that the Tibetan sangha’s urge for self-perpetuity and the subsequent status quo bias resulted in the preservation and further reinforcement of pre-existing unjust situations. In this paper I will attempt to prove this point with the help of information gained from the monastic guidelines (bca’ yig) that I have been working on.

## **Paulus Kaufmann**

### **Roles of Justice in Kūkai’s Ethical Theory**

Justice has no obvious place in Buddhist ethics. It is disputed, for example, if the ideal of a just distribution of goods makes sense within a karmic framework of understanding one’s position in life (Sizemore & Swearer 1990 vs. Fenn 1996 and Harvey 2000), if there is a Buddhist conception of just government (Kupperman 1999 and Goodman 2009 vs. Kalupahana 1995), or if Buddhism can contribute to debates about ecological justice (Buddhadasa 1990 vs. Harris 1995). In order to assess the place of justice in Buddhist ethics we therefore cannot refer to a *single* emic concept and compare it to *the* Western concept of justice. There is no unitary concept of justice in Buddhism, nor is there such a concept in the West. This does not render the search for Buddhist ideas on justice a futile project, however. In order to find these ideas we rather have to choose a functional approach and analyze what concrete *roles* the concepts employed in Buddhist moralities play and if these roles are similar to those attributed to the concept of justice in Western philosophical systems. The famous Japanese monk Kūkai (774--835) expresses his ethical convictions primarily in the second chapter of the *Himitsu Mandara Jūjūshinron* (秘密曼荼羅十住心論, T2425), considered to be his *opus magnum*. Although this chapter and the work as a whole consist mainly of quotations, these are chosen and arranged in a way so as to express an ethical theory that is genuinely Kūkai’s. Interestingly, many aspects of this theory invite comparison to conceptions of justice in Western moral philosophy: 1. Kūkai follows the *Bianzhenglun* (辯正論, T2110) in identifying the Buddhist precept not to take what is not given (不偷盜) with the Confucian concept of *yi/gi* (義), often translated into English as “righteousness” or “justice”, and understood as referring to a particular human virtue. This leads to the hypothesis that in Kūkai’s moral thought 義 is used as a virtue concept denoting a stable character trait intrinsically connected with the acquisition and distribution of goods. Kūkai’s conception of justice would thus be closer to ancient European conceptions of virtue, prominently represented by Plato and Aristotle, and significantly differ from the Rawlsian conception according to which justice is primarily a merit of social institutions. 2. In the relevant chapter, Kūkai tells a story about the origin of evil --- apparently inspired by a story told in the Agganna Sutta --- according to which evil originates with an illegitimate

appropriation of land. As a second hypothesis, I will therefore assume that the fair distribution of goods is of primary importance for Kūkai and has a pivotal role in his moral theory.

3. Finally, drawing from the *Renwangjing* (仁王經, T245) and the *Fo wei youtian wang shuo wang fazheng lun jing* (佛為優填王說王法政論經, T524) Kūkai discusses at length ideals of good government (正治) focusing on the role of the king. I thus suppose as a third hypothesis that the conception of justice employed by Kūkai is intrinsically related to the government of states. In my paper I will critically assess these three hypotheses and thereby hope to contribute to the search for Buddhist ideas on social justice.

**Thomas Kim**

### **Temple Slaves and Monks as Landlords: Issues of Doctrinal Allegiance and Institutional Pragmatism in the Joseon Period**

Starting from early Buddhism issues of monastic ownership of servants and land have long been an issue. In the Mahavihārin Vinaya a story of how servants were accepted by the Venerable Pilindavaccha illustrates reticence through the initial refusal of the monk to receive the servants, citing that a renunciate cannot accept such gifts. He later accepts the servants only after he was convinced that it was for the good of the *sangha*. Despite such stories of reluctance to accept servants and land, they have become deeply entrenched in the development of Buddhism in China and Korea. During the Joseon dynasty (1392-1910) such practices became essential for the survival of the *sangha* and possibly an essential aspect of institutional Buddhism. This was because state patronage had been severed and the *sangha*'s political and economic powers were severely curtailed.

While contradictory to doctrinal ideals (define), temple slaves and ownership of land by monks were clear signs of “domestication” which has been an ineluctable historical process. Evidences of such are born out in the official government records and land dispute documents and extent temple records. In some cases, such as temple economic pacts, economic pursuits were harmonized with doctrinal merits. Thus the ecumenical integrity of practices were maintained which in the end resulted in continued religious and institutional existence through the toughest time in the history of Korean Buddhism. Simply put, the Joseon period is an insightful period since it affords us an opportunity to observe in a more overt manner of the various processes that have been an integral element in the maintenance of an institutionalized religion.

Similar to the two models of doctrinal allegiance and institutional pragmatism, temple slave and monastic ownership of land during the Joseon period were an integral part of economic activities of the temple that ranged from sheer institutional pragmatism to activities that were in line with doctrinal allegiance. Complete doctrinal allegiance would certainly have been a difficult ideal and oppositely complete domestication would have led to the loss of its religious identity. Instead the Joseon monks chose the practical route of securing economic means while also preserving doctrinal adherence. This paper will explore some of the methods of how this balance was maintained.

**Christian Lammerts**

**Contested histories of Buddhist law in Burma, c.1200-1800 C.E.**

“In the strict sense of the word there is no Buddhist law; there is only an influence exercised by Buddhist ethics on changes that have taken place in customs.”

The understanding of Buddhist law expressed here by T.W. Rhys Davids (1908), echoed also in Weber’s (1922) remarks on the non-development of properly Buddhist legal institutions, remains surprisingly intact in Buddhist Studies. Research has repeatedly traced how Buddhist ethics and norms influenced legal culture in various sociohistorical contexts, although it has yet to adequately attend to the ways in which monks and laypersons in pre- and early modern Southeast Asia themselves envisioned the relationship between Buddhism and law. Scholarship has neglected to consider the multiple, and occasionally contrary, expressions of Buddhist law that were developed through regional jurisprudential narrative and argument. This paper examines the history of Buddhist law as a contested domain of learning, social administration, and literary activity in 13<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> century Burma, based on the corpus of Burmese, Arakanese, and Pali *dhammasattha* law texts, as well as *vinicchayas* (monastic, lay, and mixed lay-monastic court case decisions) and epigraphy. It shows how *dhammasattha* commanded broad jurisdiction over practices relating to slavery, family relations, property, and other spheres of the socioeconomic order, and at times supplanted *vinaya* in the regulation of monastic affairs. It investigates how Burmese authors articulated the status and aims of this genre as Buddhist law, and assesses the distinctive rhetoric(s) of legal justice that informed legislative theory and practice.

**Jacques P. Leider**

**Buddhist Rakhine and Muslim Rohingyas in Arakan - Historical grief and ethnic tensions**

Abstract: The communal violence that broke out in Arakan in the second half of 2012 (Rakhine State, Western Myanmar) has drawn attention to long lasting tensions between Buddhist Rakhine (Rakhaing) and Muslim Rohingya that resulted in over 200 dead and more than a hundred thousand displaced persons. Like other cases of conflictual Buddhist-Muslim relations in Southeast Asia, the communal issues in Rakhine State bear a historical complexity where “religion” is but one component. The representation by the international media as well as by HR reports has only focussed on humanitarian (lack of basic rights) and legal aspects (citizenship) of the conflict. This has led to a narrow perception of Buddhists as perpetrators and Muslims as victims that has ultimately empowered extremists on both sides and prevents a deeper understanding of the conflict. The paper will provide a historical perspective on Buddhist-Muslim relations in Arakan and emphasize the multifaceted complexity of competing identities in Myanmar’s current phase of political opening.

**J.A. Silk**

### **What Remains: Anti-caste Rhetoric and Anti-Outcaste Rhetoric in Indian Buddhism**

Indian Buddhist rhetoric against the caste system and caste-based discrimination has drawn the attention of scholars since the early days of the study of Buddhism in the West. Some of this attention has no doubt been connected with the types of political motivations which molded the shifting image of the Buddha in Western discourse (Almond 1988), in which moderns sought sanction for their own views in the hallowed paragon of justice who was the Buddha. Be this as it may, Indian Buddhist literature is in fact replete with examples of clear and self-conscious anti-caste rhetoric, and there can be no doubt that many of those who authored the scriptures placed into the mouth of the Buddha found the caste system objectionable, if not abhorrent. Whether or not J. Bronkhorst (2007, 2011) is right that the earliest Buddhism arose in an environment outside the domain of the Vedic cultural sphere, if not all at least the bulk of Indian Buddhist literature was certainly composed in an environment thoroughly grounded in the Vedic-Brahmanical vision of hierarchical human status, and it is thus in opposition to this system that Buddhist authors wrote. It has been argued that while the Buddha—a term we should automatically translate into ‘those authors who put their words into the Buddha’s mouth’—opposed the caste system in toto, he could not bring about a revolution in the society, and so contented himself with democratizing the sangha, allowing ordination irrespective of caste status. The nature of our sources prevents us in almost all cases from seeing beyond the rhetoric of texts to the underlying practice, but what we can observe is the way that reference is made to the lowest of the low, the ‘outcastes,’ *caṇḍāla*, most especially in contexts in which their status is not the main focus of discussion. In other words, through examining perhaps *unconscious* uses of certain vocabulary, we may be able to peel back something of a surface layer to espy an underlying network of attitudes. This paper will argue that when read with an eye to such rhetoric, Indian Buddhist texts of all periods provide ample evidence of ongoing deep-seated discrimination against outcastes. The very term ‘tolerance’ suggests dislike coupled with a decision to take no adverse action. We do not have access to the domain of action in ancient Indian Buddhism, but the texts themselves suggest that a strong dislike and disdain for outcastes coexisted with a rhetoric rejecting the logic and viability of the entire caste system.

**Vincent Tournier**

### **Cosmogony, Anti-caste Arguments and Royal Epics: the “Aggañña Myth” and Its Scriptural Contexts**

The myth explaining the (re)formation of the world and the slow process leading to the emergence of social categories among men is probably one of the best represented narratives in the scriptures of the *nikāyas*, being preserved in no less than seven versions within

canonical collections of the Theravādins, Dharmaguptakas, Mahāsāṃghika(-Lokottaravādin)s, and (Mūla-)Sarvāstivādins, in an individual *sūtra* translated into Chinese by \*Dānapāla in the 10th cent. (T. 10) and in several fragments recovered from the Turfan region. This myth, mostly studied so far in its Pāli version preserved within the *Aggaññasutta* (with the exception of Meisig 1988), has been understood by some scholars to contain the elements of a Buddhist egalitarian social theory (Meisig 1988), while others have read the election of the first king Mahāsammata concluding the account as some kind of social contract (esp. Dumont 1962; Collins 1993). Both interpretations were however rightly contested as anachronistic (Tambiah 1989; Huxley 1996). It remains that the *Aggañña* myth clearly develops a view of social hierarchy that is competing with and undermining the one centred on the *brāhmaṇa*. The present contribution, departing from an unjustified focus on the Pāli version of the text, will draw attention to the various uses of the myth by Buddhist communities of South Asia, and to the inherent “polyphony” of Buddhist discourses. Beyond the relative stability of the myth’s contents in the various versions in which it has been transmitted, there is indeed a great malleability of the myth’s message that depends on its context of enunciation. A look at the meta-narratives within which it was transmitted indeed reveals that it has not only been used as an etiological illustration of the “processual” formation of social categories (against the substantialist and genealogical cosmogony of the brahmins, cf. Eltschinger 2000), but also to stress the purity and superiority of the Buddhist order over any other caste/class. Two Vinaya accounts of the myth indeed connect it to a royal epic to stress that Śākyamuni, and hence his monks that are symbolically identified as his sons, descend from the most eminent of the *kṣatriya* lineages. It is also significant that major Buddhist intellectuals, such as Vasubandhu and Buddhaghosa, understood this myth specifically as an account of the royal lineage of the Buddha *qua* Dharma king, and not so much as an egalitarian tract.