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# THE STENCH OF SIN: REFLECTIONS FROM JAIN AND BUDDHIST TEXTS

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## *Abstract*

This article focuses on a recurring metaphor for sin in a range of Jain and Buddhist texts. Sin is seen as something physically disgusting and stinking. It is frequently compared to excrement. Descriptions of the human body, which also often stress its foul odor, suggest its invariable connection with sin. The paper concludes with some discussion about the “pure” bodies of perfected individuals, which are more like the bodies of animals than of humans.

## I. Introduction: Smelly Sinners

The *Suttanipāta*, *Cūlavagga*, contains a small *Sutta* called the *Kapila Sutta* or *Dhammacariya Sutta*.<sup>1</sup> Commentaries to the *suttas* often begin by describing the occasion on which a particular *sutta* was first recited. In this case, the story begins after the past Buddha Kassapa had entered Nirvāṇa, when his teachings and the community he founded needed to be sustained. There were two brothers, Sodhana and Kapila, who had renounced the world and become monks. Their mother was named Sādhani, and their younger sister was called Tāpanā. They both became nuns. Sodhana, the older of the two brothers, made a resolve to seclude himself for five years and meditate. And so he lived with senior monks and teachers for a period of five years, devoted himself to the perfection of his meditation and reached liberation, becoming an Arhat. The younger brother, figuring that he had many years to come in which he would be able to undertake the arduous path of meditation, decided that he would take an easier path and

- 1 Edited Dines Andersen and Helmer Smith, Oxford: Pali Text Society, 1990, p. 49. The commentary is on the website CSCD Tipitika, and begins with paragraph 276. The authorship of this commentary is uncertain; it has been ascribed to Buddhaghosa, but some scholars dispute that the work is his. See Oskar von Hinüber, *Handbook of Pāli Literature*, New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1996, pp. 127–130 for a discussion of the authorship. I have followed Hinüber, but I am not entirely convinced that the commentary cannot be by Buddhaghosa.

study the texts instead. He became famous for his learning, and many other monks flocked to him. This all made him very arrogant and he began to overestimate his own knowledge. He would say that he knew things, even when he did not; he would insist that something that other monks said was not allowed was in fact allowed. He even taught that what was wrong was right and what was right was wrong. One day some able monks corrected him, to which he responded with a torrent of abusive words. The monks reported this to his elder brother, Sodhana, now an Elder in the monastic community. Sodhana, too, admonished Kapila, and reminded him that the survival of the teaching depended on monks like him. He must not say he knows when he does not know; he must not say that what is not allowed is allowed, and he must not insist that what is wrong is right and what is right is wrong. But Kapila ignored him, too. Elder Sodhana took to heart the maxim that out of compassion one could warn a person once, maybe even twice, but never more than that. And so he gave up, his parting words to his younger brother the curt phrase that he would have to see for himself the consequences of his wrongdoing. Kapila was undeterred. He became nastier and nastier and surrounded himself with equally wicked monks. His ultimate act of perfidy was to deny the importance of the recitation of the rules for monks, the *pātimokkha*, and the public confession of wrong doing, rituals that were at the center of Buddhist monastic life. In this way, the commentator tells us, Kapila was responsible for the fact that the teaching left behind by the Buddha Kassapa disappeared. On the very day that Kapila committed his infamous deed of denying the necessity of reciting the *pātimokkha*, the Elder Sodhana passed away in his final Nirvāṇa. The fate of the wicked Kapila forms a stark contrast to the liberation of his pious brother. Kapila, having destroyed the Buddhist teaching and the community that was to uphold it, had to endure a series of terrifying rebirths. First he went right to hell. His mother and sister, who had followed his way and abused the capable monks who had sought to correct Kapila, also went straight to hell.

The story then becomes a bit more complicated. We now hear of five hundred men, who make their living by attacking and looting villages. Pursued by the locals and seeing no other means to save themselves, they take refuge with a forest monk, who lives in a cave. He tells them that there is no refuge like the Buddhist precepts, and with that, all five hundred highway robbers accept the precepts. The monk gives them one final bit of advice. They are not to feel anger at the men who kill them. And this is precisely what happens. Their pursuers catch up with the five hundred former thieves and kill them. They follow the advice of the monk and are all reborn as gods. The five hundred former thieves

spend quite some time transmigrating from birth to birth until they are reborn at the time of our Buddha, that is, Śākyamuni Buddha, in the wombs of the wives of fishermen. One is the son of the chief of the fishermen, while the others are born to his subjects. All five hundred are conceived and born at the same time, and they all become friends.<sup>2</sup>

The story returns to Kapila, who has been in hell, but whose time there is up. He is reborn as a golden fish that emits a foul smell from its mouth. One day all five hundred of the fisher boys take their nets and go off to catch some fish. The golden fish, the former Kapila, gets caught in their nets. The entire fishing village is astir; they are convinced that the king will give them a fine reward for this golden fish. All five hundred boys load the fish onto a boat and row eagerly to see the king. In the words of the story teller:

The king, seeing the creature, asked, “What is that?” “It’s a fish, my lord.” The king, beholding that golden fish, thought to himself, “The Blessed one will know the reason for its golden color”, and he had them bring the fish to the Blessed One. When the fish opened its mouth the entire Jetavana was filled with a terrible stench. The king asked the Blessed One, “Why is this fish golden in color and why does such a terrible stink come from its mouth?” “O great king, this fish was a monk named Kapila, during the time when the doctrine that had been taught by the Buddha Kassapa was still in existence. He was very learned and knew all the sacred texts. But he was abusive to the monks who disagreed with him, and in this way he brought about the end of the teachings. Since he destroyed the teachings of the Blessed One, he went to hell. And when the deed that sent him there had come to its fruition, he was reborn as this fish. Now, he had recited Buddhist texts for a long time and he had praised the Buddha, and as a result of those good deeds, he has obtained this remarkable color. But since he abused the monks, this foul smell comes from his mouth. Should I make this fish speak, great king?” “Yes, indeed, Blessed One.” And so the Blessed One addressed the fish, “Are you Kapila?” “Yes, Blessed One, I am Kapila.” “Where did you come from?” “From the Great Hell of Avīci.” “Where is Tāpanā?” “She is in the Great Hell, Blessed One.” “Where are you going from here?” “I am going to Hell, Blessed One.” And with that, stricken with remorse, the fish bashed its head onto the side of the boat, died on the spot and went straight to hell. The crowd was mightily moved; their hair stood on end. The Blessed One then preached this *sutta* to the monks and lay people who were assembled there.

It is clear from this delightful story that there is something very smelly about sin and sinners. Indeed, the stench of sin is so great that it takes some mighty merit

2 The motif of a king or chief having a son whose future companions are born on the same day is a common one in Indian literature. The ten princes in the *Daśakumāracarita* are a well-known example.



to overcome it. In this story it is far easier to gain an enticing color than it is to get away from the stink of sin.

That sinners stink in Buddhism is apparent from a wide variety of Buddhist stories.<sup>3</sup> The *Petavatthu* offers countless examples of those born in this lowly ghostly realm who stink. I need give only a few examples. One peta, “the peta with the stinking mouth”, is very much like our gold fish. The text tells us that the peta has a beautiful color and even floats in the sky, but its mouth is stinking and gnawed upon by worms.<sup>4</sup> This peta, much like the gold fish, had abused his fellow monks. In the next vignette, a woman who was jealous of her pregnant co-wife procured an abortifacient from an ascetic and fed it to the pregnant woman, destroying her unborn child. She did this five times, as a result of which she was reborn as a peti who was both ugly and stinking, surrounded by a host of flies.<sup>5</sup> Yet another stinking peta had mocked the practice of worshipping the relics of the Buddha, for which sin he now emits a foul stench from both his body and his mouth.<sup>6</sup>

It is not just animals and petas who stink. Often it is humans and particularly women. In the commentary to the *Therīgāthā*, we hear of Bhaddākāpilānī, who in a previous life, jealous of her sister in law, had thrown out the food she had given a Pratyekabuddha. For that sin she was reborn as woman with a stinking body. By an act of merit, in this case a gift of a gold brick to a Buddhist stūpa, she was able to get rid of her body odor.<sup>7</sup>

Jains and Buddhists have much in common in their understandings of the nature of sin and in the stories that they told about vice and virtue. In the 10<sup>th</sup> century, the Digambara Jain Hariṣeṇa in his *Kathākośa* told the story of the Jain monk Avantīśukumāla, who was devoured by a jackal as he stood firm in meditation. The jackal was his former sister-in-law in another life, and he had

3 This has not gone entirely unnoticed in the scholarly literature, although it has not been extensively explored. Most recently Susanne Mrozik, “The Value of Human Differences: South Asian Buddhist Contributions Toward an Embodied Virtue Theory”, *Journal of Buddhist Ethics*, 9, 2002, p. 8, commented that characters who “stink with sin” appear frequently in Buddhist literature. Here I argue that it is possible to draw a more general conclusion from the literature: we are all stinking sinners in so far as we have a normal human body.

4 Pūtimukhapetavatthu, section 3 of the *Uragavagga*.

5 Pañcaputtakhādakapetivatthu, section 6 of the *Uragavagga*.

6 Dhātuvivaṇṇapetavatthu, section 10 of the *Cūlavagga*.

7 *Therīgāthāṭṭhakathā*, catukkanipāṭa, entry 1. The story is told in greater detail in the commentary to the *Aṅguttara nikāya*, *Etadaggavagga*, in the entry on Mahākaśyapa. Bhaddākāpilānī was his wife.

wronged her when his brother, her husband had died. He had chased her from her home, and she had died, making a vow to eat him alive, which she now does in this rebirth as a jackal. But what concerns us is the previous rebirths of Avantīsukumāla, before he became an exemplary Jain monk. The story begins with his birth as Vāyubhūti, when he refuses to bow down to a Jain sage and insults him, calling him filthy and disgusting. As a result he is reborn as a she ass, a sow, a bitch, a blind woman who stinks and then a well-born woman, daughter of the king's house priest or purohita. But even then, this woman still carries with her the taint of her sin in a former life. She has about her a repulsive stench.<sup>8</sup>

One of the most famous stinky sinners in the Śvetāmbara world is Miyāputta, the son of Miyā, whose story forms the first chapter in the canonical text *Vipākasūtra*.<sup>9</sup> Mahāvīra has come to the city Campā. As is usual, the townspeople all come out to see Mahāvīra, including someone who, blind from birth, must be led to the place where Mahāvīra is staying. Mahāvīra's chief disciple, Indrabhūti, finds the very idea of someone who is blind from birth puzzling and asks Mahāvīra if there is really such a thing. Mahāvīra explains that indeed in this very city a son was born to a woman named Miyā, who was blind from birth. This is not his only deformity, as Indrabhūti will learn. With Mahāvīra's permission he seeks out Miyā and asks to see her son, who is kept in an underground chamber, hidden from the sight of others. Miyā wants to know how Indrabhūti came to hear of her son's existence, and he tells her that Mahāvīra had told him. She invites Indrabhūti to come with her when she brings her son something to eat. He has a prodigious appetite, and she loads up a wagon with food and drink. Before she opens the door to her son's underground chamber, she covers her mouth and nose. She tells Indrabhūti to do the same. As soon as Miyā opens the door to the chamber a vile stench comes forth, like the smell of some kind of dead animal, a snake or a lizard, a cow or a dog. The stench is disgusting, unpleasant, repulsive, and so on. But it is not only the stench of the boy that is so vile. As soon as the mother shoves the food into the chamber, it turns at once into pus and blood, which the child then ingests. Indrabhūti is astonished and wonders what evil deeds this child must have committed in a previous life to be born in this form. He returns and inquires of Mahāvīra the nature of Miyā's

8 Hariṣeṇa, *Bṛhatkathākośa*, ed. A.N. Upadhye, Bombay: Singhi Jain Series, vol. 17, 1943, story number 126.

9 Edited by Dīparatnasāgara in *Āgama Suttāṇi*, Ahmedabad: Āgama Śruta Prakāśa, 2000, vol. 8.

son's past deeds. Mahāvīra tells a long story of a royal overseer who oppressed his subjects with unlawful taxes and levies, torturing them physically and impoverishing them. The retribution for his wicked deeds comes swiftly and he is afflicted by every possible disease. No one can cure him, and the text gives a lengthy description of the medical treatments that were tried and failed. This wicked man dies and goes to hell. Eventually he is reborn as the son of the woman Miyā. As soon as she conceives this sinner, Miyā becomes an object of disgust to her husband. She tries to abort the fetus, but to no avail. Even in the womb Miyā's son is a festering mess. He develops a disease in the womb, as a result of which whatever nourishment he receives turns into pus and blood. Eventually he is born, blind and stinking. His mother wants to abandon him on a rubbish heap as soon as he is born. Her husband learns of her intention and dissuades her, telling her that if she destroys her first born she will never have another child. And so she decides on the strategy of immuring him in an underground chamber.

The son of Miyā, although clearly human, is not so far from the petas whose stories I have just mentioned. One of the peta stories is of a merchant who cheats his customers by adulterating the rice to make it heavier. His wife and son and daughter-in-law are also wicked, and it is the fate of the wife that concerns us here. She lies to her husband when he asks for something, insisting that she doesn't have whatever it is. And then she makes a truth oath, if I am lying, she says, then may I eat shit in my future lives. She dies, and whenever she is given fragrant husked rice it turns into shit, swarming with worms. She eats that and, the text tells us, suffers greatly.<sup>10</sup> In another peta story, the wife of a weaver is angry that her husband has been so generous to the Buddhist monks. She curses him, saying "may these alms turn into piss and shit, puss and blood in the next world." She is reborn as a peti, and when a god takes pity on her and gives her food, it immediately turns into piss and shit and pus and blood.<sup>11</sup> We can, I think, draw the conclusion that humans, at least in some cases like that of Miyā's wretched son, are not that different from such stinking petas. We can also, I would argue, generalize from Miyā's son's experience in the womb and extend his predicament to all humans. It is not just diseased fetuses that eat pus and shit. All fetuses stink and eat excrement. This is the nature of human existence. In what follows I will draw upon story material and didactic texts from Buddhism and Jainism to show that we are all like the son of Miyā, stinking sinners.

10 Bhusapetavatthu, *Cūḷavagga*, number 4.

11 Mahāpesakārapeti, *Uragavagga*, number 9 *Gūthamuttam pubbalohitam*.

## II. The Human Condition: Stink and Sin

In the Śvetāmbara life of the Jina Mallinātha, the only Jina who is considered to be a woman, the beautiful Mallī is intent on converting her six zealous suitors to the Jain path of renunciation. She has a golden statue of herself made, into which she has rotten food thrown. The suitors are repulsed by the stench, and she explains that this is the normal condition of the human body, from the very moment of conception. The fetus lives covered with excrement in the womb, and the body, which begins in such a disgusting way, is naturally nothing but filth, like a city sewer, a trench filled with urine, a leather bag that oozes pus.<sup>12</sup>

The Śvetāmbara Jains and the Buddhists share another text that offers ample proof of Mallī's contention that stinking, and, I would add, therefore being sinful, is simply an unavoidable part of being human. The Jain *Rāyapaseniyasutta* and the Buddhist *Pāyāsi sutta* (*Dīghanikāya*, *Mahāvaggapāli*) describe a dialogue between a monk and the king Prasenajit, in which the monk endeavors to convince the unbelieving king that there is rebirth and something that transmigrates and there is reward for good deeds and punishment for sins.<sup>13</sup> In the two texts the king is skeptical of these basic fundamentals of Buddhist and Jain belief. He tells the monk that he has seen plenty of his friends and relatives who led virtuous lives; they abstained from taking life, did not tell lies or indulge in slandering others, were faithful to their spouses, were not greedy or wicked and held the right views. Nonetheless, he has seen these very people become ill and suffer. From that he concludes that, if there is to be retribution for a person's acts, it is clearly not in this life. It must be in a future life. But what proof can there be that these people have gone to heaven? He would only believe that this is the case if they would come back from their heavenly state and tell him face to face, "See, this is our reward. There is rebirth, there is something that transmigrates, and there is punishment for wrongdoing and reward for good deeds." I

12 See the *Triṣaṣṭiśalākāpuruṣacarita*, vol. IV, tr. Helen Johnson, Baroda: Gaekwads Oriental Series, CXXI, 1954, p. 65, and in the text verses 190–193, p. 102, ed. Śrīramaṇīkavivijayī and Vijayaśīlacandrasūri, Ahmedabad: Śrī Hemacandrācārya Navama Janmaśatābdī Smṛti Śikṣaṇa Saṃskāranidhi, 2001.

13 The Jain edition, edited Dīparatnasāgara, in *Āgama Suttāṇi*, Ahmedabad: Āgama Śruta Prakāśa, 2000, vol. 8, pp. 331–352. The Buddhist text is text 10 in the *Mahāvaggapāli*, online *Tipitika* and the relevant passage is paragraph 415. For a study of the Jain text see Willem Bollée, *The Story of Paesi: Soul and Body in Ancient India. A Dialogue on Materialism. Text, Translation, Notes and Glossary*, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2002, pp. 107–8.

am summarizing the Buddhist text here; the Jain text is similar. In the Jain text, the king offers the example of his own grandmother, who led a pious life. He is only prepared to believe that there is rebirth and that deeds have consequences if she would come back from heaven and tell him about her existence there.<sup>14</sup>

The monk replies with an example, for, he says, it is easiest for people to grasp things when they are shown examples. He tells the king to imagine a person who is sunk in a pit of excrement, a primitive latrine, right up to his head. You order some men to pull him out of that pile of shit, and they do as they are told. You then tell them to take pieces of bamboo and wipe the shit off him. This, too, they do. And you tell them to rub him down with white clay, which they also do. Next they are to rub him down repeatedly with oil and anoint him with fragrant powder and then to cut his hair and beard. And then they are to bring him fine garlands, unguents and fancy clothes. And then they are to guide him to the top of the palace and there provide him with objects to delight all his senses. All this they do. Now I ask you, king, would that person, freshly bathed, anointed, hair and beard trimmed, adorned with garlands, wearing fresh clothes, lolling on the roof of the palace and enjoying objects that delight all his senses want to immerse himself again in that pile of shit?

The king gets the point right away. Indeed, no one would want to immerse himself in shit because it is impure and stinking and repulsive and thoroughly loathsome. And here is the conclusion: this is the way the gods view all human beings. To the gods all humans are impure and stink; they are repulsive and loathsome. Indeed, when a god is about to fall from heaven, another Buddhist text tells us, one of the signs of his impending departure is that his body begins to stink.<sup>15</sup> The stench of humans makes the gods feel sick even when they smell it from a hundred yojanas away. This is the reason why the king's relatives and friends do not come back from heaven to tell the king about transmigration and

14 The Jain text has a slightly different emphasis here. The monk is trying to convince the king not only that there is something that transmigrates (*opapātika satta* in the Buddhist text), but that there is a soul that is different from the body. In many ways this emphasis is most consistent with the demonstrations that follow and one suspects that the text is more at home in the Jain context than the Buddhist.

15 *Divyāvadānam* 14, *Sūkarikāvadāna*: *dharmatā khalu cyavanadharmo devaputrasya pañca pūrvanimittāni prādurbhavanti – akliṣṭāni vāsāṃsi kliṣyanti, amlānāni mālyāni mlayanti, daurgandham kāyena niṣkrāmati, ubhābhyām kakṣābhyām svedaḥ prādurbhavanti, cyavanadharmā devaputraḥ sva āsane dhṛtiṃ na labhate*. Ed. P. L. Vaidya, *Buddhist Sanskrit Texts Series*, 20, Darbhanga: Mithilavidyāpīṭha, 1959, p. 120.



the fruits of karma. The Jain text offers a similar example.<sup>16</sup> A man, freshly bathed, is about to go into a temple. Now imagine that some others would call out to him from the shit house and tell him to come join them for a bit right there in the latrine, would he agree? The answer is clearly no. The text also says that humans stink and the foul stench of humans travels five hundred yojanas. For this and other reasons the gods do not want to come back to the human world. The commentator even remarks that normally smells do not travel such a distance, but the stench of humans is so strong and so vile that it can traverse this much space.

These texts liken the human world to a pile of shit. Other texts make explicit that the shit-stink of the human world is sin. We began this paper with the story that the commentator related in order to explain the occasion on which the *Dhammacariya sutta* was first told. The *sutta* has this telling verse:

Just as a pit of excrement gets filled to the brim over many years and cannot be easily cleaned, so it is with the one who sins.<sup>17</sup>

The commentary elucidates the simile for us in this way: Just as the latrine is filled with shit, so a person is said to be “filled”, because he is filled with sin. It is difficult for him to get clean; even when he experiences the fruits of that sin for a long time he is still not purified.<sup>18</sup> In addition, this small *sutta* tells us that the sinner is impure, rubbish, offal, and you are to cast him out as you would discard these vile things.<sup>19</sup> Another text describes all desires, all the defilements, which are the necessary attributes of the unenlightened existence, as “having a foul smell”.<sup>20</sup>

This comparison of sin to shit occurs repeatedly in Buddhist texts and in the commentaries. Commenting on another *sutta*, the *Kiṃsīlasutta*, which is *sutta* 9 in the same section of the *Suttanipāta*, the commentator says that a person must avoid sin or wrong doing in the same way as someone who wants to remain

16 P. 335–336.

17 *gūthakūpo yathā assa sampuṇṇo gaṇavassiko; Yo ca evarūpo assa dubbisoddho hi sāṅgaṇo* (6).

18 *gūthakūpo viya gūthena pāpena sampuṇṇattā sampuṇṇo puggalo, so dubbisodho hi sāṅgaṇo, cirakālaṃ tassa aṅgaṇassa vipākaṃ paccanubhontopi na sujhati*; paragraph 282.

19 Verse 8 and commentary in paragraph 283.

20 The *Pāṇīya Jātaka*, 459, describes desires as *duggandha*, *dhīr atthu subahū kāmē duggandhe*. The *Jātaka Together with its Commentary*, ed. V. Fausboll, London: Luzac and Co., 1963, vol. IV, p. 117.

clean must avoid contact with shit.<sup>21</sup> In the *Devadhamma Jātaka*, we are told that a person should feel revulsion for sin, as one feels revulsion for excrement.<sup>22</sup>

The parallels between shit and sin are obvious to the compilers of these texts; both stink, both are something repulsive. In more than one way, then, the stench of sin is the very essence of human existence, of our desires and our bodies. I turn now to Jain and Buddhist descriptions of our bodies. Our bodies are not only born in sin/shit but of sin/shit, and by their very nature they are foul and stinking.

The Buddhist practice of contemplation on the impurity of the body is well known. One small *sutta* in the *Suttanipāta*, the *Vijayasutta*, number 11 in the *Uragavagga*, describes the Buddhist view of the body. Covered by the skin, the true nature of the body is hidden from view. It is really an oozing mess of puss, blood, sweat. Humans are impure and stinking, as the gods well know. The *Mahāsatipatthāna sutta* of the *Majjhimanikāya* contains a meditation on the impurity of the body and in his commentary to the *Vijayasutta* the commentator refers his readers to the *Visuddhimagga*, which contains a lengthy description of the meditation on impurity.<sup>23</sup> That stench begins in the womb and is inescapable. I cited earlier the story of the hungry ghost or peti who in her previous birth had caused her co-wife to abort and as a result of that sin had been reborn as a foul-smelling hideous peti, surrounded by flies. It was not only the peti herself who stinks in this story. The three-month old fetus that her co-wife expels is also described as a stinking mass of blood, or perhaps pus and blood *pūtilohitako*. This is the same word used for what these petas and petis eat in their miserable hellish rebirth. Indeed another *sutta* tells us that in hell the wicked are cooked in a vat of pus and blood and wherever they go there is pus and blood.<sup>24</sup> Fetuses are

21 *sucikāmena gūthaṭhānaṃ viya*, paragraph 331. The *Buddhavaṃsa*, II. 13–14, compares the filth of the defilements to excrement.

13. “*Yathā gūthagato puriso, taḷākam disvāna pūritam;*

*Na gavesati tam taḷākam, na doso taḷākassa so.*”

14. “*Evaṃ kilesamaladhova, vijjante amatantaḷe;*

*Na gavesati tam taḷākam, na doso amatantaḷe.*”

22 *The Jātaka Together with its Commentary*, ed. V. Fausboll, London: Luzac and Co., 1990, vol. I, p. 131.

23 *Visuddhimagga* VIII, edited Badari Nātha Shukla, Varanasi: Varanaseya Sanskrit Vishva-vidyalaya, 1969, vol 1 p. 522 ff. The passage is p. 236 ff. in *The Path of Purification*, tr. Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli, Onalaska, Wa: BPS Pariyatti Editions 1999. For more on the impurity of the body see Steven Collins, “The Body in Theravāda Monasticism”, in Sarah Coakley, *Religion and the Body*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997, pp. 185–205.

24 Verse 42, story 6 in the *Uragavaggo*; the *Kokāliyasutta*, *Mahāvagga*, *Suttanipāta*, verse 15.



in a stinking hell, the womb, and are themselves but a mass of festering matter. In fact, in another story a man identifies a strange mass as a human fetus by its stench.

In his commentary to the first *sutta* of the *Cūḷavagga* of the *Suttanipāṭa*, the *Ratanasutta*, the commentator tells the story of a famine in the city of Vesālī. In order to put an end to the famine, the Licchavis go to Rājagṛha to fetch the Buddha, who brings prosperity back to the city. This, the commentator tells us, is the short version. The long version is how Vesālī itself came to be. The wife of the king of Varanasi was pregnant. She told her husband, who immediately did all that was necessary to protect his unborn offspring. The queen's time came and she entered the lying-in chamber. Virtuous women give birth at dawn, and she was no exception. At dawn she gave birth to a ruddy lump of flesh. She was understandably appalled. She feared that word would reach the king that, while other queens give birth to sons that are like golden images, she, his chief queen has given birth a mass of flesh. And so she put the thing into a pot with the king's seal, covered it, and set the pot afloat in the Ganges. The pot was carried off by the waves of the river. As soon as the pot was set afloat, the gods protected it. They tied onto it a gold plate on which it was written, "This is the child of the king of Benaras". An ascetic, living on the banks of Ganges, spied the pot and grabbed it, thinking it to be a pile of rags. But then he saw the words written on the gold plaque and the king's seal. He said to himself, and here I quote, "This really could be a fetus. For, in truth, doesn't it have a rotten stench?"<sup>25</sup>

The stench of the fetus comes from the impurity of its causes. A Jain text makes this clear. The *Bhagavatī Ārāḍhanā* has a long section on the impurity of the body. The causes of the body, it says, are sperm and blood, and they are impure. They are also the kinds of causes that transform themselves into their product, the *pariṇāmi kāraṇa*, which means that they share the same nature as the product that results. The Jain text explains that this is why the body itself is impure, just like a cake made from impure flour.<sup>26</sup> The text continues with a description of the development of the embryo. At every stage of its development the fetus is impure and loathsome like excrement.<sup>27</sup> The fetus lies in vomit and

25 *siyā gabbho, tathā hissa duggandhapūtibhāvo natthīti*. I take this to be a rhetorical question and not a statement that the thing does not stink.

26 *Bhagavatī Ārāḍhanā*, ed. Kailasacandra Siddhantasastri, Sholapur: Jaina Samskrit Samrakshaka sangha 1978, Verse 998.

27 Verse 1004, *savvāsu avatthāsu vi kalalādīyāṇi tāṇi savvāṇi, asuṇi amijjhāṇi ya vihimsa-ñijjāṇi ñiccaṃpi*. The commentary reads *amejjhāṇi va* which it glosses as *amedhyam iva*, "like shit", p. 544.

shit in the womb (verse 1007) and eats what the mother has vomited, like so much shit (1010). In 1012 it eats both shit and puke and is utterly repulsive. The body is like a latrine filled with foul things and leaking foul substances (1020).<sup>28</sup> Indeed the human body is the worst of all, for there is nothing of value in it. Deer have luxurious tails from which fly whisks can be made, the rhinoceros has its horn, and the elephant its tusk. Even snakes have gemstones, but there is nothing of value in the human body (1045). The goat gives urine which is pure, and the cow gives milk. Yellow orpiment comes from the bull. But there is nothing pure in the human body (1046). The text includes a list of the parts of the body and the impurities that come from the body orifices, just as do Buddhist texts on the impurity of the body. The *Vijaya Sutta* mentioned earlier offers a close parallel to the more detailed description of the *Bhagavatī Ārādhana*. Buddhist and Jain texts share the same language when they speak of the body. In his commentary to the description of the impurities of the body in the *Vijayasutta*, the commentator says that there is nothing of value in the body, like pearls or gemstones, closely parallel to the Jain verses 1045 and 1046.<sup>29</sup> The *Visuddhimagga* elaborates: "From the feet to the head, from the tips of the hair to the feet, starting from the skin and all around, contemplating the entire body, he does not see even the tiniest speck of anything pure, no pearl, no gemstone, no lapis, no aloe, no saffron no camphor, no fragrant powder. All he sees is the various body parts, of most foul odor, repulsive, loathsome to look at, impure."<sup>30</sup>

The human condition, then, offers little to commend it, except the possibility of transcending it through religious practice. Stinking creatures, we are born from impurities, and our bodies are foul. And this foulness is not just a physical fact; it is also a moral one. Sin stinks. Sin is impure. The stench of our bodies cannot be separated from our inborn sinfulness. This point is also clear from a consideration of the absence of stench, of fragrance, which we shall see is the natural indication of and result of virtue. In the *Visuddhimagga*, Buddhaghosa tells us that those of good conduct avoid all contact with the lax monk, just as they avoid coming into contact with stinking shit or a fetid corpse. But the bodily fragrance of a virtuous monk is pleasing even to the gods. It surpasses every known fragrance and spreads out in every direction.<sup>31</sup> This suggests

28 The same image is found in the *Buddhavaṃsa* II. 22, where the body is compared to a latrine, *vaccaṃ kuṭim*.

29 *na kiñcetha gayhūpagaṃ muttāmaṇisadisagaṃ atthi*, paragraph 199.

30 *Visuddhimagga* p. 526; translation p. 237.

31 *Visuddhimagga*, translation p. 6; text on the Tipitika website. The passage appears at the end of the section on *Sīla*. It is mentioned by Steven Collins, p. 196.

that the body of the virtuous monk has somehow been radically transformed from those normal human bodies that the gods found so repulsive in our earlier story. We shall see that true virtue, like that of the Buddha or the Jina, implies a body that is very much unlike ours and is in no way a normal human body. In many cases it is closer to the body of an animal, which should not surprise us since both Buddhist and Jain texts allow that animals can have something of value in their bodies while the human body is nothing but filth. In my conclusions I offer some comments on the fragrance of the virtuous and the abundant sweet smelling plants in their abodes and suggest an additional way in which we might experience the Buddhist and Jain monuments with their rich ornamentation.<sup>32</sup>

### III. The Fragrance of Virtue and Some Conclusions

We should expect that the *Vimānavatthu*, which describes the heavenly rewards of pious men and women, often those who gave generously to the Buddhist monks or worshipped the relics of the Buddha, would offer us a glimpse of the sweet scent of the holy. As we shall see, both the gods and their abodes are described as fragrant, and gardens and flowering plants adorn these *vimānas* or heavenly palaces. While the presence of gardens in Buddhist paradises and the location of Buddhist monasteries in parks or gardens have been noted, little has been said about the fragrance of these gardens. Emphasis has been on the erotic overtones of parks and their visual splendor. I will argue that their fragrance was equally if not more important; the virtuous and everything around them are expected to smell sweet. A Tamil poem, speaking of God, says,

In fire, you are the heat.  
In flowers, you are the scent.  
Among stones you are the diamond ...

- 32 Medieval Europe offers many parallels to the pairs sin/stink and virtue/fragrance that I have proposed here. I benefitted from reading the chapter on smell in C. M. Woolgar, *The Senses in Late Medieval England*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006, pp. 147–214. See also Constance Classen, David Howes and Anthony Synnott, *Aroma: The Cultural History of Smell*, London and New York: Routledge, 1994, chapters 1 and 2; Constance Classen, “The Breath of God: Sacred Histories of Scent”, in Jim Brobnik, *The Smell Culture Reader*, Oxford and New York: Berg, 2006, pp. 374–390. More generally, the connection between virtue and the body has recently been explored in early China in Mark Csikszentmihalyi, *Ethics and the Body in Early China*, Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2004.

Everything, you are everything,  
The sense, the substance, of everything.<sup>33</sup>

We could hardly ask for a clearer statement that scent is what is most special about flowers. The fragrance of flowers may be taken as an indication of the virtue of those whose surroundings they beautify; they may also be seen as a natural enhancement of the delightful perfume that emanates from such virtuous individuals.<sup>34</sup> But the *Vimānavatthu* is not our only source of information about the intimate connection between perfume and virtue. There is a wealth of textual material that depicts the surroundings of the holy and emphasizes the fragrance of the virtuous and their environment.<sup>35</sup>

We have seen that Jains and Buddhists both associated sin with evil smells. They also both linked virtue with fragrance. Although scholars are more familiar with Buddhist texts, the passages on the heavenly *vimānas* in Jain texts have equally elaborate descriptions of the plants and flowers that are to be found there and the powerful and pleasing fragrances that emanate from them and from every part of the heavenly *vimāna*. Indeed, in the Jain texts even the jewels that are the very building blocks of a *vimāna* give off the fragrances of a host of rare aromatics, their combined fragrance a wonderful delight to the sense of smell.<sup>36</sup>

33 The poem, translated by Ramanujan, is cited by David Shulman, "The Scent of Memory in Hindu South India", in Jim Brobnik, *The Smell Culture Reader*, Oxford and New York: Berg, 2006, pp. 411–427, cited page 416.

34 See the articles by Daud Ali, "Gardens in Early Indian Court Life", *Studies in History*, 2003, 19.2, pp. 221–252, and Gregory Schopen, "The Buddhist 'Monastery' and the Indian Garden: Aesthetics, Assimilations, and the Siting of Monastic Establishments", *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, vol. 126, no. 4, pp. 487–505.

35 See also Michael B. Carrithers, "They will be Lords upon the Island: Buddhism in Sri Lanka", in Heinz Bechert and Richard Gombrich, ed. *The World of Buddhism: Buddhist Monks and Nuns in Society and Culture*, New York: Facts on File Publications, 1984, pp. 133–147, particularly p. 134, where Carrithers remarks that "the monk's morality is a fragrance, permeating the universe." This is cited in Mrozik, "The Value of Human Differences", p. 17.

36 See for example the *vimāna* of the god Sūriyābha, the description of which is to be found in the first part of the *Rāyapaseṇīya Sutta* cited earlier. I have discussed some of this material in my essay "Contemplating the Jain Universe: Visions of Order and Chaos", in *Victorious Ones: Jain Images of Perfection*, New York Rubin Museum of Art, 2009, pp. 48–64. See also the passage on the smell of women in the commentary to the *Aṅguttara nikāya*, Rūpādivagga, section 3. This makes a distinction between the stink of ordinary women (like a horse, like sweat, like blood) and the fragrance that emanates from the virtuous woman who is the wife of the Cakkavatti or world Emperor. The fragrance of sandal emanates from her body, while her breath smells like lotuses.

Nor was such an abundance of lush flowering vegetation and sweet smell confined to the heavenly realm. The shrines or *cetiyas* in which the Jina stops to rest and preach outside the cities on earth are similarly depicted as filled with fragrant flowers and scented with aloeswood and other precious aromatics. In fact, in some descriptions special emphasis is placed on the profusion of fragrance: the shrines are pleasing on account of the fragrance of the smoke of different kinds of incense, intensely fragrant with the best of all scents, with the finest scents; they are so deeply perfumed that they seem to be entirely a mass of some fine and rare aromatic.<sup>37</sup>

In a charming Jain story that was often reproduced in medieval story collections, a young girl wins a boon from a snake god because of her simple goodness. Her boon is that a fragrant garden follows her wherever she goes, a kind of visual and olfactory manifestation of her virtue.<sup>38</sup> In this story, moral purity and the sweet aroma of flowers literally cannot be kept apart. As a Buddhist counterpart, we might recall the description of the past Buddha Padmottara (Padumuttara), whose very name came from the fact that wherever he stepped a lotus sprang up under his feet.<sup>39</sup> The famous nun Utpalavarṇā, through her generosity to Pratyekabuddhas, gained an enticing complexion, like that of a blue lotus, and an even more wonderful trait; lotuses sprang up wherever she placed her feet.<sup>40</sup> And of course, there is the *gandhakūṭī*, the perfumed chamber in which the Buddha stays in the monastery. That at least some of the fragrance of the perfumed chamber comes from flowers is suggested by a passage in a commentary to the *Pāsarāsisuta* of the *Majjhimanikāya*, in which we are told that one of the elders prepared the sleeping chamber of the Buddha, removing the wilted flowers.<sup>41</sup> We might also surmise that the extravagantly scented pathway that pious lay devotees are said to have prepared for the Buddha served both as a gesture of honor and as a natural reflection of the Buddha's perfection. Thus we read in the *Mahāvastu* how king Śreṇiya Bimbisāra had the road the Buddha was

37 See for example the description of the Punnabhadda shrine in the *Aupapātika sūtra*, p. 71, ed, Dīparatnasāgara, *Āgama Suttāṇi*, vol. 8, Ahmedabad: Āgama śruta Prakāśan, 2000. *kālāgarupavarakuṇḍurukkaturukkadhūvamaghamaghamātagaṇḍhuddhuyābhirāme sugaṇḍhavaragaṇḍhagaṇḍhiye gaṇḍhavaṭṭibhūe*

38 I have translated a version of her story in *The Forest of Thieves and the Magic Garden: An Anthology of Medieval Jain Stories*, New Delhi: Penguin, 1998, pp. 264–292.

39 The story is told by Buddhaghosa at the opening of his commentary to the *Etadaggavagga*, *Āṅguttaranikāya*.

40 Her story is told in the *Etadaggavagga* 237 and in the commentary to the *Therīgāthā*.

41 Section 272 in the text online.



to traverse swept and perfumed with incense, everywhere hung with fragrant garlands.<sup>42</sup> In the Pali commentary to the *Aṅguttaranikāya*, *Etadaggavagga*, we read how King Bandhuma made a covered passageway along the route from the monastery to the palace. It was indeed very much like a heavenly *vimāna*; the route was shaded by a canopy with gold stars, while all kinds of fragrant garlands were hung from the sides. On the ground were flower garlands, pots brimming with scented flowers, fragrant substances meant to perfume the entire way, and more flowers and still more incense.<sup>43</sup>

In a Jain parallel, the gods remove from the vicinity of Mahāvīra anything and everything that is impure or bad smelling. They perfume the area with scented water and the smoke of various types of incense, so that like the heavenly chariot of a god, the area around the Jina is redolent with every fine perfume, as if it were made entirely of precious aromatics. In fact the same language is used for both the area around the Jina and a god's heavenly *vimāna*.<sup>44</sup> The virtuous, with everything around them, must smell sweet.

A few examples from the Buddhist *Vimānavatthu* further document this association between the virtuous and their surroundings and fragrances. One *vimāna* is "possessed of all kinds of fragrant trees".<sup>45</sup> A pond near this *vimāna* has a tree called *bhujaka*, which, the commentary explains, is a special kind of fragrant tree found only in heaven and on Mt. Gandhamādana (Mt. Intoxicating Fragrance).<sup>46</sup> In another *vimāna*, the men and women, adorned with floral garlands, themselves give off a gentle fragrance as the breeze touches them, while the *vimāna* has ponds with different kinds of lotuses.<sup>47</sup> In yet another example, a sweet fragrance wafts up from the lotuses in a lake at a *vimāna*.<sup>48</sup> The examples could be multiplied, but these should suffice to show us that such places of virtue and the virtuous alike all smell sweet, in stark contrast to the sinners and to places where sinners abide, first and foremost the bodies that they inhabit.

42 *Mahāvastu*, vol 1p. 213 in the translation of J.J. Jones, London: Pali Text Society, 1973, and 1.258 in the edition in GRETEL. This also seems to have been considered the proper way to treat any honored person. In the commentary to the *Cūḷahatthipadopamasutta* of the *Majjhimanikāya*, when the Brahmin Jānussoṇi processes out of Sāvatthi, they perfume the city with incense and shower flowers everywhere. This is section 288 in the online text.

43 *Aṅguttaranikāya*, *Etadaggavagga*, *Aññāsikoṇḍatheravatthu*.

44 *Rājaprasāniya Sūtra* p. 213.

45 *vividhadumaggasugandhasevitam*, verse 649.

46 Commentary to verse 650, part 1.

47 Verses 891, 893 in part 2.

48 Verse 1176, part 2.

The *Vimānavatthu* does not tell us much about the bodies of the gods, beyond stating that they are beautiful, of golden complexion, and smell good. But the descriptions of the body of the Buddha and the body of the Jina make clear that their perfect body is very unlike the ordinary human body.<sup>49</sup> It has been noted that physical beauty of the human body and moral superiority go hand in hand in Indian thinking; here I would to propose that for some, the only really perfect body was one that was strikingly different from the normal human body.<sup>50</sup> Unlike humans, the Buddha does not smell bad. One of his eighty secondary marks is that he smells like sandal. He never gets dirty and his breath always smells of lotuses. He is not subject to disease or to hunger and thirst.<sup>51</sup> The breath of the Jina smells like lotuses and his mouth is sweet smelling. Even his hair smells fragrant. Both the Jina and the Buddha have certain physical characteristics that make them look more like animals than humans. Many of the standard tropes that describe the beauty of the female body in poetry make reference to the plant and animal world.<sup>52</sup> This is also the case in the descriptions of the Jina and Buddha. Both the Jina and the Buddha have private parts that are hidden from view; the Jain text says that this is like the private parts of a horse, while the commentator remarking on this feature of the Buddha's body says it is like the private parts of a fine elephant.<sup>53</sup> Both have thighs like a deer. The Jina has an anus like that of a bird, a chest like a lion, a chin like a tiger. His broad shoulders are like those of a bull, a boar, a lion or an elephant. He also does not have normal bodily secretions. If the normal human body drips snot and pus and shit, the body of the Jina is free of any impurity. His blood is like milk, as the commentary adds. The bodies of the Jina and Buddha have healing properties. The Jains speak of *labdhis* or attainments that perfected beings have, in which

49 The marks of the Buddha are described in the *Lakkhana Sutta* of the *Dīghanikāya*. The Jina is described in detail in the *Aupapātika sutta*, edition of Dīparatnasāgara, vol. 8, beginning page 81.

50 Vidya Dehejia, *The Body Adorned*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2009, pp. 65–66. See also Susanne Mrozik, “The Value of Human Differences: South Asian Buddhist Contributions Toward an Embodied Virtue Theory”, *Journal of Buddhist Ethics*, 9, 2002, pp.1–33.

51 *Mahāvastu*, 1.168 in the edition of Senart on GREIL.

52 *The Body Adorned*, pp. 28ff, for example.

53 In the commentary to the *Selasutta*, *Mahāvagga* of the *Suttanipāta*, paragraph 553. The comparison of the Buddha to animals extends to his behavior as well. At his birth he takes seven steps, just as a newborn bull does. He proclaims his future greatness, just as a lion roars from a mountain top. See the verses in the commentary to the *Aṅguttaranikāya*, *Eka-puggalavagga*, section 170.



their body secretions are medicinal.<sup>54</sup> A Buddhist *avadāna* that was widely known describes the body of the Buddha as a medicine for all beings and all ills.<sup>55</sup> These are only a few examples of the extraordinary properties of the virtuous body.

As places where the virtuous gather we might expect that Buddhist monasteries would also have some unusual features.<sup>56</sup> We have seen that the *Dhammacariya sutta* of the *Suttanipāṭa* recommends that the sinner be thrown out of the Buddhist community, like so much rubbish cast onto the rubbish heap. The commentator tells us why: the monastery is only for the virtuous, he says, not for the wicked.<sup>57</sup> In addition to the visual beauty of the monastery which has been noted by others, I would like to conclude this discussion by suggesting that the monastery, as the abode of the virtuous, was also expected to be a place of sweet fragrance, just like the heavenly *vimānas*, and very much like the virtuous body of the perfected ones. We are familiar with the abundant floral ornaments at Buddhist sites, for example at Sanchi.<sup>58</sup> We can see the gorgeous flowers, we can even imagine we hear the sound of the birds, standard in the descriptions of monasteries. But, I think, we have forgotten to smell the flowers, and I suspect that they are there as much to perfume the site as to delight the eyes. Sin reeks and

54 A list of the *labdhis* can be found in the *Mantrarājarahasya* of Śrī Siṃhatilakasūri, ed. Acharya Jina Vijaya Muni, Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1980, beginning on p. 1.

55 See my article, “Cures and Karma II: Attitudes Towards Healing in Buddhist Story Literature”, in *Bulletin de l’Ecole Française d’Extrême Orient*, 85, 1998, pp. 285–305 for a translation of this *avadāna* and Peter Zieme, “The Bodhisattva Sattvaśādhā ‘Medicine of all Beings’”, in *Cultures of the Silk Road and Modern Science*, vol. 1, 2010, pp. 35–45, for a Uighur version of this story.

56 Descriptions of medieval European monasteries emphasize their unique aspects, including their rich fragrance that comes from flowers and sweet spices. Megan Cassody-Welch, *Monastic Spaces and their Meanings: Thirteenth-Century English Cistercian Monasteries*, Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2001, pp. 65–66.

57 *Sanḥārāmo nāma sīlavantānaṃ kato, na dussīlānaṃ*, paragraph 2. With this might be compared *Udāna*, *Soṇavaggo*, *Uposathasutta*, in which a sinful monk is called rubbish or filth, *kasambujātam*, and the commentary explains that this is because he is to be thrown out by the virtuous, *sīlavanteḥi chaḍḍettabbattā* (section 45 in the online version).

58 Robert Brown has written about some of these reliefs in “Nature as Utopian Space in the Early Stupas of India”, *Buddhist Stupas in South Asia*, Akira Shimada and Jason Hawkes (eds). New Delhi: Oxford University Press, pp. 62–85. He argues that the plants are alive, but never mentions what that might mean. I would suggest it means that they smell. He also wants to make a distinction between an “ideal” space and a “ritual or religious space”. I would argue that it is precisely because the monastery is a religious space, an abode of the virtuous, that it can be considered to be an ideal space.

virtue gives off a gentle fragrance. Like the flowers in the heavenly *vimānas* of the *Vimānavatthu* these flowers are the result of the virtue of those who stay at the site. Their fragrance is also an indicator that virtue reigns there. The well known Jain Ayāgapaṭṭas from Mathurā are similarly abundantly adorned with flowers.

If we expect the gateways of a stūpa or a surface on which offerings were place to be ornamented with flowers, we may nonetheless be surprised by the beautiful ornamentation on stone urinals that have been discovered in Śrī Lāṅka monasteries. Delicately carved floral decorations appear at the head of these urinal stones.<sup>59</sup> We know that sin stinks and the virtuous have no sin. The large lotus, perfuming the latrine and obscuring any bad odors, would have provided direct sensory proof of the virtue of those living in the monastery. A 13<sup>th</sup> century monk in Sri Lanka, Vedeḥa Thera, in his *Rasavāhinī* described a marvelous monastery perched on a cliff in the Himālayas, so difficult of access that only those with supernatural powers could reach it. Not surprisingly the grounds of the monastery abounded in fragrant flowering trees. Everything was made of jewels. And Vedeḥa Thera makes a special point of telling us, even the urinals and latrines were of jewels and as artfully made as all the other buildings in the monastery.<sup>60</sup> This otherworldly monastery was a joy to see, and we can imagine, also a joy to smell.

59 For one example see *The Cultural Heritage of Sri Lanka: The Land of Serendipity*, Tokyo: Tokyo National Museum, 2008, p.78. I thank Osmund Bopearachchi for bringing to my attention the existence of these urinal stones during his lectures at Yale, spring 2010.

60 Vedeḥa Thera, *Rasavāhinī*, transcribed by Sharada Gamdhi, New Delhi: Parimal Publications, 1988 in the account of Dāṭhāsena, VIII.4, *rattiṭṭhāna divāṭṭhāna tatheva ratanāmayā vaccapassāvakuṭṭiyo tatheva sādhunimmitā*//43, p. 330.

