

# The Shape of Victory: the Earth-Touching Gesture in Context<sup>1</sup>

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One of the best known images of the Buddha is in *bhūmisparśa*, the earth-touching gesture. This appears down to the present day in both Mahāyāna and Theravāda depictions of Gotama the Sakyan Sage, as an indication of the defeat of Māra preliminary to his awakening, after calling the earth to witness.

The gesture presents us with questions as to its origin and context. There is no story of Gotama having touched the ground before his awakening in the earliest Buddhist texts describing these events, and indeed the best-known literary depiction of the event in the Pāli tradition stems from a text compiled in the 5th c. CE. In a recent paper, Maria Spagnoli traces the origins of the gesture to the influence of Greek cultural practices around oath-making, as transmitted through visual iconography in Gandhāra in the first centuries CE. She says, “whereas Siddhārtha’s calling upon the Earth by touching the ground with his hand appears to have no counterpart in ancient India, it does have precise analogies [with oath-making] in the Greek world.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Spagnoli, 2005: 340. The oath in question is one that George Thompson calls a “declaratory or judicial oath” as opposed to a “promissory oath”. That is, it is with respect to something that one affirms happened in the past, rather than something one affirms one will accomplish in the future. An oath of either kind he says is “typically accompanied by an equally formalized

The present essay will provide further historical and cultural background from ancient India from which the gesture may be seen to have arisen in image and narrative. It will deal largely with textual material, first from the Pāli canonical stratum, and then turning to eight early narrative descriptions of the earth-touching gesture from various Buddhist traditions in the early centuries CE, some of which fit uncomfortably with Spagnoli's thesis. It will then turn to resonances the Buddhist symbolic narrative has with several prominent Upaniṣadic and Vedic tropes. It will consider various aspects of these tropes and how they might have come together to produce such an important and influential symbol in Buddhist iconography.

While it may indeed be, as Spagnoli suggests, that the gesture arose in part due to influence from Greece, nevertheless its deepest historical resonances stem from within an Indian cultural context.

### ***Mudrā* or Gesture**

Symbolic hand gestures encountered in Buddhist iconography are often nowadays termed "*mudrās*". However Richard Smith has recently argued that although the term has become standardized, it is often used inaccurately.<sup>3</sup> The word is not found in early treatments of gestural performance such as the Gupta period *Nāṭya Śāstra* (NS), which uses "exclusively the word *hasta*, hand". The word "*mudrā*" stems from later, particularly tantric usage, as a gesture within a ritual performative context to "seal" a mantra. (The word "*mudrā*" literally means "seal"). Smith finds little overlap between this ritual usage and that found in the early sculptural tradition in India, and very few correspondences between hand gestures listed in the NS and those found in early Indian visual iconography, unless representative of dancers in

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ritual gesture signifying the binding or contractual or legal nature of the entire procedure." George Thompson (1998: 142).

<sup>3</sup> Richard Smith, "Questions Regarding the Word Mudra," last modified Sept. 9, 2015, accessed March 25, 2021, <https://asianart.com/articles/mudra/index.html>

particular.<sup>4</sup> So while the term “*mudrā*” has become generally accepted, in what follows I will avoid its usage, preferring the more general term “gesture”.

A particularly early example of a Buddhist hand gesture with clear Greek influence (Fig. 1) displays the Buddha using the gesture of *abhaya* (safety or reassurance), dated from the 1st to the mid-2nd c. CE in Gandhāra.<sup>5</sup>



FIG. 1

One of the most famous hand gestures is known by the compound Sanskrit term “*bhūmisparśa*” a word composed of *bhūmi* meaning “earth” or “ground” and *parśa* meaning “touching” or “contact”. *Bhūmisparśa* is only one of numerous such gestures and so its development should be seen as part of a larger turn towards representational hand gestures in Buddhist imagery in the early centuries of the CE.

<sup>4</sup> Dale Saunders’s treatment of *mudrā* stems from the later, esoteric Japanese tradition of Buddhism and hence is explicitly set to one side by Smith. Notably Saunders suggests that such gestures as these may have arisen out of “some ancient source closely connected with the primitive dance” around the beginnings of the Common Era. Smith calls this into question by the lack of correspondence between descriptions of such gestures found in texts such as the NS and the gestural iconography found in the early Indian tradition (again, with the exception of iconography related specifically to dancers). Dale Saunders (1960: 10-11). Smith cites J.N. Banerjea’s claim that with respect to the development of Indian visual iconography “such Indian works on dramaturgy as *Nāṭyaśāstra*, *Abhinayadarpaṇa*, etc., have no practical application in our present study.” J.N. Banerjea (1956/2002: 248). This of course does not mean that there is no relation whatever between the gestures in Indian dance and those found in early iconography, however unearthing such potential relations are beyond the scope of this paper.

<sup>5</sup> “Seated Buddha,” Metropolitan Museum of Art, Accession Number: 2003.593.1; <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/72381>

### Earth as Ontological Witness in Early Texts

In the suttas of the Pāli tradition the earth plays an occasional role in witnessing important events in the Buddha's life. In particular there is said to have been a great earthquake (*mahābhūmicāla*) upon his *parinibbāna*, along with the sound of thunder (DN 16.6.10). Ordinarily however when great occurrences happen they are occasioned by a stock passage on the shaking of the "ten thousandfold world-system" (*dasasahassī lokadhātu*). So, for example the world-system is said to shake and tremble when the Bodhisattva descends into his mother's womb (MN 123.21), when he is born (MN 123.21), and at the completion of the Buddha's First Sermon (SN 56.11). None of this however happens in the early accounts of the Buddha's awakening.<sup>6</sup>

All such supernatural shakings occasion events of ontological gravity: they become metaphors for the importance of the dharma itself, and the Buddha as its teacher.<sup>7</sup> The distinction between the reaction of the earth and that of the ten thousandfold world-system is obscure but may perhaps lie in the earth's reaction being more immediate, physically dangerous, and hence frightening, while that of the world-system occasioning in us awe and a feeling of transcendence. So it might be that the earth shakes when the Buddha dies, occasioning fright and emotional turmoil, while the world-system trembles at important occasions in the Buddha's life. The former reflects more of the phenomenology of

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<sup>6</sup> Earthquakes are said to happen "when the Tathāgata gains supreme awakening" as one of the eight causes of earthquakes (DN 16.3.17). In this there seems to be a dissonance with the early suttas that actually describe his awakening, in which no earthquakes are mentioned.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. "Biographies need a basis: the more authoritative the basis, the more magnificent the biography. The Buddha's is authenticated by cosmic and indeed everlastingly earthshaking effects, replicated with entropic echoes for all the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas across the endless *samsāra*, and for all Buddhists then across Asia and well beyond it today." Eugen Ciurtin, "Thus Have I Quaked': The Tempo of the Buddha's Vita and the Earliest Buddhist Fabric of Timelessness [The Buddha's Earthquakes II]", in *Figurations of Time in Asia*, edited by D. Boschung and C. Wessels-Mevissen (2012: 39-40).

terror occasioned by loss, while the latter reflects more upon the ontological gravity of the occasion for world history.<sup>8</sup>

It also may be that these amount to two competing descriptions of the same event. The description of the eight causes of earthquakes in the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta* seems to indicate that earthquakes are themselves the effects of such important occasions, which suggests that such tremblings may be felt on earth but in fact extend well beyond into other world-systems.<sup>9</sup>

That said, in none of these cases is the world *called* to respond; the response instead is presented as automatic, an effect of the power released by great people and great events.<sup>10</sup> What is particular about the earth-touching gesture is that it represents the earth as a character in a drama rather than merely as a background condition. That character may in some cases be explicitly understood as insentient, but it is a character nonetheless.

### Equanimous Earth in Early Buddhist Texts

There are a few examples from the Pāli *Nikāyas* that lay what may be the groundwork for the gesture that would arise later. The *Mahārāhulovāda Sutta* begins with the Buddha admonishing

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<sup>8</sup> Spagnoli notes that rarely earthquakes are presented as having a joyful and harmless character, as in the *Mahāvastu*'s description of the Buddha's first sermon. This example straddles a line between being an earthquake and being an event that includes other world-systems. Spagnoli, 2005: 330. The relevant section can be found at J.J. Jones, *The Mahāvastu, Vol. III* (1956: 335ff).

<sup>9</sup> Cf. "[T]he Buddha's Vita is endowed with a nuclear tempo and the earthquakes are there to indicate to everyone this very tempo as an indication of movement all through the distinct stages of his 'epochal career'." Ciurtin, (2009: 39-40).

<sup>10</sup> Interestingly in the *Daśabhūmika Sūtra* the power to cause earthquakes is added to the standardized list of the Buddha's eight miraculous powers found in the *Sāmaññaphala Sutta* and elsewhere. See: Thomas Cleary (1993: 724), and David Fiordalis, "Miracles and Superhuman Powers in South Asian Buddhist Literature" (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 2008), p. 124. The effect is similar to that which John Kieschnick describes as "spiritual resonance" in medieval Chinese Buddhism: "... when a sage appears, one can expect a spontaneous, correlative response from Nature ..." John Kieschnick (1997:98).

his son Rāhula to regard all material form as “This is not mine, this I am not, this is not my self”.<sup>11</sup> Later that evening Rāhula goes to ask the Buddha for instruction on mindfulness and the Buddha turns to a further instruction on non-self beginning with a meditation on the earth element (*pathavīdhātu*). This meditation involves noting the identity of the earth element that makes up the organs of one’s own body and the earth element that makes up the external world. None of them are self.

When one sees it thus as it actually is with proper wisdom, one becomes disenchanted with the earth element and makes the mind dispassionate towards the earth element. MN 62.8.

After going through the other elements in similar meditation practices, the Buddha then turns to recommending “a meditation that is like the earth” (*pathavīsamaṃ bhāvanam*):

... for when you develop meditation that is like the earth, arisen agreeable and disagreeable contacts will not invade your mind and remain. Just as people throw clean things and dirty things, excrement, urine, spittle, pus, and blood on the earth, and the earth is not repelled, humiliated, and disgusted because of that, so too, Rāhula, develop meditation that is like the earth ...<sup>12</sup>

These are meditations that in the longer term bend towards dispassion, disenchantment, and equanimity by countering the hindrances of sense desire and ill-will occasioned by agreeable and disagreeable contacts. In the context of a teaching to the young Rāhula these practices may seem introductory, however that need not be the case.

In the sutta of Sāriputta’s Lion’s Roar, Sāriputta makes use of a meditation very similar to that recommended by the Buddha for Rāhula. In this sutta, Sāriputta stands accused by a fellow monk of striking him without apologizing. Called before the monks by

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<sup>11</sup> MN 62.3. Cf. Bhikkhu Anālayo (2019: 33-34).

<sup>12</sup> MN 62.13. While there is no parallel in the Chinese of these portions of the *Mahārāhulovāda Sutta*, this portion of the sutta is reflected in EĀ 43.5. Anālayo comments, “it seems quite probable that this is due to a shifting of the relevant textual portion ...” Anālayo, 2019: 33n20. See also: Bhikkhu Anālayo (2014/2015 : 75-77).

the Buddha to account for himself, Sāriputta denies the charge. He says,

Just as they throw pure and impure things on the earth ... yet the earth is not repelled, humiliated, or disgusted because of this; so too, Bhante, I dwell with a mind like the earth (*pathavīsamena cetasā viharāmi*), vast, exalted, and measureless, without enmity and ill will. AN 9.11.

The word “measureless” (*appamāṇa*) suggests that Sāriputta dwells in the Divine Abodes (*brahmavihāras*), again implying that equanimity in the face of physical or psychological harassment is a key trait of “a mind like the earth”.

Sāriputta makes explicit the role of such earth contemplations in the overcoming of harassment in the *Mahāhatthipadopama Sutta*. There he outlines an earth contemplation much like the one already put forward by the Buddha when confronting those that “abuse, revile, scold, and harass a monastic” (MN 28.8). In this practice one is to analyze and objectify the harassment into such things as painful feelings borne of ear-contact, and one is to understand that physical bodies are naturally injured by fists, sticks, and knives, causing disagreeable bodily sensations. Sāriputta then mentions the sutta on the Simile of the Saw (MN 21.20) in which the Buddha exhorts his monastics to maintain a measureless mind of kindness even in the face of the worst physical abuse.

In these early contemplations the earth appears as a deep source of calm and equanimity in the face of even the most extreme forms of disagreeable contact.<sup>13</sup> However it remains in that liminal state between true sentience and serving as an insentient ontological ground of stability.

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<sup>13</sup> Spagnoli notes that such an understanding of the earth as signifying stability and indeed truth has Vedic origins: “... the creation of the earth is set against *chaos* and establishes a law that guarantees the life of the cosmos. The earth materializes the stability of this law, which is thus defined as ‘fixed’ in the *R̥g Veda* (X 121, 5). This law, as Tucci emphasizes, is essentially *ṛta* or *satya*, i.e. ‘truth’, therefore the earth is founded on truth, as established by the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* (XII 1).” Spagnoli, 2005: 331. We will return to this relation of the earth and truth below.

### Early Depictions of Enlightenment and Māra

In the Pāli suttas the Buddha's enlightenment is portrayed as a solitary event, although pregnant with meaning for the wider world. So for example in the *Ariyapariyesanā Sutta* we read,

I wandered by stages through the Magadhan country until eventually I arrived at Uruvelā, at Senānigama. There I saw an agreeable piece of ground, a delightful grove with a clear-flowing river with pleasant, smooth banks and nearby a village for alms resort. I considered: '... This will serve for the striving of a clansman intent on striving.' MN 26.17

The short remainder of the description of Sakyamuni's enlightenment involves solely internal insights, in solitary meditation, until the arrival of Brahmā Sahampati who urges the (now) Buddha to teach.<sup>14</sup>

The *Padhāna Sutta* (Sn 3.2) frames the Buddha's striving to attain awakening in less solitary terms, as a battle with Māra's various armies, each of which personifies a hindrance to meditative insight.<sup>15</sup>

Having seen the bannered army all around,  
[and] Māra with his vehicle ready,  
I will go out to meet him in battle:  
may he not dislodge me from my place!  
Though the world with its devas  
cannot overcome that army of yours,  
I will destroy it with wisdom,  
like a fresh clay bowl with a stone. (442-3).

While this sutta depicts Māra and his armies as present during the Bodhisattva's ascetic tribulations, it does not mention his enlightenment, much less any gesture of calling the earth to witness.

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<sup>14</sup> The appearance of Brahmā Sahampati may be a later interpolation into the Pāli tradition. See Bhikkhu Anālayo, (2011).

<sup>15</sup> Although the description is of a multitude, it is defined "in what are essentially psychological terms"; that is, in terms of the Bodhisattva's own psychology. Rupert Gethin (1997: 190-191). A similar move is made in the *Mahāvastu*. Jones, *Mahāvastu III*, 227.



Another passage depicts Māra's daughters as attempting to entice the Buddha sexually through various guises and entreaties.<sup>16</sup> However these attempts occur after his enlightenment and are presented as exercises in futility. Once again there is no touching of the earth nor calling to witness.

A short passage in the *Udāna* alludes to the defeat of Māra through meditative insight into dependent origination. In this case as well Māra and his armies are not defeated through any gesture of touching the earth nor calling it to witness, but rather through becoming like the dawning sun:

When things become manifest  
To the ardent meditating Brahmin,  
he abides scattering Māra's host  
Like the sun illuminating the sky. Ud. 1.3

The Buddha is often described with the epithet “kinsman of the sun” (*ādiccabandhu*), and this simile may have a similar connotation. Just as the sun dispels the darkness at dawn, so too meditative insight dispels Māra's armies.<sup>17</sup>

Visual representations of the Buddha's life stemming from the first centuries after his passing were typically aniconic. Robert DeCaroli argues that this reluctance to render beings such as the Buddha in human form stems from the role such images played in early South Asian culture, “consistently attached to a set of objectives that are strongly associated with private contexts and worldly objectives (DeCaroli, 2015: 53).” These include such practices as harming others through harming an image of them, and performing love magic through imaging the aim of one's desire. This is a theme we will return to below. For such reasons it may be that early depictions of the defeat of Māra's army are aniconic with respect to Sakyamuni himself. For example, see this carving on an architrave dated from around the 1st c. BCE at Sāñcī (Fig. 2).<sup>18</sup> To

<sup>16</sup> SN 4. 25. These are “presented as having a similar psychological reality”, viz., as “Craving, Discontent, and Lust”. Gethin (1997: 190).

<sup>17</sup> Cf.: SN 22.102; SN 45.147.

<sup>18</sup> Northern gateway, south side, middle architrave Photo: American Institute of Indian Studies, Varanasi. AIIIS Accession No.40157, Negative No.321.56. Accessed March 29, 2021 [https://dsal.uchicago.edu/cgi-bin/aiis/aiis\\_query.py?image\\_id=ar\\_040157&get\\_large=yes](https://dsal.uchicago.edu/cgi-bin/aiis/aiis_query.py?image_id=ar_040157&get_large=yes).

the left stands an empty throne with the Bodhi tree behind it, symbolizing the Bodhisattva. Next to him stand the son and daughter of Māra, attempting to distract the Bodhisattva, while to the right loom Māra's armies. Māra himself sits in the middle, overseeing the battle to come (Karetzky, 1992: 124-125).



FIG. 2

The architrave just below (Fig. 3) depicts the aftermath of the Buddha's victory, as Māra's armies scatter off to the right before Śakyamuni.<sup>19</sup> The victor himself is symbolized at the center of the carving by the temple at Bodhgaya. Śakyamuni himself does not appear in either image, so perforce neither does anything corresponding to his gesture of touching the earth.



FIG. 3

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<sup>19</sup> Image courtesy of Michael Gunther at Wikimedia:  
[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Sanchi\\_7-10.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Sanchi_7-10.jpg)

### Appearance of the Symbol in Written Description

Although as we will presently see the earth-touching gesture appears in several early texts, it does not appear in Aśvaghōṣa's 2nd c. CE *Buddhacarita*. This leads Spagnoli to suggest that Aśvaghōṣa may be witness to an earlier "tradition in which the calling upon the Earth is not contemplated" (Spagnoli, 2005: 338). We read of Māra and his armies' harassment of the Bodhisattva in some detail, but there is no mention of a gesture. Here is the denouement of the battle with Māra:

Just as the buddhas of the past did, he has firmly established his adamant moment. While in all directions everything is moving, only this earth is tranquil. He is ably experiencing fine concentration. You cannot destroy that.

Just yield in your heart! Do away with haughty intentions! Develop the idea to be a good friend! Practice forbearance and wait upon him! When Māra heard the voice in the sky and saw that the Bodhisattva remained tranquil, he felt shame and lost his pride. He turned back and returned to his heaven. (XIII.62-64) (Willemen, 2009: 98).

After that, the Bodhisattva achieves various knowledges and concentrations through the night before attaining enlightenment. While Aśvaghōṣa does not mention *bhūmisparśa*, he does use the earth as metaphor for the immovable calm of the Bodhisattva. Just as "everything is moving" but "only this earth is tranquil" so too surrounded by the motion of Māra and his armies, "the Bodhisattva remained tranquil". In Aśvaghōṣa's retelling, it is this very tranquility which defeats Māra.

The *Xiu Xing Benqui Jing* (T 184) may be the oldest description of the Buddha's life from the Chinese tradition, translated in 197 CE.<sup>20</sup> It presents a somewhat simplified version of the story, perhaps attesting to its relatively early date. In that text the Bodhisattva responds to Māra's challenge by citing his good deeds in prior lifetimes, serving previous Buddhas and performing acts of virtue.

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<sup>20</sup> Karetzky, *Buddha*, Introduction. See also Ju-Hyung Rhi who terms it one of the "earliest texts of the Buddha's life in the Chinese translations." Ju-Hyung Rhi, "From Bodhisattva to Buddha: The Beginning of Iconic Representation in Buddhist Art," *Artibus Asiae*, vol. 54, no. 3/4 (1994), 219.

[Bodhisattva:] “Now, is your field of merit like that of a Buddha? This will let you know who will be the victor here.”

[Māra:] “In past incarnations, I’ve enjoyed generosity, So I became the Māra King of the six heavens. Monk, do you know the merits I practiced in the past? I say they are measureless but who is there to bear witness to it?” ...

The Bodhisattva then with the power of wisdom  
Reached out his hand and touched the earth: “It knows me.”  
In response, everywhere the ground roared and shook;  
Māra and his minions were confused and fell.<sup>21</sup>

After this, the Bodhisattva spends many hours achieving various forms of knowledge and power before attaining enlightenment.

Elizabeth Guthrie says that the essential structure of the story of the defeat of Māra through the gesture of touching the earth includes five elements.<sup>22</sup> These are:

- (1) The challenge
- (2) The oath or “call to witness”
- (3) The touching of the earth
- (4) The witness of the earth
- (5) The defeat of Māra

The relatively direct and unadorned description of the event we find in the *Xiu Xing Benqui Jing* nevertheless includes its five basic elements: the challenge, a version of the “call to witness”, the touching of the earth, the earth’s response, and the defeat of Māra.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Translation (Unpublished) by Charles Patton. See also Elizabeth Guthrie, “A Study of the History and Cult of the Buddhist Earth Deity in Mainland Southeast Asia” (PhD diss., University of Canterbury, 2004), 65.

<sup>22</sup> Elizabeth Guthrie, 2004: 71. Interestingly, in the *Sakkapañha Sutta* (DN 21), Sakkha is depicted at the end as touching the ground before declaring his homage to the Buddha. It is difficult to know to what extent this example reflects a true earth-touching gesture in that it only includes the second and third elements.

<sup>23</sup> Spagnoli claims that “if one excludes the later *Nidānakathā*, the only source in which the calling upon the Earth may be found in its entirety is the

The *Mahāvastu* is a Lokottaravāda text incorporating many different strata over several centuries. Although begun around the 1st c. BCE it contains material that may date to as late as the 6th c. CE (Tournier, 2017: 609). In it we find four distinct descriptions of the earth-touching gesture. The accounts are incomplete as regards Guthrie’s “essential structure” of the defeat of Māra, however two of the accounts are interesting in involving the Buddha in complex hand motions rather than a simple touching of the earth. In one recounting, Māra commands his armies to seize and kill the Bodhisattva. In response,

[T]he Bodhisattva, fearless, undismayed, without fear and terror drew out his golden arm from beneath his robe, and with his webbed and jewel-like right hand, which had copper-coloured nails and a bright streak, and which was the colour of lac, was soft like cotton to the touch, and endowed with the root of virtue acquired in several *koṭis* of *kalpas*, he thrice stroked his head; thrice he stroked his couch, and thrice he stroked the ground. And as he did so [Fn.: The text, of course, repeats all the statements], this great earth roared and echoed deeply and terribly.<sup>24</sup>

With that, Māra and his armies are dispersed. Then the Bodhisattva achieves the *dhyānas* and knowledges through the night before attaining enlightenment at “the flush of dawn”.<sup>25</sup>

A second account is similar, with the exception that the Bodhisattva is said to have “thrice stroked his head, and thrice his bent knee. Then he struck the earth with his right hand” and so on.<sup>26</sup> This second account also makes reference in passing to the

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*Lalitavistara*.” However her paper only includes descriptions of the event from those two texts and the *Mahāvastu*. Spagnoli, 2005: 336.

<sup>24</sup> J.J. Jones (trans.), *The Mahāvastu, Vol. II* (London: Luzac, 1952), 264. The description of webbing on the hand, which is usually attributed to one of the traditional “thirty-two Marks of a Great Man” (e.g., DN 30), in Bhikkhu Anālayo’s understanding “might have been inspired by Buddha statues, as sculptors tend to weld fingers and toes together so that they do not break off.” Bhikkhu Anālayo, 2017: 52. This suggests the passage — and perhaps the concept itself — derives from material influenced by figural Buddhist imagery sometime in the early centuries of the common era.

<sup>25</sup> Jones, *Mahāvastu II*, 266.

<sup>26</sup> Jones, *Mahāvastu II*, 366.

“roots of virtue acquired” by the Bodhisattva that presumably enabled him to perform such a gesture effectively.

These complex gestures seem to indicate that the touching of the earth was not itself of primary importance. Spagnoli considers that they may be related to late Vedic period oaths that involved “touching one’s own body to call punishment upon oneself if the oath were broken or the testimony false.” She goes on to suggest that the “multiplying of the gesture was an attempt to cover by tradition a ritual that was either foreign to it or had fallen into disuse ...” (Spagnoli, 2005: 339). My sense is that there is perhaps some additional ritual context here that we are missing in the multiplications of the gesture, but it is of course impossible to say for sure.

Note also that in these versions of the story there is no real oath-making or “call to witness”, nor is there a witnessing by the earth: the earth is not asked to corroborate the Bodhisattva’s sacrifices and good deeds. Rather it is the hand gestures themselves that seem to cause the earth to quake, although in the second account the effectiveness of the gestures appears to be related to the accumulated virtues of the Bodhisattva. This suggests that the defeat of Māra may not yet have been fully developed as a set story at the time of these accounts. Alternately, it may be that these accounts stem from an alternate tradition.

In comparison, there is for example no reference to gestures bringing about the earthquakes in the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta*. Those earthquakes happened directly in response to great events in the Buddha’s life; gestures did not bring them into being.

The third account in the *Mahāvastu* is noticeably different from the previous two.<sup>27</sup> In this telling, Māra compares his own great armies to the solitary figure of the Bodhisattva. In response, the Bodhisattva extolls his own “flawless virtue for infinite *nayutas* of *koṭis* of *kalpas*”.<sup>28</sup> Then he turns to the empty nature of all things, noting that

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<sup>27</sup> It appears as the second of the three accounts in the text. It is however sufficiently different from the other two that I am treating it separately.

<sup>28</sup> Jones, *Mahāvastu II*, 312.

Outward signs are devoid of reality; ... In me there is no awareness of Māra, nor of harm, and as I am thus conditioned, thou hast no power over me, thou evil one. ...

Then the Bodhisattva with his bright and webbed right hand struck the ground. The whole world quaked six times and there was a fearful roar.<sup>29</sup>

This scatters Māra's armies. The Bodhisattva is compared to the sun ("The noble Bodhisattva ... shone in the world like the king of rays"<sup>30</sup>), which echoes the above passage from the *Udāna* where Māra's armies were scattered by the Bodhisattva "Like the sun illuminating the sky." Then the Bodhisattva attains knowledge of suffering, its arising, cessation, and the Path, and knowledge of the chain of dependent arising, before attaining enlightenment.

In this account as well there is nothing much like an oath, a "call to witness", nor a witnessing by the earth.<sup>31</sup> Although the Bodhisattva does mention his "flawless virtue", he makes no attempt to draw a line between that virtue and his ability to see the emptiness in all things, much less his ability to cause the earth to quake at a touch. Additionally, the Bodhisattva's awareness of emptiness lessens dramatic tension, since it asserts that Māra's threats are essentially illusory ("thou hast no power over me"). If indeed they are illusory then there is no real need for the earth to quake, and Māra's armies don't need scattering.

It seems this account may result from a melding of two descriptions of the enlightenment event. One involves an essentially private, internal awareness of the emptiness of all things, another involves a public, external manifestation of power through the exhibition of a gesture. Additionally, if as Spagnoli contends, the earth-touching gesture came into the Indian tradition through an adoption of a Greek style of oath-making, it is unusual

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<sup>29</sup> Jones, *Mahāvastu II*, 312-313.

<sup>30</sup> Jones, *Mahāvastu II*, 315. This is earlier (p. 313) said of the Buddha, which is either a scribal error or indicates that Māra's armies continued to be awed by Śakyamuni until after he became enlightened.

<sup>31</sup> A fourth description of the gesture is only made in passing: "Smiting Māra's troops, routing Māra's ranks, scattering them with thy right hand, thou dost raise thy Conqueror's banner." J.J. Jones (trans.), *The Mahāvastu, Vol. III* (London: Luzac, 1956), 340.

to find examples such as these that include the gesture without the oaths.

The *Saṅghabhedavastu* of the Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya also contains a description of the defeat of Māra with the earth-touching gesture. The Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya was compiled around the 1st or 2nd c. CE (Schopen, 2004: 572-3), however its description of the event appears relatively advanced in terms of detail. Indeed it may include a particularly early literary occurrence of a mature *bhūmiśparśa* gesture in its recounting of the defeat of Māra.

Māra responded: "You've seen for yourself how a single sacrifice made me lord of everything you could desire. Who could possibly have witnessed you perform hundreds upon thousands of millions of sacrifices in the three previous eras, and give up everything for the sake of other beings, including your head, hands, feet, eyes, flesh, blood, children, wives, gold, etc., in order to attain the unsurpassed knowledge?" Then the Blessed One touched the earth with his webbed hand that was marked by three auspicious signs, the result of many hundreds of good deeds, giving succor to the fearful, and proclaimed "The earth is my witness [to all of that]." Then earth-deity split open the earth, hands folded, and uttered the following: "It is exactly as the Blessed One says, O sinful creature." When the deity said this, the sinful Māra fell silent. Stunned, his shoulders drooped. Downcast and lifeless, he began to brood.<sup>32</sup>

After this, the Bodhisattva experiences various powers (*rddhis*) and knowledges before attaining enlightenment. This passage lacks the reference to elaborate gestural dances found in the *Mahāvastu*. Instead there is a description of the sacrifices and good deeds the Bodhisattva has done over his prior lifetimes. Here also we see an explicit call to witness, where the earth (and indeed the earth deity) is called to confirm the Bodhisattva's karmic potency. We see all five aspects of the essential structure of the story: challenge, oath or "call to witness", touching of the earth, witness of the earth, and the defeat of Māra.

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<sup>32</sup> Translation (Unpublished) by Anand Venkatkrishnan.



Comparing this simple gesture to the more elaborate dance of the *Mahāvastu*, the call to witness may be gesture enough: once the touching of the earth is motivated by the Bodhisattva's request for karmic corroboration, nothing else is needed. The single gesture is powerful enough on its own, and in comparison the more elaborate gestural tradition seems unwarranted.

The *Lalitavistara Sūtra* was composed in the 3rd c. CE. It seems to have been “based on several early and, for the most part, unidentified sources that belong to the very early days of the Buddhist tradition.”<sup>33</sup> In its telling of the battle, Māra and his armies harass the Bodhisattva and try to prevent his awakening. Much like in the second account of the *Mahāvastu*, the Bodhisattva maintains equanimity through an awareness of the emptiness of all things: “There is no Māra here, no army, no being, and also no self; like the moon reflected in a pond, so does this threefold universe revolve.”<sup>34</sup> Then the Bodhisattva reacts:

21.225 He gracefully ran his right hand over his body from  
head to toe —

The hand, which was adorned with a fine web, ...

21.226 He stretched out his hand, like a lightning bolt striking  
from the sky,

And said, “This earth is my witness.

In the past I have made millions of elaborate sacrifices  
and never denied those who petitioned me.

21.227 “Water and fire and wind are my witnesses,  
And so are Brahmā, the lord of beings, the moon, the sun, and  
the stars.

The buddhas in the ten directions are my witnesses;  
My discipline, practice, and the superior branches of  
awakening are all my witnesses. ...

21.229 “However many beings there are in the ten directions,  
With all their strength of merit, discipline, and wisdom,  
And all their many unrestricted sacrifices,  
They do not equal even a hundredth of the qualities in a single  
hair of mine.”

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<sup>33</sup> Dharmachakra Translation Committee (trans.), *The Play in Full: Lalitavistara* (Freemont, CA: 84000, 2021), version 4.47.11, i.17.

<sup>34</sup> Dharmachakra, *Play in Full*, 21.222.

21.230 He gracefully touched his hand to the earth  
So that the earth resounded like a copper vase.  
As Māra heard this he fell to the ground ...<sup>35</sup>

After this, the Bodhisattva attains the four dhyānas and various knowledges before reaching enlightenment “just at the break of dawn”.<sup>36</sup>

In this telling, we see once again as in the *Mahāvastu* the gesture of the hand touching the body before the ground, only in this instance the gestures are not tripled nor directed towards particular parts of the body. It may nevertheless be an indication similar to the late Vedic oaths noted by Spagnoli: the Bodhisattva is bringing his whole body into the oath. Further, it is more than just the earth itself that is called to witness the Bodhisattva’s sacrifices. Instead, the earth serves as a kind of ontological stand-in for all of manifold reality, including the elements, gods, heavens, realized beings, and indeed all of the dharma of discipline and practice.

Then the gesture operates like a bolt of lightning: in Elizabeth Guthrie’s words, “Gathering together the power of his perfections, he conducts the power through his hand and discharges it into the earth.” (Guthrie, 2004, 108)

It should also be noted that this description includes two separate gestures. First there is the gesture of stretching out the hand like a lightning bolt from the sky, and later in the description, the “graceful” touching of the earth itself. Taking this as an example of oath-making, the oath appears to be associated more with the former gesture than the latter: with the stretching out of the hand and the strike of the thunderbolt, not so much with the touching of the earth itself. The touching of the earth seems, in context, rather more like the ringing of the earth’s bell, something only possible given the Bodhisattva’s character and its ontological support from all manifest reality. That is, the touching of the earth reveals the effect gained through making the appropriate oath. The oath itself however has already been made.

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<sup>35</sup> Dharmachakra, *Play in Full*, 21.225-230.

<sup>36</sup> Dharmachakra, *Play in Full*, 22.32.

Although the call to witness is emphasized in this sutra, and all five essential elements of the story are retained, in a dramatic sense the witnessing seems poorly motivated. Just as in the *Mahāvastu*'s second account, since the Bodhisattva notes there is no Māra nor Māra's army, why would he think he needed witnesses to defeat them? While the point of the passage is to indicate non-self, and hence the claim that "there is no Māra here" is not meant to be taken literally, nevertheless its emphasis just prior to the denouement of the Bodhisattva's journey robs it of dramatic tension. What is important to the defeat of Māra is the internal awareness of non-self. The external exhibition of earth-touching is made to seem inessential by comparison.

The gesture may first appear in the Pāli tradition in commentarial material passed down through the centuries and compiled by Buddhaghosa around the 5th c. CE. For example we read an account of it in the commentary to the *Ariyapariyesanā Sutta* (MN 26):

The Bodhisatta set up four-factored energy and resolved: "I will not break this sitting posture so long as I have not attained enlightenment." Then he sat down and crossed his legs in the sitting posture. Just at that moment, Māra created a thousand arms, mounted his elephant named Girimekhala who was 150 yojanas in size, took his army extending nine yojanas, and looking out with his eyes half-closed, he approached [the Bodhisatta], spreading over him like a mountain. The Great Being stretched forth his hand, [resolving]: "While I was fulfilling the ten pāramīs, no other ascetic, brahmin, deva, Māra, or Brahmā was a witness. But in my existence as Vessantara, on seven occasions the great earth was my witness; now too, though it is without volition like a block of wood, [let] this great earth be my witness." At once the great earth, like a bronze gong struck by an iron baton, let out a hundred roars, a thousand roars, and having roared, turning over, it made of Mara's army a heap at the edge of the world-sphere.<sup>37</sup>

Here once again there is an explicit call to witness. While the actual touch of the earth is not mentioned, it may be implied in the

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<sup>37</sup> *Majjhima Nikāya* Commentary: VRI 2.86; Ee II 183. Translation (Unpublished) by Bhikkhu Bodhi.

stretching forth of the Bodhisattva's hand. It may also be that this is a separate understanding of the gesture. We will return to this topic below.

In describing the earth as having been his witness on seven occasions in the past, the Bodhisattva refers to the *Jātaka* tale that describes his prior lifetime when he was King Vessantara. In that tale his great generosity caused the earth to shake seven times. This foregrounds the earth's response to his gesture in this lifetime against a background of similar behavior in times before. The Bodhisattva shows the earth as having been responsive to his great deeds in the past, which sets the precedent for the case before him now.

That said, in this case as in prior cases, calling the earth to witness still appears somewhat poorly motivated. Surely the Bodhisattva's good deeds stand on their own without the need to prod the earth's response with a gesture. It is this sort of ill-fit that makes such accounts seem premised on the independent existence of the gesture: an existing iconographic tradition required incorporation within a larger narrative structure.

Perhaps the most famous literary depiction of the earth-touching gesture in the Pāli tradition stems from the *Jātaka Nidāna*.<sup>38</sup> Traditionally this is believed to have been composed by Buddhaghosa in the 5th c. CE out of earlier material (Jayawickrama, 2002: ix-x). This raises the question of how the earth-touching gesture became integrated into the *Nidāna*. While this may never be solved satisfactorily, it may be that Buddhaghosa took inspiration from the same material used in the *Ariyapariyesanā* commentary. At any rate the presentation of the gesture in the *Nidāna* appears to be more mature in a dramatic sense. Instead of the Bodhisattva claiming the earth's witness without much apparent reason or need, in the *Nidāna* the reasoning is made clear. Awakening is framed as the right to the throne, and there are two contenders for that throne: Māra and the Bodhisattva. Māra taunts, "Rise, Siddhattha, from that seat. It is not meant for you. It goes to me" (Jayawickrama, 2002: 97). The fight between them becomes a display of dominance, gauged by the testimonies of their respective backers. "Māra, who will testify to your having given away in

<sup>38</sup> Anālayo, 2019: 36. Piya Tan, 2018: 141-141.

charity?” asks the Bodhisattva. Māra’s army roars, “I am his witness.”

The Bodhisattva has no army, so the framing introduces an element of danger and uncertainty to the struggle. How can the Bodhisattva come out victorious? In this context his motion towards the earth as witness comes across as a master stroke.

You have sentient beings as witnesses to your having given away in charity, but here in this place I have no living being whatever as my witness. ... [L]et this great and solid earth, nonsentient as it is, be my witness to the seven hundredfold great alms I gave when I was born as Vessantara. (Jayawickrama, 2002: 98).

The Bodhisattva extends out his hand and points towards the earth, asking for its testimony on his behalf. The earth resounds with echoes that scatter Māra’s army in defeat. Then the Bodhisattva spends the three watches of the night gaining various knowledges and abilities before attaining enlightenment, once again at dawn. In this case as in the prior one there is reference to the *Vessantara Jātaka*, here referring to the Bodhisattva’s enormous generosity in giving away seven hundred of each thing he owned, rather than to the seven times the earth shook.

In the *Mahāvastu* and the *Lalitavistara* the turn towards the earth seemed unmotivated in the narrative since Māra’s armies were depicted as essentially illusory. The relative docetism of those accounts left the Bodhisattva in no true danger, and hence in no true need of the earth to play a role on his behalf. In the *Nidāna* on the other hand we have the story in what may be a more mature form, with a progression fit for the stage. The request for the earth as witness is motivated by the battle between Māra and the Bodhisattva, and the conflict is heightened by our sense that defeat seems more of a live possibility.

Both texts in the Pāli tradition point out the earth’s non-sentience. This may seem odd (Anālayo, 2019: 34ff), but if we consider the role of the earth as a sort of ontological verifier of Śakyamuni’s merits, and through them the Buddha dharma itself, it may not be as odd as it seems. Śakyamuni’s credentials become established through the earth’s response to his deeds. In the same way the world’s construction verifies the skillful and unskillful

nature of actions by producing karmic results without a guiding sentience.

### **The Role of Truth**

Spagnoli locates the origin of the earth-touching gesture in the culture of classical Greece. In particular, “whereas Siddhārtha’s calling upon the Earth by touching the ground with his hand appears to have no counterpart in ancient India, it does have precise analogies in the Greek world” (Spagnoli, 2005: 340). Such cultural interchange she suggests would have percolated through the iconographic experimentation in Gandhāra, where the gesture appears to have first arisen.<sup>39</sup> This may indeed be so but there remains more to be said about the cultural roots of the gesture and its surrounding narrative from within ancient India.

Following Giuseppe Tucci, Spagnoli notes that in the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* “the earth is founded on truth”.<sup>40</sup> We find similar claims for example in the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*, in which Brahman is identified with “the finest essence here — that constitutes the self of this whole world; that is the truth (*satyaṃ*); that is the self.” (6.9.4ff) (Olivelle, 1998: 253ff.). In that *Upaniṣad* we also find an example of an ordeal by fire, whereby a man accused of theft but swearing his innocence is made to hold a heated axe. If he speaks the truth, “he turns himself into the truth” and so is not burned. “What on that occasion prevents him from being burnt — that constitutes the self of this whole world; that is the truth (*satyaṃ*); that is the self” (Olivelle, 1998: 257). While the earth as such does not appear in these Upaniṣadic expressions, following Tucci it may be seen as a synecdoche for all of reality: “this whole

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<sup>39</sup> Spagnoli also argues that the representation of the earth deity found in early Indian iconography is “clearly derived from Greek figurative traditions.” Spagnoli, 2005: 341. However we should be careful not to elide the earth with the earth deity. Guthrie has shown that the earth deity does not always play the same role as the earth. For example, the earth deity is often said to defeat Māra by wringing water from her hair rather than by shaking the earth. Guthrie, (2004: 91). (In the account of the *Saṅghabhedavastu* the role of the earth deity seems to be close to if not identical with that of the earth itself, but we do not see this in other examples above).

<sup>40</sup> Giuseppe Tucci, 1954: 332-7, quoted in Spagnoli, 2005: 331.

world”, the ontological ground that supports karma, dharma, and truth. It is what makes it so that a truthful person is not burnt by fire, while a liar is.

The Bodhisattva’s call to witness his past good deeds constitutes a central aspect of the narrative surrounding his touching of the earth, at least in most instances above. Guthrie considers the call to witness a “truth act” (S: *satyakiriyā*; P: *saccakiriyā*) (Guthrie, 2004: 101). A truth act in ancient India is the accomplishment of some unusual or supernatural effect through the speaking of truth. The concept was originally defined by E.W. Burlingame as “a formal declaration of fact, accompanied by a command or resolution or prayer that the purpose of the agent shall be accomplished” (Burlingame, 1917: 429). Modern scholarship finds its *locus classicus* in the *Milindapañha*,<sup>41</sup> where the monk Nāgasena establishes that there is “in the world such a thing as Truth, by the asseveration of which true believers can ... make the rain to fall, and fire to go out, and ward off the effects of poison, and accomplish many other things they want to do” (Müller and Rhys Davids, 1890: 180). It is not entirely clear however whether the Bodhisattva’s “call to witness” is in fact a truth-act; that is, whether it fits Burlingame’s definition. In most passages describing the defeat of Māra, the Bodhisattva does indeed make a truthful declaration calling the earth to witness (those in the *Mahāvastu* he does not). However it is not clear whether his purpose is accomplished simply by means of the truth, or whether instead it is accomplished by the intercession of the earth as witness.

W. Norman Brown (1972) and George Thompson (1998) find that the concept of the truth-act originates in the Vedas, however there are differences of opinion between them as to which precise passages count as examples. Consideration of one passage in the *Ṛg Veda* (RV) may shed some light on our case in various respects. This is the “gambler’s lament” at RV X.34. This hymn describes a gambler who has lost all his possessions, including his cows and his wife, in games of dice. At the denouement the gambler petitions the god Savitar, saying: “He who is the general of your great troop [O dice], who has become the head of your

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<sup>41</sup> Burlingame, 1917: 437; Thompson, 1998: 127.

host, to him I stretch out my ten [fingers]. No wealth do I conceal. This is a Truth [Act] (*rtam*) which I declare.” (Brown, 1972: 256).

This passage is interesting in several ways. First, does it constitute a truth-act? In Brown’s estimation it does, since it is grounded in the truth of the gambler’s statement about being destitute, and it results in the god Savitar granting him his wealth back. However in Thompson’s estimation it does not since,

It is *not* ‘by the power of truth’ that the gambler has regained his cows and his wife. Rather, it seems clear, *it is the god Savitar* who has returned them to the gambler, in response to the gambler’s plea for mercy. ... the ritual gesture and the accompanying assertion are both directed to a particular agent, a witness, and clearly a god. ... The point is this: ... it is *not* by means of *the truth*, i.e., by his own utterance of the truth, that the gambler has been able to recoup his losses. It is rather by the aid of this or that god that he does so. Therefore the stanza would *not* seem to be a *satyakriyā* in the strict sense which I believe we should adopt (Thompson, 1998: 139).

In the same way, we may say, the Bodhisattva’s call to witness is directed to a particular agent, the earth. And it is with the aid of the earth that he is able to achieve his ends, not by means of the truth itself.

How we judge the case will depend on how we understand the role of the earth in this narrative. If the earth is understood as a kind of earth deity, then indeed Thompson’s interpretation is plausible: nothing is being done by the truth except to urge a witness to corroborate. No real “magic” is being done.<sup>42</sup> If on the other hand we understand the earth as playing the role of an ontological ground of order, truth, and indeed the dharma itself, then Brown’s understanding of the passage as a truth-act seems plausible. In this latter understanding the earth is not truly a sentient character in the drama. Instead it stands in for the dharma of right and truth: it manifests as karmic consequence, and as the falling rain and the extinguishing fire when truths are spoken in the right circumstance.

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<sup>42</sup> See: “... magic endeavors to bring the world into conformity with one’s wishes, by means of one’s words.” “... the Vedic *satyakriyā* is best understood as a ‘magical performative.’” Thompson, (1998: 144, 148).



Thompson also raises another intriguing aspect of the truth act, which is its link to righteous kingship. He suggests that the truth act may be an ancient Indo-European trope whereby kings express their ethical character and mastery through truth-telling, and in so doing harness worldly powers for good (Thompson 1998: 134). In much the same way the Wheel-Turning King of the *Cakkavatti-Sihanāda Sutta* conquers peacefully under the power of dharma, which includes truth-telling.<sup>43</sup> The role of the Wheel-Turning King is explicitly contrasted with that of a Buddha in that at his birth Gotama could have become either one.<sup>44</sup> In a sense he retains aspects of both. This is so whether we consider that the Bodhisattva was making use of a truth-act during the defeat of Māra, or whether he simply was upholding the truth in a more general sense.

The second reason this passage from the RV is interesting is that its claim of truth (whether or not we consider it a truth-act) is accompanied by a gesture: the stretching out of the gambler's fingers. Thompson considers his petition an example of an oath spoken with a ritual gesture (Thompson, 1998: 137-8, 142). As to why precisely this gesture accompanies the oath, it is not entirely clear. It may be a representation of the gambler's destitution, a display of his empty hands. It may also be an echo or imitation of the god to whom he petitions, Savitar, who it is said "erect and with broad hands, extends his arms for all to obey" (RV II.38.2) (Jamison and Brereton, 2017: 457).

Two of the above examples involve the Bodhisattva stretching out his hand without touching the earth. In the *Lalitavistara* he does so before he touches the earth, as a separate gesture apparently accompanying his oath. In the *Ariyapariyesanā* commentary there is no touching of the earth *per se*, all we have is the stretching forth of the Bodhisattva's hand while giving the oath.

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<sup>43</sup> DN 26.6. Conversely, in DN 26.15 lying in the kingdom causes lifespans to decrease. See also DN 27.19-20 where lying causes decay in the kingdom. While these do not reference the bad effects when a king lies, they suggest it.

<sup>44</sup> E.g., DN 3.1.5. See also David Fiordalis (2022).

### Resonances with Indra

Both the gesture and the role of truth that we find in the Bodhisattva's defeat of Māra have resonances elsewhere in the Vedas, in particular with the role of Indra, "the preeminent god of the *Ṛgveda*" and his two most famous mythological narratives.<sup>45</sup> In the first of those narratives, Indra does combat with the great cobra deity Vṛtra who is coiled around the mountains, holding back their waters. The deity's name is derived from the root "vr̥" meaning "to cover, conceal, or obstruct", which leads Jamison and Brereton to say "his name means 'obstacle,' and this victory over 'Obstacle' is therefore paradigmatic for Indra's victory over all obstacles."<sup>46</sup> Similarly, the Bodhisattva's victory over Māra is a victory over the most dharmically important obstacles, the Five Hindrances: Māra's armies stand in for such hindrances in the *Padhāna Sutta*.

Indra then defeats Vṛtra by bringing down his mace (*vajra*), a word which in time came to be associated with the thunderbolt, releasing the waters held back by Vṛtra. Guthrie notes that during the gesture of touching the earth, the Bodhisattva's hand acts like a bolt of lightning. This is found particularly in the *Lalitavistara*: "He stretched out his hand, like a lightning bolt striking from the sky ..." Guthrie says, "Here the *bhūmisparśamudrā* can be compared to the *vajra* or the *kīla*, the magical weapon that is driven into the earth to bring the phenomenal world under control" (Guthrie, 2004: 108). It is also reminiscent of the third account in the *Mahāvastu* where the Bodhisattva is said to "strike the ground" with his hand. The striking of the ground and defeat of Māra brings the Bodhisattva's mind, that is, his phenomenal world, under his control. In the same way that Indra's defeat of Vṛtra is implicitly the victory of stability over chaos, so too the Bodhisattva's defeat of Māra is a victory of the stability of

<sup>45</sup> Jamison and Brereton (2017: 38-9). There are many resonances between Indra and the Buddha, including the fact that Indra was said to have been born from his mother's side (RV IV.18.2), and that she abandoned him soon after birth (RV IV.18.4, .8, .10). Indeed the Buddha appears as Sakka (= Indra) some 21 times in the *Jātakas*. (John Jones, 1979:174, cited in Anālayo, 2011: 158).

<sup>46</sup> Jamison and Brereton (2017: 134). Vṛtra may appear in the Pāli Canon at SN 2.3, where the deity Māgha (= Indra) is called "Vatrabhū". See Bhikkhu Bodhi, (2000:386n146).

*samādhi* over the chaos of the mind.<sup>47</sup> The hindrances are overcome and the true work of attaining enlightenment can begin.

In the second narrative, that of the Vala cave, Indra is faced with recovering cows that were stolen by the Paṇis and kept hidden in a cave. In this story as well Indra is victorious, however this narrative does not involve him using violence. Rather, he frees the cows “through truth” (RV III.31.9) (Jamison and Brereton, 2017: 509). Elsewhere the cows are described as “standing hidden in the fetter of untruth” (RV X.67.4) (Jamison and Brereton, 2017: 1489). Indra’s “truth” is his ability to speak the true, right, and proper ritual formulae in the way that a priest might do the same with Indra himself (RV IV.23):

(.4) The god will take cognizance of my truths, when he has accepted the homage that he will enjoy. ...

(.10) (Whoever) holds fast to truth, just he wins truth. The explosive force of truth hastens swiftly as it seeks cattle (Jamison and Brereton, 2017: 595-6).

When Indra speaks these truths, the Vala cave bursts open. In at least one account the event is described as an earthquake, and Indra is called “shaker of the unshakable” (Jamison and Brereton, 2017: 797). (E.g., RV VI.18.5) The Vedic sages then analogize the release of the stolen cows from bondage with the breaking of dawn. (E.g., RV III.31).

Once again we can find a number of resonances between this narrative and that of the Bodhisattva’s defeat of Māra. In the same way that it is Indra’s truth that defeats the Paṇis and bursts open the Vala cave, it is the Bodhisattva’s truth that brings about the earthquake which defeats Māra. And just as the release of the cows brings dawn, so too as we have seen with the defeat of Māra the Buddha attains enlightenment at dawn in several above texts. In the *Udāna* we saw how “the ardent meditating Brahmin/abides scattering Māra’s host/Like the sun illuminating the sky.”

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<sup>47</sup> “The idea that there is a huge serpent or *nāga* - deep in the centre of the earth, floating in the cosmic ocean or crouching on top of Mount Sumeru - that causes chaos and instability and must be controlled before creation can begin, is one of the fundamental principles of Indian cosmology ...” Guthrie, (2004: 109).

All five elements that Guthrie finds essential to the earth-touching narrative have resonances with aspects of one or the other of the two main myths involving Indra in the RV. (1) The Bodhisattva is challenged by Māra, Indra by Vṛtra and the Paṇis.<sup>48</sup> (2) The Bodhisattva makes his oath of truth, Indra speaks truth before the Vala cave. (3) The Bodhisattva touches the earth, Indra smites Vṛtra with his *vajra*.<sup>49</sup> (4) The earth shakes in witness to the truth of the Bodhisattva, and the earth shakes and splits open in witness to the truth of Indra. Finally, (5) Māra the hinderer is defeated, as is Vṛtra the obstacle. After their defeat, the cows are freed bringing the dawn that also heralds enlightenment.

### **The Necessity of Merit**

Given the importance of merit in the Bodhisattva's ability to make the earth quake and hence overcome Māra's forces, it is worth mentioning that there is a separate, competing tradition within Buddhist doctrine. In the aforementioned *Padhāna Sutta* the Buddha claims to have no need for merit. Merit is for Māra (Sn 431). A similar claim is made in the *Mahāvastu*, where Māra implores the Bodhisattva to continue doing meritorious deeds, and the Bodhisattva replies, "I have no use, Māra, for the tiniest of merits. Why Māra, dost thou not speak to those who have use of merits?"<sup>50</sup> The tension between building up the beneficial karma that merits provide, and overcoming birth and death through the rejection of karmic action, lies at the center of Buddhist soteriology. True speech is Right Speech in Buddhism, key part of the Eightfold Path. By placing the Right Speech of truth and its associated call to witness in the foreground, the earth-touching gesture serves to highlight the importance of karmic action in laying the groundwork for enlightenment.

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<sup>48</sup> While Indra's challenge by Vṛtra may not be made explicit, we can see Indra's challenge by the Paṇis (*e.g.*) in RV X.108.

<sup>49</sup> We have also seen resonances with an oath of truth and ritually stretching out the hands in the story of the gambler's lament.

<sup>50</sup> Jones, *Mahāvastu II*, 225.

### Form to Word

To return to our earlier point, the questionable narrative justification of the earth touching gesture (why would the Bodhisattva have needed to touch the earth in order to establish his ethical *bona fides*?) suggests that the eight accounts above may incorporate independently existing symbolic forms as part of their storylines without motivating their appearance with complete success. That is, it may be that the *bhūmisparśa* gesture existed in visual (sculptural or performative) representations of the Buddha's awakening before it was integrated into the texts we have before us today.<sup>51</sup>

It is difficult visually to depict an essentially private, supramundane breaking-through such as enlightenment. Faced with such a problem, artists and performers may have struggled to find a narrative metaphor, as well as for example using visual metaphors like halos as in Fig. 1. But whereas halos testify to the special nature of the person, a gesture terminating in contact suggests a particular moment in time such as a breakthrough awareness. Contact with the earth is an apt vehicle for the metaphor given the earth's resonance with a boundless state of equanimity in the face of pain and difficulty, and given the earth's role as ontological verifier of Śakyamuni's greatness.

It is unlikely that the gesture itself originated in a formerly well-established textual tradition, given its non appearance in Aśvaghōṣa's early 2nd c. CE life of the Buddha. What is clear however is that the gesture already plays a central part in artistic depictions of the Buddha's form in Gandhāra by around the same time (Fig. 4).<sup>52</sup> *Bhūmisparśa* appears to be a relatively common form by the 2nd-3rd c. CE.

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<sup>51</sup> Anālayo argues that "the suggestion that textual descriptions could have been influenced by art has long-standing precedents" in the work of Étienne Lamotte and others. Anālayo, 2017: 56-57. Also see Karetzky, 1992: 126. See also the fact that lightning is mentioned after earthquakes in Buddhist texts: "Perhaps this variation belongs to the classical influence of Buddhist art representations, much adept in indicating *prabhā* (effulgence) rather than *bhūmicāla*." Ciurtin, 2009: II.32n16.

<sup>52</sup> 2nd-3rd c. CE. Peshawar Museum Accession Number PM\_02767. Ihsan Ali and Muhammad Naeem Qazi, 2008: 115.



FIG. 4

Patricia Karetzky describes the potency and primacy of this “newly created icon”. She says,

... the iconic tradition prevails over the narrative, judging by the meager remains. The *mudra* was an efficient way of identifying the event without the need to include narrative figures. Throughout the Buddhist world, the Buddha is shown seated in meditation; when his hands are in this calling the earth to witness *mudra*, the historic moment of the Enlightenment is identified. It is this image that encapsulates the special message of Buddhist doctrine (Karetzky, 1992, ,126).

Ordinarily the image is interpreted in this fashion: as indicating the moment of enlightenment, the pivot-point between Śakyamuni’s relatively ordinary life as a Bodhisattva and his state as an awakened Buddha. But in fact this is doctrinally inaccurate, and that inaccuracy may reveal other important features of this image.

### **Development Out of Aniconism**

The subject of aniconism during the early centuries after the Buddha’s passing has been much discussed and debated; it is too much to go into in this paper.<sup>53</sup> That said, there seems to have

<sup>53</sup> See e.g., DeCaroli, 2015: 24-28.

been a strong disincentive to portray the Buddha in human form until the early centuries CE. This may stem from a general concern about portrayals of people generally, since as DeCaroli notes,

The major, recurring objections to images encountered in both the Buddhist and Brahmanic literature appear to be responding to or building from a core of cultural beliefs about how images function. And those functions are consistently tied to corporeal concerns centered on enmity and desire.<sup>54</sup>

It probably also stems from the Buddha's special status as an awakened person after final nirvana. Māra's is the realm of visible, tangible objects such as bodies and images. Nirvana is the realm where Māra has no reach.<sup>55</sup> For this reason the status of an awakened person after death was one of the Buddha's famous "unanswered questions".<sup>56</sup> Presenting the Buddha as a physical icon in human form after his death threatens to answer such a question in the affirmative.<sup>57</sup>

In his paper on the origins of iconic representation in Buddhist art, Ju-Hyung Rhi outlines a gradual shift in representations of Śākyamuni.<sup>58</sup> First he was represented only as a Bodhisattva, and only later as a Buddha.<sup>59</sup> That is, there was a period of several centuries in which images of Śākyamuni were particularly contested. DeCaroli points in particular to the period from the 1st to the 4th c. CE (DeCaroli, 2015: 127). During that time Śākyamuni was mainly portrayed during the period in his life in which he was an unenlightened ascetic. This is probably due to a residue of the aniconism already mentioned: its approach to

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<sup>54</sup> DeCaroli, 2015: 56. DeCaroli argues that the roots of aniconism stretch back into the Vedas and Upaniṣads (*Ibid.*, 43ff, 78, 170), and that Jains had similar concerns (*Ibid.*, 151).

<sup>55</sup> E.g., SN 4.19.

<sup>56</sup> E.g., MN 72.

<sup>57</sup> A number of passages dating from around the time of these images suggest that the Buddha's form was either extremely difficult or impossible to render faithfully. See DeCaroli, 2015: 36-39.

<sup>58</sup> Rhi, 1994, "Bodhisattva to Buddha." See also DeCaroli, 2015: 173-175.

<sup>59</sup> In the early period of Buddhism's development, the term "bodhisattva" was reserved for the person of the Buddha prior to his enlightenment. It may originally have been even more restricted to the period in Gotama's life between renunciation and enlightenment. See Rhi, 1994: 219.

personal representations that eschewed images generally, particularly of a being like the Buddha who was supposed not to be present to us following his passing, and who symbolized the world-transcendent.

Rhi notes a couple of passages, one from the Sarvāstivāda Vinaya and another from the Mahāsaṃghika Vinaya, that appear to countenance images of the Bodhisattva, while discouraging images of the Buddha.<sup>60</sup> For example the Mahāsaṃghika Vinaya discusses *caityas* (shrines) as places “where there is a Bodhisattva image” but only where there are “the footprints of the Buddha” (DeCaroli, 2015: 221). It was less doctrinally questionable to represent the image of the unenlightened Bodhisattva than the enlightened Buddha.

This brings us back to the image of the earth-touching gesture. It is often thought of as inhabiting that liminal space between the unenlightened and the enlightened. Indeed the power and popularity of the symbol may stem from just such an interpretation. Just as enlightenment is often understood as a singular break in time, a flash of lightning, so the image of hand touching ground emphasizes that momentous and immediate contact with things “as they really are” (Pāli: *yathābhūtam*).<sup>61</sup> As Cristin McKnight Sethi puts it,

At the moment of enlightenment, the prince reaches his right hand towards the ground in a gesture (or mudra, and specifically the bhumisparshamudra) of calling the earth to

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<sup>60</sup> DeCaroli (2015: 31) notes that the Kashmiri Sarvāstivāda Vinaya appears to have allowed Buddha images. Since as he notes it is not possible to date these apparently divergent passages accurately, it is not clear whether there was a development over time or whether there were differences of opinion at one time. A similar problem occurs with the Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya, which “contains numerous passages that explicitly treat the Buddha as a juristic personality”. Schopen, 1997: 272. The passages Schopen cites appear to identify the Buddha with a Buddha image set up within the monastery in its “perfume chamber” (*gandhakuṭī*). He notes that these chambers were set up for Buddha images, and seem to have become established monastically following the fourth or fifth centuries CE. (*Ibid.*, 268). If this is correct, these passages most likely date from that time or after, which is to say after the time at which Buddha images were less doctrinally contested.

<sup>61</sup> E.g., MN 149.



witness his spiritual awakening. In doing so he becomes the Buddha.<sup>62</sup>

Yet reflecting back upon the textual material above, doctrinally speaking that is not the role that this image inhabits. Instead it is an image entirely within the realm of pre-enlightenment, in which Māra's armies are defeated. Those armies symbolize the malign forces of the meditative hindrances, aspects of mind that keep us from seeing things "as they really are" and so keep us bound to the cycles of *samsāra*.

The process of awakening only *begins* in earnest once those forces have been defeated; it is not completed thereupon. Hence as a matter of doctrine the earth-touching gesture does not in fact connote the time at which Bodhisattva becomes Buddha, but rather the time at which the Bodhisattva has purified his mind enough to begin the meditative process which will lead to Buddhahood. This may seem a small difference, but it may be one of the reasons why this particular depiction of Śakyamuni was developed and promoted during the early centuries of the common era. Doctrinally speaking, the image of the earth-touching gesture is unquestionably an image of the Bodhisattva, not an image of the Buddha.

Beside doctrine however resides culture. DeCaroli notes scholarship that suggests some images were developed in response to new doctrine. However he goes on to say,

I think it is worth considering that the reverse may well be true, that doctrinal shifts ... were a direct response to broad changes in culture and artistic practice, which the more established doctrinal positions struggled to condemn, excuse, justify, or champion.

The textual material above describing the earth-touching gesture seems to originate with the gesture itself as a given, requiring justification. It may be that this potent symbol of the Buddha's enlightenment required doctrinal reinterpretation to become excusable from within a generally aniconic tradition. Rather than

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<sup>62</sup> Cristin McKnight Sethi at the online Khan Academy  
<https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/ap-art-history/introduction-cultures-religions-apah/buddhism-apah/a/images-of-enlightenment>  
 Accessed July 8, 2020.

indicating the pivot-point between Bodhisattva and Buddha, the earth-touching gesture was shifted back in time to play its role in the legend of Māra's defeat. Originally its role was ill-defined and motivated, a kind of *deus ex machina* that stirred the earth and overthrew Māra. Later it became more clearly associated with the notion of speaking truth and the call to witness, and finally into a fully worked-out narrative form.

If this is so, perhaps the early popularity of the gesture resides in its skillful slippage between doctrine and culture. As DeCaroli notes, "the Buddha's image had to navigate a complex strait between doctrinal precision and societal expectations" (DeCaroli, 2015: 188). The doctrinally precise could view the symbol in one way while the society could, arguably, view the symbol in another. Nowadays the earlier, more orthodox context is largely forgotten, and we view it as the act of becoming Buddha.

While it may not be possible to know precisely how the wider society understood the image in the earliest centuries after its arising, during the Chinese monk Xuanzang's travels to north India in 629 CE he notes a story about the creation of such an image. He describes it as "a figure (likeness) of Tathāgata when he first reached the condition of Buddha." The description of the statue continues, of "a beautiful figure of Buddha ... His right hand hangs down in token that when he was about to reach the fruit of a Buddha ..." (Beal, 1884: 120-121).<sup>63</sup> In Xuanzang's description, the sculpture inhabits a strange, liminal space of portraying both a Buddha and one about to become a Buddha.

## Conclusion

The earth-touching gesture plays a central role in Buddhist iconography. The aim of this essay has been to investigate the textual evidence for such a gesture so as to sketch out what may have been some of its historical Indian context and early development. The gesture seems to have arisen out of an uneasy melding of two different traditions: one public and performative, another private and based around awareness of non-self and other related forms of knowledge and meditative ability. In the early

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<sup>63</sup> See also Guthrie, 2004 : 67.

centuries of the common era the latter, more doctrinally established tradition seems to have been forced to come to terms with the newer tradition of Buddhist iconography, fitting it in where it was least problematic. That is, this gesture required incorporation within a larger narrative structure of the defeat of Māra that oriented it with respect to an already existing doctrinal tradition.

There are deep resonances between the role of the earth in the Pāli suttas and its role in the gesture of touching the earth. There are also deep resonances with early Vedic narratives of truth-telling, the defeat of hindrances, smiting with the *vajra*, and taking an oath of truth with a ritual hand gesture. Maria Spagnoli's contention is that the earth-touching gesture has its roots in ancient Greece, at least insofar as it is an example of an oath taken with one's hand upon the earth. This may be so, however there are certain difficulties involved in such a claim. Not all examples of the narrative of the defeat of Māra explicitly include touching of the earth. The example from the commentary to the *Ariyapariyesanā Sutta* simply involves the stretching forth of the Bodhisattva's hand. In the case of the *Lalitavistara*, it appears as though the oath is given with the stretching forth of the hand rather than with the touching of the earth. And as we have also seen, examples of the earth-touching gesture from the *Mahāvastu* do not include an oath, which may suggest that in at least some early traditions the gesture was not necessarily associated with oath-making.

The earth-touching gesture likely originated sometime around the 1st or 2nd c. CE, at nearly the same time as the sculptors in Gandhāra were setting it in stone. However the stories in which it became embedded took several more centuries to reach a form that could be said to doctrinally justify the gesture. Indeed ironically the story in which we typically embed the gesture today may be closer to its original intent than the early stories allow: as the liminal edge between the unawakened and the awakened state.

Finally, this essay has been focused on textual evidence for the gesture. It has not looked at potential parallel developments in the early traditions of the Buddhist visual arts. It would be beneficial to undertake such a study, but that is beyond the scope of the present essay.

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