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## Coronavirus and Ill-fated Crowns: Buddhist Lessons in Pandemics and Politics

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# Coronavirus and Ill-fated Crowns: Buddhist Lessons in Pandemics and Politics

Alexander McKinley<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

Synthesizing three retellings of the story about the Buddha curing a plague in the ancient city of Vesāli, this article argues that lessons from the narrative can help us analyze the modern coronavirus pandemic and critique political responses to it. From the ancient Pāli commentary of Buddhaghosa to Sinhala vernacular retellings by a medieval monk named Buddhaputra and a colonial-era layman named Vijēvikrama, the critical force of the story has seemingly grown over time. Along the way, these authors emphasize how the endless expansion of the city due to the material desires of its rulers was bound to exacerbate suffering by their grasping at impermanent forms. This philosophical insight is applicable to current

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problems, where the limitless materialism of global capitalism has also been overextended, altering climates and ecologies to generate new pathogens like the coronavirus. Countries that promised uninterrupted economic growth during the pandemic have in turn suffered its worst consequences. The story of Vesāli therefore remains ripe for many more retellings in the modern world, teaching that attention to a higher ideal of transcendent truth is more fruitful than material enrichment alone.

## Introduction

The *Ratana Sutta* has been in the air lately, its intoned syllables floating along the same breaths that airborne viruses use to move among humans. The sutta was chanted repeatedly in the year 2020 by many Buddhist communities, who have used it to combat the coronavirus pandemic, invoking the sutta's long-standing paratextual powers to cure illness. At the outset of the global lockdown, Sri Lankan monks performed a week-long recitation of the *Ratana Sutta* near the temple of the Buddha's tooth relic (Silva 22).<sup>2</sup> The sutta was even put high up in the air, as a special plane was equipped in Myanmar for senior monks to recite it into microphones and spread its healing words over the country ("Sayadaws").

Considering the *Ratana Sutta*'s protective properties as a *paritta* text, the coronavirus-induced surge in recitations is no surprise; there is long precedent for performing *paritta* when faced with such perils. In sixth-century Lanka, for example, Upatissa II faced a famine and plague in

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<sup>2</sup> This recitation was also nationally televised: [https://youtu.be/XwGFm\\_oMWFm](https://youtu.be/XwGFm_oMWFm).

his capital of Anuradhapura. According to the *Mahāvamsa* chronicle, *bhikkhus* told the king the origin (*uppatti*) of the *Ratana Sutta* and advised him to reenact the ritual in the story, where Ananda fills the Buddha's bowl with water and sprinkles it around the city as the sutta is recited. Upatissa undertook their advice, found it efficacious, and decreed, "Whenever there are perils like famine and disease on the island, so shall it be done" (Geiger 37:198). Fifteen hundred years later, Buddhist rulers are still following this advice, albeit now sprinkling the water from helicopters.<sup>3</sup>

Some Buddhists in Sri Lanka, however, have expressed reticence towards relying on miracles. A monk even published an editorial dismissing religious rituals meant to stem the pandemic; instead, he advocated compassionate deeds and scientific prevention (Sathindriya Thera). This spurred me to consider whether the curative potential of the *Ratana Sutta* can be taken more seriously in a theoretical sense, beyond its *paritta* powers. I found that the sutta's commentarial tradition explains disease and other perils in terms that are as practical as they are miraculous.

The origin story of the sutta, as relayed by the fifth-century Pāli commentary by Buddhaghosa and by the subsequent vernacular retellings in Sinhala, is laden with Buddhist philosophy that I suggest can be read as a type of political critique, containing ethical lessons that resonate with scholarly deconstructions of the modern global order. Of course, making such an argument exceeds a strict reading of Buddhaghosa and others solely in terms of their contexts. Yet I suggest such adaptations remain true to the commentarial spirit of the Buddhist tradition that the modern world calls Theravāda, which earlier identified itself as Vibhajjavāda, or "the analytical vehicle." As Maria Heim explains, Buddhaghosa's own commentarial work is not simply glossing or defining but an act of

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<sup>3</sup> <https://youtu.be/ueN6Imdisx8>.

discovery itself, where “the modular nature of texts, passages, and categories that Buddhaghosa encounters and enacts can be seen as one way in which texts generate new meaning and continue to speak to multiple (or perhaps infinite) contexts” (*Voice* 15). So, I suggest the *Ratana Sutta* story can still speak to concepts not around when it was composed, including global capitalism, climate change, and the coronavirus. I do not anachronistically assume that older Buddhist texts levy such criticisms, but find they provide philosophical insights that help construct critical tools applicable to such pressing issues.

This article is thus another commentarial layer, in the tradition of the *Ratana Sutta*, that synthesizes three earlier commentaries, while also taking a somewhat heterodox turn into political ecology, incorporating scholarship by Bruno Latour and others that speaks to current concerns. The core of my argument is that the origin story of the *Ratana Sutta*, set in a city named “Expansive” or “Huge” (Pāli: Vesāli / Sinhala: Viśālā, Visāla, Visal), warns against enshrining the growth of wealth as a good unto itself. Although the city is prosperous, the death that ensues after drought, famine and disease reveals the inevitable suffering caused by the impermanence of material attachments. This lesson, present to different extents across the generations of commentators, can be adapted to critique a capital-connected world that everywhere expands across borders even as it enforces them, crossing all manner of biological boundaries, stressing ecologies, and transferring new viruses to humanity to circulate and mutate in their own turns through our global transportation chains of material attachments. Appropriately, Vesāli shows how death *precedes* pandemics, which follow upon previous disasters, while pandemic death in turn unleashes additional demons. Ultimately, the story teaches that authentic good governance must focus on higher truths over political power to remedy the situation. In the process, this ancient story reflects on recurrent patterns of excess in civilization and the impermanence of even the best cities. In this sense, it still speaks to

the more vast and complex networks of modernity, often described as an acceleration of older human habits. To analyze its ethical content, I make comparative applications to both Sri Lankan and American politics to support my hypothesis that this Buddhist narrative can constitute a critical theory applicable anywhere.

### **A Collective Commentary on the *Ratana Sutta***

The *Ratana Sutta* itself is relatively short, only seventeen verses long. It begins with an injunction to all terrestrial and celestial beings to be happy, to listen, and to look after humans. Most verses then praise the three “gems” (*ratana*) of the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha, before the final three verses, apparently in the voice of the god Sakka, enjoin those same beings to revere the triple gem.<sup>4</sup> Buddhaghosa’s commentary is much longer, relaying the origin (*uppatti*) of the sutta from “the ancients” (*porāṇā*), part of his process of translating the lost Sinhala commentaries to the transregional language of Pāli for the Mahāvihāra lineage in Anuradhapura.<sup>5</sup> The existence of the story from an earlier date, however, including a Sanskrit version in the *Mahāvastu* (Jones 208-249), suggests the

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<sup>4</sup> For an analysis, see Heim “Taking Refuge.”

<sup>5</sup> The Pāli “canon” was a relatively open body of texts until the first or second century C.E. Its commentarial codification by Buddhaghosa was the agenda of one Lankan monastic lineage, not a universal canon with all parts accessible to all monks of Southern Asia at all times (Collins “Pali Canon”). Bhikkhu Bodhi conjectures that the *Ratana Sutta* is relatively late among canonical suttas, as it uses the name “Sakyamuni” (Bodhi 1432 n.958). Because the Pāli *Tipiṭaka* has been standardized, I refer to it here as a closed and shared body of texts. I cite Bhikkhu Bodhi’s English translation, but modify it in certain places, quoting Pāli from the edition of the *Tipiṭaka* established at the Sixth Buddhist Council in Myanmar in 1956, available online at [tipitaka.org](http://tipitaka.org). All translations from Sinhala are my own.

lessons of Vesāli exceed any one commentator’s agenda.<sup>6</sup> So while I could not make the arguments of this article without Buddhaghosa, his interpretations alone would be insufficient. The subsequent Sinhala versions are what imbue the story with an overt critical force, framing the city’s fate as more omen than accident. In turn, each retelling reframes what I see in the others. Just as Buddhaghosa’s commentary was a means to discover the immeasurability of the Buddha’s words, the analytic act of reading multiple commentaries reveals the seemingly infinite applications of Buddhist insights.

Among the commentarial legacy of later Sinhala retellings, an important version appears in *Pūjāvaliya*, a compilation of stories about *pūjā* offerings to the Buddha, completed by Mayūrapāda Buddhaputra around the year 1266. Long used to preach sermons (Deegalle 188-192), *Pūjāvaliya* was likely a key means by which the narrative of Vesāli moved more deeply into Sinhala vernacular literature. *Pūjāvaliya* can be seen as a continuation of Lankan literary trends that began in the preceding century, where canonical teachings were distilled into their essence and reworded in new Pāli and Sinhala texts “that would have previously fallen outside the strict parameters of what has been classed as a commentary” (Gornall 220). Yet Buddhaputra’s retelling has a certain commentarial effect and aesthetic, with elaborative first-person prose passages quoting Pāli stanzas at times.<sup>7</sup> He is the first to alert us that impermanence (*anitya*) in particular is key to Vesāli’s downfall, noting the danger of reliance on

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<sup>6</sup> There are significant differences between the Sanskrit and Pāli. Some comparative work has been done in Obeyesekere “Ritual Drama.”

<sup>7</sup> Buddhaputra’s entire *Pūjāvaliya* can be read as an expansion on the section about recollection of the Buddha (*buddhānussati*) in Buddhaghosa’s *Visuddhimagga* (*The Path* VII §1-67). Buddhaputra begins *Pūjāvaliya* with a Buddhaghosa-esque exegesis of the Buddha’s “*itipiso*” epithets, and then uses a Pāli stanza from *Visuddhimagga* beginning with the word *pūjā* (VII §23) to close every chapter of *Pūjāvaliya*. On *buddhānussati* and the *itipiso* epithets as a commentarial and devotional practice, see Hallisey *Devotion* 216-248; Heim *Voice* 202-206.



its hugeness. Connected to the court of Parakramabāhu II, Buddhaputra wrote in living memory of the 1215 invasion by Kalinga Magha, which completely devastated the Buddhist presence in Anuradhapura according to the *Mahāvamsa* (Geiger 80: 54-55). Buddhaputra also wrote in cataclysmic terms of this invasion in his *Pūjāvaliya* chapter on Lankan history, when Magha and his armies “destroyed the world’s *sāsana* ... broke thousands of stupas ... made their own settlements ... mixed races with Lankan women ... brought heretical views to Sri Lanka ... and made the island of Lanka like a house set aflame” (Buddhaputra 784-785). It took several kings in the lineage leading to Parakramabāhu to relocate power and reclaim territory, and still royal capitals were tucked into highland strongholds distant from Anuradhapura, governing fractiously. Buddhaputra knew well how even the best cities meet their end.

I suggest furthermore that the commentarial tradition of the *Ratana Sutta* continued in Sinhala literature through ritual healing traditions. The Pāli lines of the sutta, for example, were inserted into Sinhala verses conveying blessings for healing and protection, which included stories of the Licchavi royals who ruled Viśāla.<sup>8</sup> The astrological tradition of “*bali*” healing rituals for removing ill planetary effects includes such a blessing, called *Viśālā Śāntiya*, in its prescribed rites. Although most extant versions of this text give abbreviated accounts of the story, a longer retelling in Sinhala verse does exist, a professional composition that is commentarial in its detail. It was also written for a *bali* ritual, according to its final verses, which connect the origin of the *Ratana Sutta* to the origin of the “*pantis baliya*,” or the thirty-five *bali* rituals.<sup>9</sup> It

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<sup>8</sup> Or.6615(430): *Ruvan Sūtra Śāntiya*; Or.6615(250), (251): *Viśālā Śāntiya*, in Somadasa. Other rituals to ward off dangerous illnesses likewise invoke the plague of this city: Or.6615(87): *Vaduru Mā Kāli Dēvi Upata*. Obeyesekere (“Ritual Drama”) also found the Licchavi story retold in a twentieth-century *sanni yakuma* ritual.

<sup>9</sup> Different *bali* traditions suggest the Buddha himself, or a Licchavi prince during his visit, performed the first *bali* ritual to cure Viśāla. The *pantis bali* are understood as the thirty-

was printed as *Licchavi Kathāva* in 1889, and according to the editors who “compiled and revised” the edition, presumably from now-lost manuscripts, the poem was “heard to have been composed about a hundred years ago by a poet named Vijēvikrama Muhandiram who lived in the up-country region, although there is no evidence that can be accepted irrefutably” (Silva and Perera).<sup>10</sup> Such authorship is plausible in light of the literary revival in the up-country in the eighteenth century; central to these new patterns in monastic training and prestige were the Pāli *paritta* texts of which the *Ratana Sutta* is part (Blackburn “Magic”). The literary revival also emphasized preaching to lay communities and coincided with “the emergence of a sophisticated literate community composed of lay men and women” (Blackburn *Buddhist Learning* 71), making it possible for the origin story of the *Ratana Sutta* to be skillfully recounted by a layman like Vijēvikrama, whose Muhandiram title suggests he may have been an official in the Dutch or British colonial government. Coincidentally, his *Licchavi Kathāva* relays a retelling of Vesāli’s story that shows how colonized earth inevitably withers. As his poetic elegies dwell in the landscape of Vesāli, Vijēvikrama lends the most insight into the environmental stakes of the city’s limitless expansion.

Buddhaghosa, Buddhaputra, and Vijēvikrama will therefore be our philosophical companions in pursuit of lessons from the *Ratana Sutta* origin story. From ancient to medieval to early modern times, each emphasizes different points, but collectively complement one another and cohere into a larger commentarial tradition, providing an array of interpretations that make the moral of the story applicable to ever more

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five different types of *bali* rituals, or the thirty-five different steps to a *bali* ritual. In the steps, the *Viśālā Śāntiya* and *Ruvan Sūtra* come last (Kāriyavasam 19-35). We might therefore imagine Vijēvikrama’s *Licchavi Kathāva* to have been a sort of grand finale to a well-endowed *bali* ceremony.

<sup>10</sup> I have consulted the British Library copy of Silva and Perera’s version, call number 14165.e.18, and cite this work by its verse numbers.

contexts. The narrative's repeated retelling is itself a testament to its potential for addressing recurrent problems in human living. Although expanded and accelerated with globalization, epidemics are relatively routine events in the history of civilizations. The collective history of these commentaries can thereby be reapplied once again to modern concerns, teaching us, like so many Buddhist stories, that failure is an opportunity for learning.

### **Perils of Endless Expansion**

Buddhaghosa begins his commentary with the origin of the Licchavi lineage. It is a strange story, where a queen of Benares gives birth to a lump of flesh and, ashamed, sets it afloat in a river. The gods sustain it until a hermit finds it and cares for it. The flesh grows into the first two Licchavis, brother and sister, their name a pun on their physical state, meaning either that they are skinless or have adhesive skin. The children are then adopted by cowherds but behave violently and are ostracized. The cowherds receive a land grant from a king and build their own city. The Licchavi line marries incestuously inside the city walls, which must expand to accommodate the growing family and its need for palace pleasures: "As those children grew up, because the city was unable to contain its abundance, they surrounded it with a wall, each time extending it by an interval of a *gāvuta*. Because of its repeated extension, it came to be called Vesāli" (Bodhi 675). Buddhaghosa uses a play on words to source this moniker from the Pāli word for huge (*visāla*) by describing the city's "repeated extension," or more literally, "being made enormous again and again" (*punappunaṃ visālikatattā*).

In Sinhala works, the city was directly called Visāla, and authors elaborated on the significance of this name. Vijēvikrama did this

poetically, naming several types of the city’s hugeness in one quatrain by anchoring each line with the word *visālā*:

By thus bringing the military company that is huge,  
with a length and width three hundred leagues huge,  
and the five rows of arches with tied flags being huge,  
because of that, that city was named “Huge”—*Visālā*. (v.54)

Yet there is something ominous to this hugeness. *Vijēvikrama* includes a touch of temporal foreshadowing when he situates the expansion of this city in an epoch of decay:

Then the noble Licchavi prince was coming to be king.  
At that time, the birthing queen was accustomed to wealth.  
For that reason, another city was made well.  
At that time, it was the year 2000 in the Kali Yuga. (v.51)

Setting the story in the end times of the Kali Yuga instructs us to expect the disaster that unfolds shortly thereafter.<sup>11</sup>

At first glance, a Buddhist critique of the city may seem counter-intuitive. Cities are generally seen as key to Buddhist *realpolitik* and were frequently used as metaphors for *nibbāna* across Pāli literature (Collins *Nirvana* 9-11, 224-229; Marino). Charles Hallisey has noted this may be because the city “protects, shuts out, and provides security” (“*Nibbāna-sutta*” 110); this certainly resonates with descriptions of *nibbāna* as a state of true fearlessness. Yet Hallisey also describes the *nibbāna* city as a “conventional metaphor” (113) and notes elsewhere how Theravāda philosophers avoid singularly definitive interpretations (“Ethical Particularism”; “In Defense”). The *Ratana Sutta* commentaries may thus present another meaning beyond customary glosses, to illustrate how fears (*baya*),

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<sup>11</sup> This matches *Visālā Śāntiya* texts where the Kali Yuga is mentioned in opening verses, including the very first line of the version in *Sēdaraman* 234.

also translatable as perils, still slip into seemingly secure cities. After all, attachment to any single safe space, even *nibbāna* itself, is problematic. The city of Vesāli therefore contains the opposite metaphorical potential, its continuous grasping instead representing *saṃsāra*.

Buddhaputra moves in this direction in *Pūjāvaliya*, where he lauds the city but also embeds an ominosity in its urban enormity. He builds up the hugeness for many lines of his prose, listing all the reasons the city may have gained the name. Having followed the same details as Buddhaghosa up to this point, Buddhaputra begins to riff in elaboration:

Thus that city was like a lowered half of heaven. From the trumpeting sound of the rutting tuskers, and the neighing sound of the horses, and the chariot-wheel sound, and the sound of performers bowing and playing the *vīṇa*, and the sound of the great cymbals with a voice like the ocean's roar, and the sound of thousands of victory conches, and the sound of thousands of reed flutes making songs from bamboo, and the sound of lines by the thousands striking up melodies, and the sounds of "kava" and "bova," the ten-fold sounds are huge in that city, because of which I think it may have received the name Viśāla City. Or I think it is said to be named Viśāla because of the ornaments on the especially huge halls. Or I think it is said to be named Viśāla because of the royal assembly of huge *śāl* trees in thousands of groves shining. (437)

Buddhaputra set the customary sounds of flourishing urbane areas on a huge scale, along with ornamentation and vegetation. Continuing to use the word *viśāla*, however, he then turns to unfortunate things that can also become huge problems, reminding his audience of a key Buddhist teaching that reveals the fatal flaw of Viśāla:

Thus in an era of that oceanic Viśāla City, my Lord King Buddha explained how, “According to the Dharma, all aggregates of each form cease to be and are impermanent.” Those words of warning are true, and just like they were preached, in Viśāla City the peril of disease, the peril of famine, and the peril of inhuman spirits, those three dangers also became huge. (437)

Buddhaputra thereby draws a direct correlation between the enormous wealth of the city and its ultimate downfall through impermanence (*anitya*). He presents this teaching as “advice,” but it also carries a sense of “warning” (*avavada*) to make the moral of Viśāla clear. Rather than being too big to fail, the city’s failure is assured by its enormous reliance on illusory forms born of transient aggregates.

Through impermanence, the city can be read as a cautionary tale of excess. Consumed with expanding to accommodate more people and take up more territory, its seeming limitlessness was never sustainable. Vijēvikrama’s poem especially emphasizes the manipulation of nature that the city undertook for walls, moats, irrigation, and agriculture:

As it lacked a boundary, the earth’s soil was gathered.  
A shaft was taken so as to crack through it,  
by which the rest was placed everywhere else widespread.  
Thus was the glory of that beautiful city like this.

Out of the mud, seven good water moats surround outside.  
7,700 feet are around because of the people.  
One by one having built separate mansions happily,  
[the city is] seen around that region in the glorious shape  
of the seven seas. . .

Channels on banks of ponds and banks of lakes  
ripen the farm fields and fertilize along the borders.

Home-gardens are full of trees heavy with fruit.  
Worldly beings are made happy in that city. (vv.55-56, 64)

These are long-standing forms of human intervention into natural processes: manipulating and displacing large amounts of soil, carving out new waterways, and selecting for cultivatable species to produce sustenance. Many modern ecological crises are directly tied to the exponential expansion and acceleration of these habits over the past century. In Vijēvikrama's elegy, these interventions are still described positively, although he does later detail the withering of this same landscape. On the ancient scale of Viśāla, just as now, the natural world could take back what it had given.

All the authors list the problems that befall the city in the same order. First came drought, then famine, then death, then disease, then more death, then demons. Each author suggests in their own way that the cause of the initial drought was natural. Buddhaghosa implies this by having the Licchavi king investigate any possible unrighteousness in his past but find no ostensible fault; Buddhaputra invokes impermanence; Vijēvikrama more directly calls it "natural" (*nisaṅga*):

First, a three year period without rain came naturally.  
Falls, rivers, lakes, channels, tanks, wells, and ponds dried.  
Fruiting paddy in fields died and trees bore no fruit either.  
With meals of pulled arecanut husks, people felt fatigued.  
(v.72)

These descriptions are even more foreboding to read at present, as our human-inflected climate has changed the parameters of the natural to make drought a growing problem, as crops in Sri Lanka similarly turn to husks and reservoirs dry up (Dissanayake; Indrakularasa). Appropriately, Vijēvikrama emphasizes how natural powers can unseat the plans and pretensions of human politics:

In the midst of the good prosperous people's city,  
 In the granaries and lofts, the *vī* and *hāl* rice dried up.  
 The chena crop cultivation did not yield fruits.  
 Pride left places where noble offices were received. (v.74)

Although preparations were made for leaner times, they were no longer sufficient in the face of such extended drought, and prosperity itself dried up. This made the prestige of political office likewise devoid of pride (*siṭu tanaturu lattān giya odēyā*). As pride is generally considered a hindrance to Buddhist insight, this drought can be understood as a learning moment for a distracted city.

Such a cautionary tale mirrors how modern scholars of political ecology have warned against the excess of globalization, acknowledging the power of natural agencies over humanity even as humans modify environments (Bennett; Connolly; Latour *Facing Gaia*). Like Buddhaputra, they warn against belief in the permanent stability of natural processes (Ghosh 16-27). They also reject seemingly singular forms that are really conditional aggregates, as with Latour's critique of how modern thought divides reality into supposedly separable categories of nature versus culture (*We Have Never Been Modern*). Similarly, anthropologists like Elizabeth Povinelli have deconstructed the conceptual and political hierarchies between the living and non-living. In Buddhist terms, what undergirds such critique is the fundamental truth about the emptiness of all forms, which is also the reason why grasping at ever more of the earth will never grant humanity full control.

Pandemics are also excellent teachers of this lesson, proof of natural unpredictability and the permeability of territorial borders and human bodies. Already in 2016, Povinelli used the category of "The Virus" to name any entity "which seeks to disrupt the current arrangements of Life and Nonlife ... for the sole purpose of diverting the energies of arrangements of existence in order to extend itself" (19). The actual



coronavirus is surely one such disrupter, its absorption through our respiratory system proving Povinelli's point that "human lungs are constant reminders that this separation [of life and nonlife] is imaginary" (42). Moreover, the virus has shattered the illusion of our command over globalized life, fracturing supply chains and migrating over closed borders. As many 2020 pundits have noted, the pandemic is not an isolated disaster, but one born out of existing problems with the global order and compounded by growing inequalities in politically unwell societies (Jabali; Scott). In other words, the coronavirus is but the cherry atop a disaster sundae, one that shows the whole to be melting. Likewise, the story of Vesāli shows how disasters do not happen in isolation, but successively unfold to topple unbalanced polities.

### **Cascading Catastrophes—Death, Disease, and Demons**

All retellings of the story describe Visāla's problems as threefold, with the city suffering from the perils or fears (*baya*) of famine, disease, and demons. Buddhaghosa notes how the most vulnerable populations were struck first:

Some time later a famine struck, with drought and crop failure. First the poor people died, and their bodies were cast outside. Then, drawn by the smell of the corpses, inhuman spirits entered the city. Then still more people died, and because of the decay an epidemic (*abhivātaka*) broke out. (Bodhi 675)

The rulers of Visāla apparently tried to sweep the poor people (*duggatamanussā*) over the city walls until they were overwhelmed, and the problems of the poor became the problems of the elites, too.

This is a classic story of civilizational collapse, with compounding problems that mirror historical crashes theorized by academics. The first page of Joseph Tainter’s *The Collapse of Complex Societies*, for example, could be reframed as a Buddhist summation of Visāla: “The implication is clear: civilizations are fragile, impermanent things” (1). It is never just one problem that causes sociopolitical collapse but a nexus of damage and mismanagement, with “an insufficient response to circumstances” (54). The Licchavi rulers showed such an inability to stem the tide of death in their city; despite its prosperity, with a palace for every prince, the city was still filled with the poor, and rulers were too consumed in their wealth to sustain this peasantry. These problematic preconditions are why many scholars warn against looking only for cataclysmic collapses, which blind us to smaller collapses already happening to different segments of the populace at different times, a process also exacerbated in our era by the coronavirus. As the wealth of America’s 686 billionaires grew during the pandemic, 23 million Americans reported food insecurity:

Insisting that they should not be allowed to blur together puts not only “society” but also collapse into a different sort of focus. If societies are not in fact unitary, problem-solving entities but heaving contradictions and sites of constant struggle, then their existence is not an all-or-nothing game. Collapse appears not as an ending, but a reality that some have already suffered. (Ehrenreich)

In the case of Visāla, although its elegies envisioned rivers of wealth and abundant sustenance, its epidemic revealed what was really true about the city—it had already collapsed at its outskirts and failed those most susceptible to famine.

As collapse happens by degrees, problems in one sector cascade into larger scales of sociopolitical decay. Buddhaputra’s retelling makes

this point in graphic detail, as bodies decompose in the streets with no one left to bring out the dead:

Firstly there was no rain, the water dried up in the tanks and field embankments, the paddy earth was parched, and rice famine occurred. Poor people who received no rice were the first to start to die. Some people burned the dead bodies, but because the corpses were brought in such great numbers, not all were burned, and chains were put around the neck and they were dragged outside the city. Then, because so many corpses were brought, those not dragged like that were taken from inside homes and dragged into gardens and courtyards. Then, because the dying ones increased, the surrounding gardens were half filled with dead bodies, while in another half lay those exposed to the illness who were worsening. There was no one to drag out the dead bodies, and no one to look after the ill. (437-438)

Reaching all strata of society and overwhelming the city with bodies, the scale of this disease is deemed “epidemic” by all the authors, designated by the term *abhivātaka*, likely based on the Pāli verb *abhivāyati*, meaning to “blow through” or “pervade.” The former sense applies in the way the authors describe the illness as being transmitted through miasma-like airwaves. As Buddhaputra puts it, “In all ways the winds of snake venom struck, and people immediately fell into a poisoned trance and died. Because of that, when the power of this disease was seen, due to the level of death it was named ‘epidemic’ (*abhivātaka*)” (438). As for the “pervasive” sense of the term, the authors point to the overflow of bodies as an indicator. The coronavirus pandemic likewise left bodies in the streets of the capital of Ecuador, and during its worst surges in the United States, hospitals, morgues, and funeral homes were overwhelmed and required extra refrigerated trailers to store the dead (Ochs and Cherelus;

Viteri and Kraul). Even if not reached, a plausible tipping point of collapse comes into view in such situations, showing a sociopolitical status quo ill-prepared for mass catastrophes that accompany an overextended society. As Buddhaputra states in his definition of an *abhivātaka* disease: “So because of the rotting of those corpses, a disease deemed epidemic was born like fire had been set to matchsticks” (438). Body counts define epidemics, but if the disease is a fire burning through a population, the state of the public must have somehow dried into matchsticks to fuel it so well.

Ensuing collapse is not restricted to human welfare. Buddhaputra and Vijēvikrama both give examples of the environmental entanglements of Vesāli’s disaster. Furthering his definition of epidemics, Buddhaputra presages virology by describing a transmission from animals to humans: “That is a disease that first kills the geckos that live in homes, secondly kills the dogs, and thirdly kills humans” (438). In turn, as viruses spread among humans, they can be transmitted back to the animal world. Vijēvikrama describes such a spread to animals incorporated into human homes and economics:

Drawing acrid water, that city experienced tough times.

Goats, cows, and buffalo died from place to place.

To the dogs it came and struck.

Budding trees and vines withered and dried up . . .

Sons, daughters, and animals who spent lives there

heaved up and died, strewn about place to place.

Having tied up elephants like lines of mountain summits,

their trunks rolled up and they died upon the rocks there.

(vv.78, 80)

Although the coronavirus itself has not proved highly deadly to animals in this way, they have still faced death as a consequence of its contagion.

When coronaviruses began mutating in farmed minks in Denmark, possibly interfering with human vaccine development, millions of minks were culled (Murray). Animals that humanity selects for breeding are obviously most likely to share illnesses and suffer consequences, but Vijēvikrama also reminds his audience of a bigger picture, describing how the drought triggered catastrophic ecological collapse far outside the city as well:

Where the western sun always went to recline,  
endlessly less and less was given.

Gaur, boar, elk, and deer herds  
met their end here and there in death. (v.79)

Having all environments die, even those where humans do not directly intervene, is the scale of collapse threatened by global climate change. These cascading catastrophes begin to enter a feedback loop, where, in the case of only viruses, human spaces on a warming planet increase possible territories for insect and mammalian disease vectors, and a corresponding loss in biodiversity decreases the collective resiliency of environments to pathogens (Lustgarten). As any Buddhist would tell you, things really are co-dependent.

Poverty. Drought. Famine. Disease. Death. Could it get any worse for Visāla and similarly imperiled cities? Alas, demons are sure to follow wherever there is death. There are many ways one can interpret the demons of this story, who receive different names across retellings. Buddhaghosa calls them *amanussā*, often translated as evil spirits, but which most literally means “nonhumans.” When the term is first used by Buddhaghosa, it is juxtaposed in the same sentence with other types of *manussā*, from poor humans (*duggatamanussā*) who become dead humans (*matamanussā*), to the nonhumans (*amanussā*) attracted to the corpses. How can this devolution of the *manussā* be read? The term *amanussā* also

appears when Buddhaghosa glosses the word *bhūtā* in the opening line of the *Ratana Sutta*, where the Buddha addresses “all the *bhūtā* gathered here” (*yānīdha bhūtāni samāgatāni*). Buddhaghosa presents an array of definitions for *bhūtā*: “the word *bhūta* occurs in the sense of existing, . . . the five aggregates, . . . the four primary elements, . . . all beings, . . . plant life such as trees, . . . and the totality of beings. . . . But here it should be seen as a general term for *amanussā*.” English translations of *amanussā* that reduce it to “evil spirits” do not capture the richness of Buddhaghosa’s commentarial elaboration. Why go to the trouble of listing six other possible definitions of *bhūtā*, quoting different collections across the *Tipiṭaka*? Perhaps Buddhaghosa establishes this because *amanussā* itself is a vague term. Must it be frighteningly inhuman, or just nonhuman, including plants, animals, and helpful spirits? By using *amanussā* to gloss *bhūtā* in the sutta, Buddhaghosa in turn infuses some of the multivalent naturalism of *bhūtā* into how one would think of *amanussā*. This is reinforced during his interpretation of the next line as he melds the words, noting “all the nonhuman beings” (*sabbāneva amanussabhūtāni*) gathered there: the sky-beings (*antalikkhe bhūtāni*) and the earth-beings (*bhummāni bhūtāni*), the latter including “those beings arisen on the earth and those dwelling in trees, vines, etc. on the earth; for those are all born on the earth or in trees, vines, mountains, etc. connected to the earth” (Bodhi 679). Emphasizing connection with the earth suggests the nonhuman is not confined to inhuman spirits. The city’s meltdown from *manussā* into *amanussā* is yet another indication of the transience of its man-made forms, dissolving back into reformations of elemental aggregates.

Yet the demonic side of the inhuman cannot be ignored either, another ominous consequence of civilizational excess. Buddhaghosa does not describe how the *amanussā* behave, but Sinhala authors offer gruesome depictions. Buddhaputra uses “*amanuṣya*” when naming the perils that befall Viśāla, but he mostly calls them *yakṣa*—a class of beings, sometimes benign, sometimes demonic, that has haunted Buddhism since

its beginnings (DeCaroli). In the Sinhala tradition, *yakṣas* still encompass some *bhūtā* nature, residing in natural places and impacting elemental humors that make up the body, although they are thus common culprits for disease and other chaos and need to be tamed. When most fearsome, *yakṣas* devour humans entirely. Buddhaputra describes their appetites: “So as to eat that human flesh, from each direction *yakṣas* came from their world and rushed around the whole city, shook the last life out of people, and began to eat” (438). Such displays of grotesque greed show how *yakṣas* contravene conventional Buddhist ethics, and Vijēvikrama likewise names other un-Buddhist qualities, introducing the *piśāca* to Visāla as another carnivorous demon:

The *piśāca* entered that city, truly into its belly.  
 The fierce stench given off, their minds alit with arrogance.  
 Brought by allure of flesh, mouths affixed without timidity,  
 leaping, they broke and ate people, pursuing and pressing.  
 (v.87)

Here the demons display the trait of arrogance (*eḍi*) in addition to their base greed for flesh that fuels their relentless pursuit of prey. Yet demons are more than mere examples of un-virtue in Buddhist thought, as their negativity can itself convey lessons and achieve positive ends by embodying emptiness and impermanence (McKinley). The ferociousness of the Sinhala *yakṣa* lends it a critical energy, which Vijēvikrama harnesses in another verse about pride:

That suffering having begun, the coming pain felt,  
 seeing beings’ minds shaken, they entered amidst that city.  
 Striking and tossing, strength and pride broken by claw  
 attacks,  
 the *yakṣa* armies cast down and ate humans, severing them  
 severely. (v.86)

The *yakṣas* may be brutal for the horrors they inflict on humanity, but they ultimately “broke the pride” (*odē biñdē*) with which the city was afflicted. Similar to his verse about pride vacating prestigious offices during the drought and famine, here Vijēvikrama uses a phrase that idiomatically means “to humiliate.” A bit of humility is actually what Visāla needs, having so selfishly expanded. The *yakṣa*’s horror thereby enacts a corrective order.

Demons can thus act as a language for speaking about a host of disorders in the world. As Bruce Lincoln describes it:

Demonology constitutes something like a unified theory of what we treat separately under the rubrics of bacteriology, epidemiology, toxicology, teratology, criminology, Marxism, psychoanalysis and others, for it is an unflinching attempt to name, comprehend, and defend against all that threatens, frightens, and harms us. (31)

In Sinhala discourse, the *yakṣa* is used to speak not only of spirit possession, but also the behavior of demonic people, the *yakṣa*-esque ones who act inhumanely and damage social trust (Obeyesekere “Demonic Possession”; Venugopal). In this way, even if one does not believe in literal *yakṣa* beings, the demonic invasion of Visāla remains an important part of the political critique in this narrative, symbolizing the many unsavory forces that emerge in crises like pandemics. The coronavirus’s demonic qualities range from the behavior of the virus itself to collateral damage on mental health and social cohesion (Mohaghegh). In the United States, the demonization of Asian Americans became a widespread problem during the pandemic (“Reports of Anti-Asian Assaults”; Darling-Hammond et al.). In Sri Lanka, Muslims were demonized as disease vectors due to their burial rites, visits to India, or trade in Chinese merchandise (Schonthal and Jayatilake 268; Silva 24-33). Political administrations in both the U.S. and Sri Lanka had a history of leveling divisive language and



policies against minority groups before this, and their social tinderboxes desiccated by populism were lit aflame in the pandemic.

Demonic traits aside from hate can likewise be multiplied, especially greed and its mechanical reproductions. Desire is the root of most depictions of the demonic, and nothing encourages appetites quite like global capitalism. Although we claim no *yakṣa* taste for human flesh, our focus on fulfillment draws us closer to consuming ourselves. Even *Business Insider* called it “ghoulish” when, only two months into the first wave, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration released a handbook for reconverting refrigerated trucks from rolling morgues back to food transport (Premark). As the supply chain rattles back to life and lurches onward, what demons are ignored in the process? If the pandemic comes with lessons, our ability to learn them requires frank confrontation with our fearsome perils and commitment to dispel them with truth.

### **Truthful Treatment of Ills**

Who is to blame for Vesāli’s disaster? As with the coronavirus pandemic, it is impossible to label any one actor as solely responsible. Both Buddhaghosa and Buddhaputra describe how the Licchavi king orders his past be examined to see if he is culpable due to an unvirtuous action, something “un-dharmic” (*adhamma / adharmā*). That his ministers find no personal faults is understandable, as the multifold manner of the drought-triggered collapse exceeds any one ruler. Yet the ministers’ findings raise a question, unaddressed by any of the commentators, about what sort of *dharma* they used to judge the king. It seems logical that royal ministers would hold their king accountable to a standard of *rājā dharma*, the rules followed by rulers, and according to this, Vesāli may have made no mistakes. In Kauṭilya’s *Arthaśāstra*, for example, a manual for political success, expansion and consumption are foremost aspects of rule, as

“Government seeks to acquire what has not been acquired,” and the first directive of a royal superintendent is that “He should settle the countryside—whether it has been settled before or never been settled” (Olivelle 1.4.3, 2.1.1). The continual expansion of Vesāli thus followed established patterns of good governance. Moreover, *Arthaśāstra* deems drought, famine, disease, and demons as all “dangers arising from fate,” again attenuating a king’s responsibility, as “good and bad policy pertain to the human realm. . . [which] consists of what is caused by a visible agent” (4.3.1, 6.2.6-10). Rulers are therefore not culpable for matters beyond their direct actions and jurisdiction.

From a Buddhist point of view, however, there remains an argument to be made that the rulers of Vesāli had misguided intentions in their endless expansion. A drought may happen by natural processes, but this does not absolve Licchavi leadership for their conspicuous consumption that exacerbated suffering. *Nettipakaraṇa*, a Pāli guide for composing commentaries, contains an instructive passage about enrichment and metaphorical illness in its description of the hindrance of ignorance (*avijjānīvaraṇa*) caused by the fetter of craving (*taṇhāsaṃyojana*), existing among those who mistakenly presume that “He who cultivates sensual desires enriches the world; he who enriches the world produces much merit.”<sup>12</sup> *Nettipakaraṇa* warns that “they enrich only the sickness, they enrich only the boil, they enrich only the barb. Overwhelmed by the sickness. . . they find no medicine for sickness, boil, or barb” (Kaccāna-Thera 149).<sup>13</sup> Buddhaghosa uses the same term for “enrich” (*√ vaḍḍh*), also meaning to increase or enlarge, when describing how Vesāli received its name. Because the city’s increasing enrichment was based on sensual pleasures, a literal sickness accordingly ensued,

<sup>12</sup> *Yo kāme paṭisevati, so lokaṃ vaḍḍhayati, yo lokaṃ vaḍḍhayati, so bahuṃ puññaṃ pasavati.* Thanks to Ven. Upali Sraman for guiding me to this passage.

<sup>13</sup> *Te tadabhiññā santā rogameva vaḍḍhayanti, gaṇḍameva vaḍḍhayanti, sallameva vaḍḍhayanti, te rogābhitunnā ... rogagaṇḍasallabhesajjaṃ na vindanti.*

another piece of Vesāli's *saṃsāra* symbolism. Licchavi ignorance is of the sort Jay Garfield calls "primal confusion," grasping at a seemingly permanent world, dwelling in the egoism of identity and possession, and attempting to enrich existence for personal pleasure (9-11). All the royals amid their flowering gardens are therefore partly responsible for pollinating the city's sickness through their grasping, part of the polity's collective "socio-karma" (Walters 10-11). As philosopher Jane Bennett has written of plural agencies: "The notion of a confederate agency does attenuate the blame game, but it does not thereby abandon the project of identifying (what Arendt called) the sources of harmful effects. To the contrary, such a notion broadens the range of places to look for sources. Look to long-term strings of events: to selfish intentions. . . generating a tragedy of the commons" (37). Similarly, the selfish intentions replicated across multiplying generations of Licchavi royalty bore fruit for only so long, with returns already diminished for those of the urban fringe.

Yet some willfully cling to their status quo of enrichment despite diminishing returns. In modern terms, Latour identifies these actors as the elite capitalist class that denies climate change while simultaneously exacerbating it by deregulating economies. Rather than admit the ideal of endless growth was misguided, they suffer from their own primal confusion and prefer to live "out of this world," to cash out of the global economy via maximum extraction, attracting non-elites to their position of denial with its easy answers and distrust of expertise (*Down to Earth* 34-35). The ensuing circus of populism obfuscates the oligarchic agendas, keeping favored politicians in power who propagate images of nations retreating behind literal and figurative walls, deploying a "politics of the armed lifeboat" in response to global collapse (Parenti 11). A sluggishness to react is also suggested by Vesāli's commentators, who emphasize the suddenness of its catastrophe. Buddhaputra writes: "When killed by that illness, some people are chatting as though they are not sick and are struck; some die while telling beloved stories; some whom death befalls

are children who were just laughing and smiling; some are out traveling when they die” (438). With their civilization collapsing around them, the populace tried to simply go on with life, only to die in their tracks. Vijēvikrama paints a similar picture, with the problem recognized but nothing done:

Having gazed above, they prattle and say there is no rain.  
 “Rough wind without water,” they said and sat on the  
 riverbanks.  
 Exhausted by the water of undrinkable mud sludge slurry,  
 stomachs taken with pain, they rolled from side to side.  
 (v.75)

The sort of talking about the problem these people do is only “prattle” or “chatter” (*doḍā kiyati*), useless speech that accomplishes nothing, like so much political discourse.

As the rich exploit workers and evade taxes to buy escape yachts to island bunkers, they show that wealth can slow personal experience of disaster. Vijēvikrama makes a similar point, being the only author to reflect on the fact that this story describes waves of death, but then cuts to a scene where the king and his ministers are still alive and well enough to meet:

Like this, the three perils struck those in that place.  
 What of the others to whom disasters happen slowly?  
 The learned and wise ones with great virtue and insight,  
 the generals and great ministers were like that.  
 They gathered to be in the shade of the high king’s foot.  
 “In five-thousand years no rain will rain down in your city.  
 Disease has covered; yakṣa perils and great famine struck.  
 Beings are being voided,” they advised, being destroyed.  
 (vv.89-90)

Vijēvikrama acknowledges that, relative to the general populace, these elites are somewhat insulated from the catastrophes befalling the city. Yet they seek the king because, however “slowly” (*lasē*), disasters (*vipat*) have arrived at their doors, too. This slowness is no virtue. Sinhala Buddhist poetry more often contains the word’s opposite, *nolasē*, to encourage acting without idleness. While advising the king that beings are being “voided or “emptied out” (*sisvā*) by these perils, the elites themselves are likewise being destroyed (*nāsī*), perhaps because they are dying of the disease, or perhaps because their entire workforce has been killed. In *Arthaśāstra*, Kauṭilya records teachers who say the loss of common people is worse than the loss of chiefs in a calamity because “the loss of common people deprives undertakings of enterprise and security,” but Kauṭilya disagrees, stating, “It is possible to rectify the loss of common people, because they are numerous” (Olivelle 8.4.9-10).

Either way, the importance of people appears purely economic for the benefit of elites. Likewise, workers in factories, warehouses, shipping, and store floors of some of the world’s richest corporations were not given adequate protection or leave to stem the spread of the coronavirus. As Latour remarked in an interview, “The pandemic has shown us the economy is a very narrow and limited way of organizing life.” Walls erected to protect wealth are ultimately useless against “a global catastrophe that has come not from the outside like a war or an earthquake, but from within. Viruses are completely inside us” (Watts). It is therefore fitting that Buddhaghosa and Buddhaputra describe Vesāli’s inhumans as bursting out from the city when banished, as Buddhaputra’s *yakṣas* who stealthily “flowed” (*galā gena*) inside then fled by “breaking the foundations of the walls. . . like a current of water” (438, 443). Walls may signify sovereignty, but problems still seep through cracks and build up before bursting out into collapse.

The rulers of Vesāli at least had the good sense to seek help from outside their own enriched institutions. As Latour remarked, “We should remember that this idea of framing everything in terms of the economy is a new thing in human history” (Watts). Even the *Arthasāstra* competed with other *sāstra* discourses of its day, politics balanced by different pathways of good living (Doniger). Finding no *dharmic* fault on their own, the ministers of Vesāli discuss bringing in several different teachers, and the king decides to invite the Buddha, according to whose Dhamma the entire ethos of the city was misguided, clinging to forms founded on sensorial relishing. This can be interpreted as an example of what Steven Collins calls the conflict between Dhamma 1—“an ethics of reciprocity”—and Dhamma 2—“an ethics of absolute value”—the former dealing with the practical and political bargains of “quotidian” life and the latter with what is right in the furthest “supererogatory” sense (Collins *Nirvana* 420; *Wisdom* 7-9).<sup>14</sup> Focused only on quotidian enrichment, the grand city, however righteous, was doomed to suffer. Adapting this to modernity, current elites may be well trained in the “Dhamma 1” of economic theory, perhaps even practicing a relatively benevolent sort of business ethics, but with the modern turn away from transcendent truths, elite recognition of any supererogatory responsibility has largely ceded to accumulation of personal wealth as its own value. So, care for existence on a planetary scale, a supererogatory aim by standards of nationalistic governance, largely goes unheeded, and suffering is exacerbated.

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<sup>14</sup> The thirteenth-century Sinhala *Butsaraṇa* contains the retelling of Viśāla that is most adamant that the king did nothing wrong per prevailing standards of governing *dharma*, with the populace proclaiming this in extended elegy (Vidyācakravartī 153-156). This retelling is translated in Reynolds. The fifteenth-century monk Vīdāgama Maitreya cast the situation very differently in his Sinhala verse *Budugūṇa Alankāraya*, using the term “un-dharmic” (*adahama*) to describe the king multiple times and blaming Brahmin advisors who encouraged reliance on gods rather than the Buddha’s virtues (Maitreya vv.104-107).

A transcendent truth is what cures Vesāli. Buddhaghosa notes the Buddha and his disciples came in a great procession, with many offerings made by the Licchavi rulers, and “When the Blessed One reached Vesāli, Sakka, ruler of the devas, came surrounded by his company of devas, and ... most of the inhuman beings fled” (Bodhi 678). The remainder of the *amanussā* were then driven out by the Buddha’s elder disciple Ananda, who recited the *Ratana Sutta* while sprinkling water from the Buddha’s bowl. Although this ritual is why many Buddhists still trust the efficacy of the *Ratana Sutta* to stop illness, the story suggests this was no ordinary miracle, but the miracle of truth itself. As Buddhaghosa parses the lines of the sutta, he uses the phrase “having thus declared the truth” (*evaṃ saccam vatvā*) like a refrain as he elaborates on the components of the triple gem (691-705). This echoes the refrain throughout the sutta itself of the line “By this truth may there be happiness” (*etena saccena suvatthi hotu*). P. B. Meegaskumbura notes how this “repetitive saying. . . indicates that it is in fact *sacca-kiriya* ‘asseveration of truth’ that is deemed to bring benefits” (722). In Buddhaghosa’s commentary, the god Sakka affirms this: “Then Sakka, ruler of the devas, reflected: ‘By making a declaration of truth (*saccavacanam*) based on the excellent qualities of the Triple Gem, the Blessed One has brought safety to the city’” (Bodhi 705-706). It is therefore no simple magic of the gods, or even the Buddha’s unique powers, but rather truth that restores the polity. Most straightforwardly, this truth refers to the Buddhist path. More expansively, however, if we consider the total sum of the Dhamma taught across the *Tipiṭaka*, the content of this truth ultimately encompasses all natural laws.<sup>15</sup> Collins describes it as “knowledge of the Truth of things, what the Pali calls ‘Seeing Things As They Really Are’ (*yathābhūta-dassana*)” (*Wisdom xxxv*).

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<sup>15</sup> A small glimpse of such expansive efforts to explain the world can be seen in Buddhaghosa’s *Ratana Sutta* commentary, where explication of all the Buddha’s words leads him into defining concepts like “woodland thicket” and “a summer month” (Bodhi 702-703). Cf. King.

Applying this expansive notion of knowing to modern problems, such a clear-eyed view of reality would ideally be the aspiration of our civilizations.

In this case, a dose of ascetic medicine may be needed. As *Nettipparakaṇa* prescribes, “pursuit of indulgence of sensual pleasure is the sickness; calm and insight (*samatha-vipassanā*) are the counteractive medicine for the sickness” (Kaccāna-Thera 149). This is not to say we must all become monks and nuns or somehow abolish cities. Yet ascetic ideas can teach us how to better enrich the world with attentive restraint, acknowledging the limits of our planetary state. Some things are up to fate, but, following the logic of the *bali* ceremony in which Vijēvikrama participated, even when under planetary pressure, we still have some agency to attain better balance with ritual attention. Collins prefers the Greek term *askēsis* to the English asceticism, to emphasize its sense of “training, a special way of life ... with both behavioral and mental aspects, devoted to the attainment of some specific end,” although only small groups of elites are able to pursue such practice, “demographically tiny, but civilizationally of great importance” (*Wisdom* 204, 86). Today it is the elites steering the global order who must be convinced to devote themselves to more truthful ends. We cannot expect them to become monks or nuns either, but advice given to ascetics can be instructive. One line in the *Ratana Sutta* describes Sangha members as “those with no desire for growth.” Buddhaghosa explains this as an eradication of *kamma*: “When their moisture of craving has been dried up by the path of arahantship, that old *kamma* is destroyed. . . . Previously there was a desire for ‘growth,’ a designation for renewed existence, but when that is also abandoned. . . they are with no desire for growth” (Bodhi 705-706). Although this refers to monks and nuns striving to end rebirth in *saṃsāra*, the general concept of “no desire for growth,” also readable as “the desire for no-growth” (*avirūḥichandā*), may be applicable to modern civilizational concerns.



An ethic of no-growth fits the theme of “action as abstention” found across Buddhist teachings, where virtuous actions are framed by what is *not* done. As Heim explains, this “logic of abandoning and abstaining—that is, absences,” allows for “the presence of other felicitous things . . . [as] the presence of absences makes possible other processes” (*Forerunner* 113-116). A desire for no-growth is likely something Latour would also endorse to address our global ecological crisis and all its climate-changed viruses. The absences created by the global shutdown of 2020 inspired him to pen a widely translated essay encouraging people to dwell in the inactivity and imagine other possibilities of organizing our world: “The first lesson the coronavirus has taught us is also the most astounding: we have actually proven it is possible, in a few weeks, to put an economic system on hold everywhere in the world and at the same time, a system that we were told was impossible to slow down or redirect” (“What Protective Measures”). This pause has allowed some of us to reevaluate value itself, to recognize “something is wrong with the economy,” as people notice that the essential workers sustaining society are the least protected and compensated, and those working from home learn how caring and teaching confound “the notion of productivity,” how “these activities belong to a type of action that is *non-economizable*.” With so many people feeling this, there is potential for a shift: “Productivity—its calculation, its measure, its intensification—is gradually being replaced, thanks to the virus, by a totally different question: a question of subsistence. This is the turning point. . . not *what and how* to produce, but is ‘producing’ a good way of connecting to the world?” (Latour “Are You Ready”). This outlook is another type of positive no-growth, an abstention from production and consumption for their own sake.

It is easier theorized than done, of course, because attention and investments are continually drawn toward material gems of personal enrichment rather than higher gems of truth. In Buddhaghosa’s terms, “A gem is what leads to delight, what brings, produces, and increases delight;

this is a designation for whatever is honored and of great value, inestimable, rarely seen, and used by profound beings.”<sup>16</sup> This expansive definition means “gems are of two kinds, sentient and insentient.” A king therefore surrounds himself with literal jewels as well as his entourage of elephant gem, horse gem, queen gem, steward gem, and governor gem. Buddhaghosa describes all these gems as wonderful, attracting the attention of the populace so that “the multitude does not show honor elsewhere; no one takes flowers and incense and goes to the places of the *yakkha* or *bhūtā*,” these elemental beings forgotten for human resplendence. Yet even compared to such delightful gems, in each case Buddhaghosa repeats, “there is no gem equal to the Tathāgata.” By including this outline of political actors in a commentary on Vesāli, Buddhaghosa seems to reiterate the story’s point that worldly enrichment only goes so far. Good kings are good to have, but even they must submit to greater truths. Buddhaghosa notes: “even wheel-turning monarchs, the foremost of home-dwelling gems, pay homage by prostration to homeless gems ... and thereby achieve celestial and human excellence, and in the end attain the excellence of *nibbāna*.” Worldly riches must bow to the renunciation of wealth in hopes of a fortuitous future.

Buddhaputra describes this as a political reality in *Pūjāvaliya*, as he ends his first chapter with a story of an ancient Anuradhapura king symbolically donating his entire kingdom to the Sangha. Buddhaputra then explains he wrote *Pūjāvaliya* in part to convince Parakramabāhu, already an expert Buddhist who wrote a Sinhala gloss of Buddhaghosa’s *Visuddhimagga*, to abdicate the throne and fully pursue enlightenment. Buddhaputra then begins his second chapter by outlining the “worldly benefits” (*lōvāḍa*) of *Pūjāvaliya*, first among which is the edification of kings, who have little chance to hear about the Buddha as they are “intoxicated by luxury (*sampatīn mat va*)” (17). Yet the benefits of

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<sup>16</sup> Quotations in this paragraph are taken from Bodhi 683-690.

*Pūjāvaliya* extend far beyond, to everyone from cloistered queens to illiterate peasants, as well as the officials doing much of the governing, including:

Illustrious leaders like sub-kings (*yuva raja*), chief ministers and others, so that they will, as virtuous people, whenever free, mindfully read these various discourses on the Buddha's virtues and exceptionally learn ruling law (*rājā nīti*), natural law (*loka nīti*), moral law (*dharma nīti*), world customs (*loka vyavahāra*), *dharma* customs, local customs, and about this world and the next, and will therefore serve the welfare of kings and the people, avoid the wrong path, fulfill good for the self (*ātmārtha*) and good for others (*parārtha*) and ultimately make their happiness into a treasure for the next world. (18)

Buddhaputra thus argues that far more than pathways to liberation can be learned from the Buddha. The knowledge he expects of those in power is expansive, covering all processes of the world, human and otherwise, with an ethic that is not merely self-serving. Stories of the Buddha therefore teach not only ultimate soteriological ends but also practical political lessons, especially that there is worth and meaning (*ārtha*) beyond (*para*) oneself (*ātma*). The story of Viśāla is one way that Buddhaputra illustrates this point, showing how a sole focus on expanding crowns leads to ill fates.

The coronavirus pandemic has also taught this lesson. Countries distracted by political power grabs or promises of uninterrupted economic prosperity mounted the least effective mitigation responses. Countries that were singularly focused on a mitigation plan, clearly communicated it, and remained devoted to masking and testing—in other words, countries that faced the truth—have controlled the virus best (Woodward). The United States was among the most extreme examples of

failure, with a presidential administration founded on falsehoods and deregulation that effectively deregulated the virus, too. The executive branch quickly traded its halting response for indifferent inaction or outright subversion of medical officials and state leaders. Meanwhile, the start of the pandemic's third wave in the U.S. coincided with the campaign leading into the November 2020 election. After the incumbent administration lost, it further refused to acknowledge reality, ever grasping at illusory crowns. When the ex-president's extremist followers stormed the United States Capitol in a confused coup attempt on January 6, 2021, the country glimpsed a *yakṣa*-like specter of an even larger scale of socio-political collapse than its marginal communities had already been suffering. Distraction from truth thus seeds more disaster.

Sri Lanka presented a very different case at the beginning of the pandemic. The Rajapaksa administration initially appeared to be more competent populists compared to America, as President Gotabaya Rājapaksa and his brother, Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa, made a daunting decision to shut off the tourist-friendly island from all incoming air travel, keeping the airports closed through 2020, certainly a “non-economizable” plan. Initial success, however, gave way to distraction, and the virus returned. The Rajapaksas handed mitigation management to the army instead of experts, reduced health spending, and directed their attention to a power grab instead of the pandemic (Gunasekara). Their controversial “Constitutional Amendment 20A” was passed, expanding powers of the executive presidency curbed by the previous opposition coalition. As the populace turned to gaze at the Rajapaksas bejeweling themselves and with the media busy opining on 20A, the coronavirus silently blew back through the public sphere. By the time the amendment passed on October 22, 2020, it was clear that two outbreaks in Colombo suburbs were super-spreaders, and unchecked community transmission was underway (“Raging New Wave”). The lack of virologists on government task forces meant delayed realization that this new outbreak was of

the more contagious coronavirus mutations formed in 2020, one appropriately named “20A” (Janapriya). Sri Lanka’s Covid death toll began to climb; an enviable number of only a dozen deaths from mid-March through mid-October rose to over a hundred before November’s end. In turn, other sociopolitical sectors stumbled: on November 29, there was a riot in the Mahara prison, already overcrowded to thrice its capacity, which began with the prisoners demanding coronavirus tests. Eleven prisoners were shot and killed by guards in the ensuing melee, and nine bodies tested positive posthumously (Ranasinghe). The peril that comes with grasping at crowns instead of truth becomes directly measurable in human lives.

### Conclusion

Every civilization has a bit of Vesāli in it, susceptible to similar perils. The global order is likely to emerge from the coronavirus intact, without having indicated true commitment to the reforms needed to stave off future environmental and sociopolitical collapse. The story of Vesāli therefore needs ever more retellings. In Sri Lanka, it may even hold potential as a powerful piece of political rhetoric. When Mahinda Rājapaksa requested every temple on the island recite the *Ratana Sutta* to combat the second outbreak, it took only a week to coordinate (“Request to Recite”; Tharaka). In another ten days’ time, a National Pirith Chanting ceremony began, with the *Ratana Sutta* and other *paritta* texts recited for three weeks by 100 monks in Independence Square, sponsored by corporate donors and supported by the army and police (“L.O.L.C. Group”). With the power of Buddhist discourse in the country, these are moments when resident monks or lay patrons of some of these temples might respond with a reminder of the story behind the *Ratana Sutta*, its skepticism of profligate political power, and its abiding ethic of truth.

Opinions of some Sri Lankan Buddhists about the coronavirus show awareness that the pandemic is only a product of larger problems with the sociopolitical order. Monks and nuns have suggested in interviews that the virus demonstrates imbalances in the environment, caused by too much greed and too little compassion. Addressing this requires more awareness and self-control, as a senior monk from Kandy put it: “Today people’s bodies are completely unrestrained: they are like a factory, going day and night. Searching for wealth, powerful countries like America, China and India are burning, working without regard, firing away like a mill. . . There’s no restraint is there?” (Schonthal and Jayatilake 276). Resisting the “huge,” such calls for restraint are calls for no-growth, to pause and reflect on more honest ways of living.

It comes down to fruits. As Latour observes: “Injustice is not just about the redistribution of the fruits of progress, but about the very manner in which the planet is *made fruitful*” (“What Protective Measures” 3). To make the world fruitful while also preventing the fruits of our actions from harming us, wealth can no longer be a virtue unto itself. The burgeoning gardens of Vesāli were delightful, but they only intoxicated elites who lived beside bees that Vijēvikrama describes as “Lines of pollen-drunk ones who gulp and draw it out until empty” (v.66). The antidote to such a lack of restraint is to become a different sort of bee, satisfied by another type of pollen, as Vijēvikrama suggests at the start of *Licchavi Kathāva*:

The Buddha's lotus mouth  
preached the beautiful pollen unerrantly.  
By reception, the mind is satisfied.  
Worship the Dhamma lovingly, bee. (v.2)

A *religious* treatment of truth is the type of clear-eyed attention to detail needed from political leaders who do not shy from difficult facts (Latour *Facing Gaia* 152-183). There can still be prosperity, but neither profit nor

power can be sole goals. Buddhaghosa's commentary concludes with the Buddha explaining that the rain he brought to Vesāli, and the illustrious offering received in return, was not due to his Buddha power: "Rather, it was produced by the power of a slight act of past generosity" (Bodhi 711). Offerings in the name of truth go a long way, while denial or ignorance only exacerbate suffering, viscerally felt in the coronavirus pandemic. I therefore leave Vijēvikrama with the final word of warning, describing similar symptoms among those dying in a city gone astray like ours:

The disease having amassed, fever struck and fatigue set in.  
Aches banged as if fire sparks had been sprinkled.  
Everywhere not even a dewdrop rained down.  
People perished and the limitless city was ignorant. (v.81)

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