

In thinking about what to contribute to this conference, to which I am very grateful to have been invited, I faced something of a quandary, in that I am not a philosopher. I quickly learned that in my first and only college philosophy class when I found myself stumped by some argument in the *Euthyphro*. The long and short of it is, that in studying the *Mahābhārata*, I have not turned much to the *Śāntiparvan*'s 3rd and most philosophical anthology, the *Mokṣadharmaparvan*. Recently, while writing two books on *dharma*, the only two units I have worked on are a portion (12.181) of the *Bhṛgubharadvāja Saṃvāda* (12.175-85) that presents its two interlocutors in a taut exchange about *varṇa*—in which *varṇa*'s origins, and those of *svadharmā*, seem to have been woven into a reminiscence of the cosmogony in *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 1.4.11-14; and the cosmogony at 12.224.11-48 from the beginning of the *Śukānupraśna* (12.224-47), for its much discussed parallels with the *Manusmṛti*'s cosmogony. Otherwise, before taking up my project on *dharma*, the only two units that I had worked on in depth are the Śuka story—the first half of which is called the *Śukotpatti* (“Origin of Śuka”; 12.310-15) and the remainder most generally referred to as the *Śukābhīpatanam* (“The Flying about of Śuka”; 316-20), and the *Nārāyaṇīya* (12.321-39). These are not very illustrative texts with which to talk about philosophy in the *Śāntiparvan*, though for different reasons. The Śuka story is basically a narrative about Śuka's attainment of *mokṣa* that rounds off two earlier, more philosophical dialogues between Vyāsa and Śuka, the author's firstborn son—the first one in the just-mentioned *Śukānupraśna*; and the second in the *adhyāya* just before the *Śukotpatti* called the *Śukanuśāsanam*¹ The *Nārāyaṇīya*, on the other hand, is crammed with philosophical terms and ideas, but seems anomalous and to most interpreters axiomatically “late” because of its subordination of all these ideas to Pāñcarātra and other schemata of *bhakti*.

Nonetheless, in several of my writings, I have tried to move along some questions about these two units in relation to the one that follows them and ends the *Mokṣadharmaparvan*: the *Uñcavṛtīyupākhyāna* (12.340-53). In fact, I could suggest, in retrospect, that I have built up a cumulative argument beginning with my last book, and then in four articles, that is now waiting to be made. I must thus review this argument as it has taken shape through these five publications.

A. Shaping the Argument to Date

First, in my 2001 book, *Rethinking the Mahābhārata*, I urged that further research was necessary before we settle on the opinion that the *Nārāyaṇīya* is axiomatically late (2001, 28-29). And shortly before that, I summarized the *Uñcavṛtīyupākhyāna* to make the point that the epic's recurrent interest in Brahmins devoted to the “way of gleaning” (*uñcavṛtī*) could suggest that it “was written by ‘out of sorts’ Brahmins” (2001, 19). “Consider,” I went on, this richly textured story that is set emphatically (12.340-53) at the end of the *Śāntiparvan*, where it follows the *Nārāyaṇīya* and concludes Bhīṣma's teachings on emancipation (the *Mokṣadharmaparvan*). Padmanābha, a snake king, returns home to the Naimiṣa Forest (343.2) after a fortnight of pulling Sūrya's ... one-wheeled chariot (350.1). Awaiting him is a Brahman guest, Dharmāraṇya, who has been prompted to make this visit by a Brahman guest he had of his own, and with whom he had shared doubts about the many doors to heaven (342.9; 16)—death in battle and the *uñcha* vow cited jointly among them (13). Dharmāraṇya wants to know Padmanābha's “highest dharma.” But first he asks what “highest wonder” (350.7) the snake has seen on his solar travels. The greatest “wonder of wonders” (8), says the snake, was seeing a

¹ Belvalkar 1954-1966, cliii; cf. 1746-47 for its varied titles.

refulgent being attain liberation by entering the “solar disc” (*ravimaṇḍalam*) in a moment (*kṣaṇena*; 13), and learning from Sūrya that this was a perfected Muni who had “gone to heaven vowed to the way of gleaning” (*uñchavṛttivrate siddho munir eṣa divaṃgataḥ*; 253.1cd). Dharmāraṇya says this response answers his other question as well: he now knows his highest dharma will be to take up gleaning (352.9–10). Bhīṣma then rounds off his teachings on mokṣa by telling Yudhiṣṭhira that this story has answered *his* initial question about the “best duty of those in the (four) life-stages” (*dharmamāśramaṇām śreṣṭham*; 340.1). The “highest dharma,” says Bhīṣma, is indeed gleaning, and presumably he means by this that it is exemplary for householders, Brahmans or otherwise, who seek emancipation (353.8–9).

Next, in an article on the *Nārāyaṇīya* (published in 2006, but researched in 2003), I agreed with Reinhold Grünendahl (1997), Thomas Oberlies (1997), and John Brockington (1998) on the general point that, in the so-called Part B of the *Nārāyaṇīya*, the Critical Edition editor of the *Śāntiparvan*, Shripad Krishna Belvalkar (1954-66), had erred in basing himself mostly on Malayālam manuscripts to remove what I called three dips to the outer frame dialogue between Śaunaka and Ugraśravas. Based on obvious changes made in the Malayālam manuscripts, Belvalkar had reverted the conversation between Śaunaka and Ugraśravas to an inner frame dialogue between Janamajeya and Vaiśaṃpāyana, which, I argued, undercut the way the three dips in Part B made cogent and indeed profound reference to the so-called Part A of the *Nārāyaṇīya*, which tells of Nārada’s journey to and back from Śvetadvīpa (“White Island”) where he got *darśana* of Nārāyaṇa. In summing up, I wrote,

Finally, it was in thinking that everything could be “reverted” to one level that Belvalkar made his big mistake—a simplifying misconstrual apparently based on M and still given credence “on principle” by Grünendahl. One can only wonder that critics have never asked *why* a decision to revert to the outer frame would have been made here—at a point near the end of the *Mokṣadharmā*, which treats ultimate questions. In fact, the *Mokṣadharmā*’s last three units give shape to the authors’ parting overview of at least the *Śāntiparvan*. The final section is an allegorical story that takes place *in* the Naimiṣa Forest (which we thus do not exactly leave) about the many doors to heaven and the best duty of the four life stages: these being connecting themes with the two sections that precede it—the Śuka story and the *Nārāyaṇīya*, both of which take us back to the outermost frame (Hiltebeitel 2006, 251-52).

(by outermost frame, I mean the story that Vyāsa imparts the *Mahābhārata* first to Śuka, Vaiśaṃpāyana, and three other disciples As I pointed out further (252 n. 790, the *Nārāyaṇīya* refers back to the Śuka story. When Vyāsa tells about his prior birth from Nārāyaṇa as Apāntaratamas, he recalls Nārāyaṇa’s prediction that he “will not gain release from affection. And your son, free from affection, will be a supreme soul by the grace of Maheśvara” (12.337.45c-46d). Śiva’s intervention in the Śuka story occurs toward its end (at 12.320.17-36), just before the *Nārāyaṇīya* (see Hiltebeitel 2001a, 310-312).

Subsequently, three roughly contemporaneous articles then tugged further at questions raised by the suggestive placement of the three final units of the *Mokṣadharmaparvan*. First, in a study of the *Mahābhārata*’s *upākhyānas* (Hiltebeitel 2005a), I discussed the placement of the *Uñcavṛtṭyupākhyāna* in relation to other *upākhyānas*, noting that ten *upākhyānas* “are dispersed through Bhīṣma’s multi-genre instructions in the three anthologies” of the *Śāntiparvan*, and that “Bhīṣma never recites two in a row”:²

² For a looser list of thirty *upākhyānas* (including three in Appendices) in the *Śāntiparvan* anthologies (I list fourteen), see Belvalkar 1954-66, clxiii. His way of listing, with double entries in some cases where I have single headings, and with a *Gomāyusārdūlopākhyāna* (12.112) before *Uṣṭragrīvopākhyāna* (12. 113), challenges my point that “Bhīṣma never recites two in a row.”

Yet there is a striking pattern. Four of these *upākhyānas* confront the Dharma King Yudhiṣṭhira with “puzzle pieces” about dharma in which lead characters are either his own father, the god Dharma, in disguise, or figures who bear the word *dharman* /*dharma* in their names. Moreover, one such tale occurs as the last *upākhyāna* in each anthology. Thus Dharma himself appears disguised in the *Sumitra-Upākhyāna* or *Ṛṣabha Gītā* near the end of the *Rājadharmā*; a magnificent crane bears the name Rājadharmā in “The Story of the Ungrateful Brahman” (*Kṛtaghna-Upākhyāna*) that ends the *Āpaddharma*; and . . . the *Mokṣadharmā* . . . ends with the story of a questioning Brahman named Dharmāraṇya, “Forest of Dharma” . . . [in the *Uñchavṛtti-Upākhyāna*]... [S]ince Book 3 ends with the “Firesticks Subtale” in which Dharma appears disguised as a crane and a puzzle-posing Yakṣa, it would appear that one strain of the epic’s *upākhyānas* carries a major subcurrent through such puzzle pieces, especially in that they frequently punctuate the ends of major units (2005a, 487).

Indeed, this would include a similar puzzle piece about a disguised Dharma at the end of Book 14, the very last *upākhyāna* in the *Mahābhārata* called the *Nakulopākhyāna* (2005a, 491-92; 2005b, 260 n. 74). But within the four anthologies themselves, the transition from the *Mokṣadharmaparvan* to the *Dharmadānaparvan* of Book 13 marks the only point where Bhīṣma offers a concentrated stretch of *upākhyānas*, with nine occurring from 12.340 to 13.51 (really ten, if we begin at 12.335), which I attribute not only to what Jim Fitzgerald calls “a progressive loosening of editorial integration” (2004, 147-48, cited Hiltebeitel 2005a, 488) but a relaxing of the characters now that Bhīṣma has satisfied Yudhiṣṭhira’s philosophical questions and everyone can look forward to his settling in as a generous *dānadharmic* king (Hiltebeitel 2005a, 468-69, 474, 488-90).

Second, in a review of Fitzgerald’s 2004 translation of the *Rājadharmaparvan*, I found that I could not endorse Fitzgerald’s treatment of such “progressive loosening of editorial integration” as something that would strung out the composition of the four anthologies over centuries, with each one reflecting new interests of different groups of Brahmins. Here, I mentioned recent studies by John Brockington (2000) and Adam Bowles (2004, now 2007) that might shed some light on this question (Hiltebeitel 2005b, 259-61). To resummmary the former, in assessing “how far” the *Mokṣadharmā* “is just a random collection and how far its growth conforms to a definite purpose or reveals a clear structure” (2000, 72), Brockington mentions Robert C. Zaehner’s view that “[t]he scheme of the twelfth book . . . resembles” the *Bhagavad Gītā* in that the *Mokṣadharmā* becomes “increasingly theistic” (Zaehner 1963, 302). But Brockington cautions: “In so far as [Zaehner] regards the *Nārāyaṇīya* as its climax, such a view might possibly be justified, but in reality the final passage of the *Mokṣadharmā* is the *Uñcha-vṛtty-upākhyāna*” (Brockington 2000, 72). Considering the *Nārāyaṇīya* to be late (74, 78, 80) and weighing the more uncertain dating of *Uñchavṛttypākhyāna*, Brockington decides that the latter “cannot easily be explained as a mere afterthought or appendix” and that it “constitutes perhaps the strongest argument against a definite structure to the *Mokṣa-dharma*” (82). Here, after repeating my point about puzzle pieces structuring major units by appearing at their ends, and at the transition from the *Mokṣadharmā* to the *Dānadharmā* in particular, I wrote, “I believe there is some merit to Zaehner’s attempt to trace a current of theism. But it would not be one measured through any of the text’s sub-units or its historical development, and for that matter it would be not so much an increasing current (it barely trickles through the *Āpaddharma*) as one that runs through Bhīṣma’s entire discourse, with the deity always present and listening. This current reaches its full strength in the *Dānadharmaparvan* when Yudhiṣṭhira finally asks Bhīṣma to describe this long-silent “*Nārāyaṇa*” (13.126.5-6), and, after Bhīṣma obliges with a run of lauds and mostly theistic narratives, Yudhiṣṭhira finally addresses Kṛṣṇa himself (13.144-46) before Bhīṣma finishes” (Hiltebeitel 2005b, 260). As to Bowles, he brings up a point about the *Śāntiparvan*’s three anthologies that I pursue further in my last article to address this theme: “A

logic of action informs this structure, a logic that models the proper duties of the royal life. A king's desire for salvation must follow the proper completion of his royal duty, or, rather, it follows *from* the proper completion of his royal duty. The syntactic order of the *Śāntiparvan* text ... mirrors, therefore, the proper syntactic order of the royal life and the proper order of the king's concerns" (2007, 391).

B. Patrick Olivelle's Discussion of *Mokṣa* in *Manu* and the *Buddhacarita*

The last article that has shaped my present argument is my study of Aśvaghoṣa's *Buddhacarita* (Hiltebeitel 2006b), which brings us to what I announced for this paper in my abstract. As Patrick Olivelle observes in his Introduction to the *Buddhacarita*, Aśvaghoṣa uses the term *mokṣa* at *Buddhacarita* 9.65-66³ "in the technical meaning given to it by Manu, namely, renunciatory asceticism of a wandering mendicant, . . . rather than simply liberation from the cycle of rebirth" (2008, xxi-xxii). Olivelle's full discussion of this passage is of course relevant. He is making a "case . . . that Aśvaghoṣa knew Manu's work on dharma" (xix). Olivelle dates Aśvaghoṣa to the second century CE on the grounds that he would probably be citing a first-century *Manu*, and acknowledges E. F. Johnston's recognition that Aśvaghoṣa also "knew the 'Rāmāyaṇa' and presents the Buddha as the new Rāma" (2008, xxii). But, as we shall see, he is silent here on Aśvaghoṣa's relation to the *Mahābhārata*.

Olivelle gets to *Buddhacarita* 9.65-66 having begun a discussion of Aśvaghoṣa's treatment of what he calls "the theology of debt,"⁴ and introduces 9.65-66 by noting that "[t]hese words are put into the mouth of the counselor of the Buddha's father"—a counselor or *mantrin* who, we may add, is a Brahmin like the king's chaplain or *purohita* with whom the counselor has gone to find prince Siddhārtha in the forest. In Olivelle's translation, the counselor says:

A man is released from his debts to his ancestors through offspring, to seers through studying the Vedas, and to the gods through sacrifices; a man is born with these three debts, whoever is released from these, for him alone, they say, is release (*yasyāsti mokṣaḥ kila tasya mokṣaḥ*). Release is open to one, experts say, who strives following the sequence of rules (*ity evaṃ etena vidhikrameṇa/ mokṣam sayatnasya vadanti taj jñāḥ*); those who desire release violating that sequence (*vikrameṇa mumukṣavaḥ*), only get fatigued though they expend much effort. (Olivelle 2008, xx-xxi; 266-67; 457)

Olivelle considers *Manu* to have been the first to use "this theology of debt to defend his position that the orders of life (*āśramas*) are to be followed sequentially as an individual grows old and that renunciation is limited to old age," though, as he observes, the theology of debt is also "alluded to in the '*Mahābhārata*'" (xxi). Olivelle's position is that *Manu* would be earlier than the *Mahābhārata*, or at least than this usage in the *Mahābhārata*. But, more important on this specific point, he says that *Manu* would have been the first to use "the theology of debts (*ṛṇā*) to provide theological grounding to his view," which was in opposition to that of Baudhāyana, who used the theology of debt "as an argument against the *āśrama* system as a whole and against celibate asceticism" (2008, liii n. 1, citing Olivelle 1993, 86-91). On the passage in question, then, Olivelle says that Aśvaghoṣa's counselor "echoes Manu" on the point "[t]hat freedom from debt is a precondition for undertaking the life of freedom (mendicancy)." And Olivelle buttresses this point with the observation that "these two verses of Aśvaghoṣa parallel" two verses in *Manu*'s sixth chapter on the *āśramas*, which read:

Only after he has paid his three debts, should a man set his mind on release (*mano mokṣe niveśayet*); if he devotes himself to release without paying them (*anapākṛtya mokṣam tu*),

³ The abstract mistakenly cites the passage that Olivelle is citing in *Manu* as 5.17, which also mentions *mokṣa*.

⁴ On which he cites Olivelle 1993, 46-53 (his *The Āśrama System: The History and Hermeneutics of a Religious Institution*).

he will proceed downward. Only after he has studied the Vedas according to rule, fathered sons in keeping with the Law, and offered sacrifices according to his ability, should a man set his mind on release (*mokṣe niveśayet*). (*Manu* 6.35-36; Olivelle 2008, xxi; 2005, 600).⁵

It is here that Olivelle makes the observation I cited in my abstract, which I now give a little more fully:

Note also Aśvaghoṣa's use of the term *mokṣa* (release, liberation) in the technical meaning given to it by Manu, namely, renunciatory asceticism of a wandering mendicant (see Olivelle 2005, 243), rather than simply liberation from the cycle of rebirth. It appears likely that both in the theology and in the vocabulary Aśvaghoṣa is here following Manu's text" (2008, xxi-xxii).

When Olivelle suggests here that readers now "see Olivelle 2005, 243," one might be reminded of how Yudhiṣṭhira asks Bhiṣma a question, for instance, "What, O Grandfather, did Olivelle say in 2005 on page 243," only to be referred to what Olivelle said earlier at much greater length about "the same question," in this case in a 1982 article titled "Contributions to the Semantic History of *saṃnyāsa*." Fortunately, the 2005 distillation is almost sufficient for our present concerns. It occurs in a note to *Manu* 1.114ab, a line in *Manu*'s table of contents or "synopsis." This line reads: *strīdharmayogaṃ tāpasyaṃ mokṣaṃ saṃnyāsameva ca*; and Olivelle translates it as follows, while inserting the chapter-and-verse numbers where Manu addresses these topics: "Law pertaining to women [5.111-145]. Hermit's life [6.1-32]. Renunciation* [6.33-85]. Retirement* [6.87-96]. (2006, 92, 401). The asterisks after "Renunciation" and "Retirement" direct us to the footnote in question, which begins as follows:

Renunciation (*mokṣa*), *Retirement* (*saṃnyāsa*): the Sanskrit term *mokṣa* literally means liberation. Manu, however, attaches a technical meaning to the term, using it as a synonym of renunciation and the fourth order of life dedicated exclusively to the search after personal liberation. The term has the same meaning when used in the common compound *mokṣadharmā*, which is a section of the *Mahābhārata* and a distinct topic in medieval legal digests (*nibandha*). Manu makes a clear distinction between this renunciatory asceticism and the life of a vedic retiree, which he designates as *saṃnyāsa* (2005, 243).

Olivelle goes on to say that other translators "ignore the technical use of the two terms here," and references his aforementioned 1982 article for "a more detailed study." That article, at the bottom of this stack of references, is concerned primarily with *saṃnyāsa*. In it, Olivelle already touches on *Manu* 1.114's differentiation of *mokṣa* as "renunciation" from *saṃnyāsa*, or more specifically "the life-style of the *vedasaṃnyāsika* that *Manu* calls *saṃnyāsa*," which involves the abandonment of ritual activity incumbent on a householder, at 6.86-96 (1982, 270-71). More to our purpose, however, Olivelle shows that in contrast to *Manu*'s carving out of this technical "vedic retiree" usage to insist on doing the four *āśramas* in sequence, the *Mahābhārata* is one of just a few texts to introduce what Olivelle calls "the classical meaning" of *saṃnyāsa*, in which "*Saṃnyāsin* is commonly used as a synonym of such terms as *parivrājaka*, *pravrajita*, *śramaṇa*, *bhikṣu*, and *yati*" (265). Moreover, he shows that the *Bhagavad Gītā* introduces the further twist that what is renounced with *saṃnyāsa* is not just karma (ritual or otherwise), but the attachment (*saṅga*) to karma and its fruits (*karmaphala*) (269-70, 272).

I believe Olivelle raises intriguing possibilities in positioning the *Mahābhārata* among the earliest texts to have innovated in introducing the generalized classical usage of *saṃnyāsa*.

⁵ Cf. Olivelle 2005, 150, translating the three usages of *mokṣa* in this passage by "renunciation" instead of "release," and with reference to his note to *Manu* 1.114, on which see below.

But what is ignored in this particular discussion⁶ is that the *Mahābhārata* also airs the preclassical system, particularly doing so in the Śuka story, which Olivelle, eleven years later, calls “the most straightforward presentation of the original [i.e., pre-classical *āśrama*] system” (1993, 154). If the Śuka story presents the pre-classical system in conjunction with questions pro and con about the classical system, this does not encourage the view that the *Mahābhārata*’s innovative treatment of the classical system would itself, in isolation, be late, as Olivelle, at least as of 1982, proposes.⁷ More likely, I believe, it just takes a while for the more strictly legal texts to catch up with the *Mahābhārata*. Curiously, another text to introduce the classical meaning, one of the earlier Saṃnyāsa Upaniṣads called the *Āśrama Upaniṣad*, recommends the life of the gleaner (*uñchavṛtti*) under the name *ghorasamnyāsika* or *ghorasamnyāsin* (271, 273).

Now, when I wrote the abstract for this paper, I had not yet realized that, if I did my homework, I would find Olivelle relating *Manu*’s technical usage of *mokṣa* “as a synonym of renunciation and the fourth order of life dedicated exclusively to the search after personal liberation” directly to the *Mahābhārata*’s usage of *mokṣadharmā* in the *Mokṣadharmaparvan*. As Olivelle’s comment seems to reflect, the term *mokṣadharmā* is not found in either the *Rāmāyaṇa* or *Manu*, and the *Mahābhārata* seems to have coined it. As I tried to demonstrate in my own study of the *Buddhacarita*, Aśvaghōṣa relates his usages of *mokṣadharmā*, and thus implicitly *mokṣa*, not to the *Rāmāyaṇa* but to the *Mahābhārata*, and particularly so in the section of the *Buddhacarita* that Olivelle cites, where King Śuddhodhana’s counselor and purohita are the first to speak of *mokṣadharmā* in terms that the Buddha-to-be will reject, and not long before they try the further argument about *mokṣa* and the three debts (9.65-66). Here is Olivelle’s translation the verse with this usage at *Buddhacarita* 9.19:

Kings, even while remaining householders
 cradled in the lap of royal fortune
 crowns upon their heads,
 pearl strings on shoulders,
 arms bound with bracelets,
 have won the dharma of release (*narendrain . . . prāpto gr̥hasthair api mokṣadharmāḥ*)
 (Olivelle 2008, 20-51).

As I argued, the bodhisattva’s exchange with the two counselors marks a point where Aśvaghōṣa’s critical reading of the two Sanskrit epics turns “from a *Rāmāyaṇa* reading to a *Mahābhārata* reading,” in which the king’s counselor and purohita get to double not only for Rāma’s two Brahman visitors in the forest but for the postwar comfortors of Yudhiṣṭhira: the first explicitly, the second only implicitly” (Hiltebeitel 2006b, 269)—but with our being able to be quite certain about this second implication since the conversation is shaped around the *Mahābhārata*’s concept of *mokṣadharmā* (*Buddhacarita* 9.19). In being the first to mention this term, the counselor prompts the Bodhisattva’s doubt that release can be won in the lap of royal luxury, whereupon the Bodhisattva states his firm resolve not to seek it there himself whether it is possible are not (see Hiltebeitel 2006b, 271-72). My argument is that Aśvaghōṣa, in his “critical reading” of both epics, uses the term *mokṣadharmā* to talk about *nirvāṇa*, but in a way that is meant to address Brahmanical usage of the term *mokṣadharmā* in the *Mahābhārata* as coming up short, from a Buddhist perspective, on the very question at hand: the idea that *mokṣa* (i.e., *nirvāṇa*) would be formulated in relation to the renunciatory asceticism of a wandering mendicant, which is what Yudhiṣṭhira wants to do at the beginning of the

⁶ Cf. in contrast Olivelle 1993, 104, 153-55.

⁷ Olivelle dates the *Mbh* later than the *Rām* (1982, 267-68, 272 and n. 47, 273), and, on the “classical meaning” as found “especially the *Śāntiparvan* and the *Anugītā*, concludes, “We would not be far wrong in placing this final semantic development of S[amnyāsa] around the 3rd-4th century A.D.” (274).

Śāntiparvan and gives up on doing once Bhīṣma has turned his attention from *mokṣadharmā* to *dānadharma*, by the *Śāntiparvan*'s end.

Although there are a few usages of *mokṣadharmā* outside the *Mokṣadharmaparvan*, I think that Aśvaghōṣa, writing in the first or second century CE, would be referring to the *Mokṣadharmaparvan*, where the weight and dramatic centrality of the *Mahābhārata*'s teachings on the topic certainly apply. This is also the view of Tsyūsho Byodo [1930] 1969 and Muneo Tokunaga (2005). But I would propose additionally, although it cannot be proven because Aśvaghōṣa makes no reference to any specific *Mokṣadharmaparvan* units, that it would be rather unsuccessful to argue that the *Mokṣadharmaparvan*'s last three units would not have been included in the first or second century text that Aśvaghōṣa was critiquing, because they are precisely the units where his argument most directly applies. Indeed, given that premise, it would further be unpromising to argue that the *Nārāyaṇīya* would have been so much later than the other two units that it could have been inserted between them, after Aśvaghōṣa, as is usually thought in Gupta times. This is because the *Nārāyaṇīya* is the only one of the three consecutive units that gives prominent and frequent use to the compound *mokṣadharmā*. Yet intriguingly, the other two frame this *Nārāyaṇīya* topic by using the term *mokṣadharmā* each only once—in the Śuka story only in its very last verse, where Yudhiṣṭhira hears,

Whoever, devoted to tranquility, would recall this meritorious history that pertains to matters of *mokṣadharmā*, he attains the supreme way.⁸

and, in the *Uñcavṛtṭyupākhyāna*, only in its very first verse, where Yudhiṣṭhira asks,

Now, grandfather, that you have addressed the auspicious *dharmas* that have to do with *mokṣadharmā*, you can tell me, lord, about the best *dharma* for those who pursue the *āśramas*.⁹

As Belvalkar puts it in describing the opening *adhyāya* 340 of the *Uñcavṛtṭyupākhyāna*:

Yudhiṣṭhira says to Bhīṣma that, though he has listened to his discourses on the *Mokṣadharmā*, he still desires to hear from him the highest *Dharma* which is to be practised by persons performing the duties of the four *āśramas*. Thereupon Bhīṣma tells him there are many ways of practising the highest *Dharma*. By way of illustrating this statement, he repeats to Yudhiṣṭhira the following story which was formerly narrated by Nārada to Indra. (1954-66, ccxxx)

In other words, Yudhiṣṭhira has turned a corner. He is beginning to transition Bhīṣma away from *mokṣadharmā*, about which he has more or less heard enough, to the topic of the *āśramas*, which implies his remaining in the householder stage as a royal householder, the very thing that king Śuddhodana's counselor had held up for the Bodhisattva to consider. And indeed, the *Uñcavṛtṭyupākhyāna* will tell about a householder reaching the highest goal, albeit not as a king but a gleaner and without further mentioning *mokṣa*. Yudhiṣṭhira has turned this corner precisely in hearing the *Nārāyaṇīya*.

C. The Last Three Units of the *Mokṣadharmaparvan*

Now in the remainder of this paper, I would like to attempt two things. I will present a case that the epic poets bring Yudhiṣṭhira to this turning of the corner by an artful curvature of the three culminating units of the *Mokṣadharmaparvan* to point him in the direction of the teachings that follow it. This will involve taking note of some of the anomalies of each unit. Then I will close with one more question that Yudhiṣṭhira might have asked but didn't: "Oh Grandfather, what is the real meaning you attach to this term, *mokṣadharmā*?"

⁸12.320.41: *itihāsam imam puṇyam mokṣadharmārthasaṃhitam/ dhārayed yaḥ śamaṃparaḥ sa gacchet paramāṃ gatim.*

⁹ 12.340.1: *dharmāḥ pitāmahenoktā mokṣadharmāśritāḥ śubhāḥ/ dharmam āśramināṃ śreṣṭhaṃ vaktum arhati me bhavān.*

Regarding the three units, it is best to take them up in sequence.

When Yudhiṣṭhira asks to know more about Śuka, he is asking about the firstborn son of his other grandfather, indeed his real grandfather genetically, Vyāsa. Śuka would be his father Pāṇḍu's eldest brother.¹⁰ The Śuka story is obviously a family matter, and comes at a point where Yudhiṣṭhira is marking a turn toward adjusting to his familial and dynastic responsibilities, which involve ruling the Kuru kingdom. I am not sure whether being born from the shedding of Vyāsa's sperm into his churning firesticks makes Śuka one of Yudhiṣṭhira's genetic uncles, like Dhṛtarāṣṭra and Vidura, but I suppose it would, though it probably would not have made Śuka eligible for the Kuru throne like, say, that other elder brother Karṇa, since unlike Karṇa's mother, the firesticks never became a queen. Now, as Olivelle mentions, the Śuka story is the *Mahābhārata*'s "most straightforward presentation of the original [pre-classical *āśrama*] system" (1993, 154). This is because it confirms that the twenty-five-year-old (12.309.62b) Śuka can skip the full sequence of the four *āśramas* and seek release directly from the first, i.e., from *brahmacarya*, without marrying, and above all, without waiting for the fourth. The Śuka story that Bhīṣma tells is about how Śuka obtained *mokṣa*, which most scholars, and perhaps Yudhiṣṭhira, take to be Śuka's exit from the world of *saṃsāra*.¹¹ I say this might be Yudhiṣṭhira's impression, since the Pāṇḍavas are told in Book 3 to visit a *tīrtha* named Vyāsasthalī where Vyāsa was consumed with grief over his son, presumably Śuka, and was resolved to give up the body until he was "made to get up again by the gods."¹² If Vyāsa mourns Śuka at this point in Book 3, it gives us the anomaly that Vyāsa would have finished the *Mahābhārata* before most of it had happened, since Śuka, one of Vyāsa's five original disciples to receive Vyāsa's creation, would have to have done so before this point (see Hildebeitel 2001, 282-85, 316-17). But for present purposes, the more interesting anomaly is this: Whether Yudhiṣṭhira knows it or not, we know that Śuka has not left the world of *saṃsāra*, since three generations after Yudhiṣṭhira, he joins his father Vyāsa as an attendee at Janamejaya's snake sacrifice to hear the *Mahābhārata* told for the first time in the human world by Vaiśampāyana.¹³ Indeed Śuka's and Vyāsa's presences are included among the attendees who decide the fate of the snakes! Note that Vyāsa had instructed Śuka in the *Śukānupraśna* to observe nonviolence and noncruelty, *ahiṃsā* and *ānṛśaṃsya* (12.309.4). Moreover, Yudhiṣṭhira might pick up a hint of how Śuka be living on after obtaining *mokṣa* from what Bhīṣma tells Yudhiṣṭhira in the *Śukānupraśna*, just before he begins with the Śuka story proper:

Approach life's journey by [eating] the remains of gods and guests (*devatātithiśeṣeṇa yātrām prāṇasya saṃśraya*; 12.309.5cd).

Śuka's subsistence would be consonant with what Yudhiṣṭhira will learn in Book 13, in the *Umāmaheśvarasaṃvāda*, about Ṛṣis and Munis who practice varieties of *uñchavṛtti* under the heading of *Munidharma* or *Ṛsidharma*:

When there is no more smoke, when the pestle is set down, when there are no more coals, when the people have eaten their meal, when the handing around of vessels is over, when

¹⁰ For fuller discussion, see Hildebeitel 2001, 279-80. Yudhiṣṭhira's questions begin: "How did the just-souled Śuka of great tapas, Vyāsa's son, take birth and achieve the highest perfection? Tell me this, grandfather. Upon whom did Vyāsa, that treasure of asceticism, beget Śuka? We do not know his mother (*jananīm*) or that high-souled one's lofty birth. How as just a boy did his mind attain such subtle knowledge as no one else in this world? I wish to hear this in detail (*vistareṇa*). . . . Tell me, Grandfather, of Śuka's glorious union with the self and consciousness, in the proper order" (310.1-5).

¹¹ See, typically, Sörensen [1904] 1963, 216: "Ç. Obtained liberation, Vyāsa lamented his death." Cf. Hildebeitel 2001, 282-84, 317.

¹² *Mbh* 3.81.81-82, which concludes: *kr̥to devaiś ca rājendra punar utthāpitas tadā*; cf. Hildebeitel 2001, 43, 282.

¹³ *Mbh* 1.48.7ab; see Hildebeitel 2001, 115 and n. 71. Indeed Śuka's and Vyāsa's presences are mentioned among the attendees when they decide the fate of the snakes! Note that Vyāsa had instructed Śuka in the *Śukānupraśna* to observe nonviolence and noncruelty, *ahiṃsā* and *ānṛśaṃsya* (12.309.4).

the time for asking alms has passed by, surely [it is then, still] longing for a guest, [that] one eats the food left over. Delighted by the *dharma* of truth, patient, he is yoked to the *Munidharma*.¹⁴

Śuka is evidently a “silent” Muni once he has come back into orbit from *mokṣa*. At least he does not say anything in the *Mahābhārata* while attending Janamejaya’s snake sacrifice with his father (Hiltebeitel 2001, 317 n. 128). And his birdlike nature would make him a good candidate for gleaning. In any case, he has attained *mokṣa*, to quote Olivelle once again, “in the technical meaning given to it by Manu, namely, renunciatory asceticism of a wandering mendicant, . . . rather than simply liberation from the cycle of rebirth.” Moreover, as we have noted, the last verse of his story mentions the term *mokṣadharmā* to open up that subject for its most sustained treatment in the *Nārāyaṇīya*.

Now, the *Nārāyaṇīya* is too complex a text, and contains too many plots and subplots, to be really summarized. With regard to Yudhiṣṭhira’s turning point, it occurs toward the end of the aforementioned Part A, and is clearly a moment of family bonding: having heard the White Island story, he and his brothers become devoted to Nārāyaṇa, with Kṛṣṇa also listening in and standing by.¹⁵ The next *adhyāya*, 12.327, which begins Part B, is then the *Nārāyaṇīya*’s showcase for the term *mokṣadharmā*, being the only *adhyāya* in the *Nārāyaṇīya* to mention the term, which it does three times there. The term *mokṣadharmā* does not occur again until Yudhiṣṭhira credits Bhīṣma with teaching him about it in the first verse of the *Uñchavṛtṭyupākhyāna*. And thereafter, Bhīṣma only mentions *mokṣadharmā* one more time in a stray line¹⁶ more than halfway through the *Dānadharmaparvan*. Yet it would be a mistake to think that the *Nārāyaṇīya* leaves the concept behind after *adhyāya* 327, because it is introduced there in conjunction with the somewhat overlapping term *nivṛtti-dharma*, which can be said to thread the purport of *mokṣadharmā* into further reaches of the *Nārāyaṇīya*. *Nivṛtti*, either in the compound *nivṛttidharma*, or with that meaning, has five usages along with the three of *mokṣadharmā* in *adhyāya* 327 (indeed, Greg Bailey [2010] shows in his statistical chart of usages of the root *vṛt* that *adhyāya* 327 is the greatest concentration point of that usage). There are six usages of *nivṛtti* in that sense before this in Part A (322.37a; 323.43a; 325.43x; 326.63ab and cd). And there are two after it in Part B (328.34c; 335.2a). More than this, in Part B, in the *Nārāyaṇīya*’s second dip to the outer frame (see Hiltebeitel 2006a, 239-43), the verb *ni-vṛt* is used twice to describe Nārada’s running “return” (12.331.16a, 20c) from seeing Nārāyaṇa on White Island to see Nara and Nārāyaṇa at their Badari *āśrama*. This is one of the anomalies that so intrigues Śaunaka that he asks his second leading question to Sauti about it. Clearly, as we could show with Śuka, it has to do with *returning* (*ni-vṛt*) “here” to this world.¹⁷

Now, once we correct Belvalkar’s attempt to revert the outer frame dialogue between Śaunaka and Ugraśravas to an inner frame one between Janamejaya and

¹⁴ 13.129.53-54: *vidhūme nyastamusale vyaṅgāre bhuktavajjane/ atītapātrasaṃcāre kāle vigatabhaikṣake// atithiṃ kāñkṣamāṇo vai śēṣānnakṛtabhojanaḥ/ satyadharmaratih kṣanto munidharmaṇa yujyat*. For a study of his verse and others evoking the same or similar practices, see Hiltebeitel in press.

¹⁵ 12.326.121: “Having heard this best of Narratives, O Janamejaya, King Dharma and all his brothers became devoted to Nārāyaṇa.” Cf. 3.187.50-53: a similar scene after listening to Mārkaṇḍeya. In both cases Draupadī is also there; on her presence during Bhīṣma’s battlefield oration, see Hiltebeitel 2005a, 490.

¹⁶ It occurs in a unit called *Śrāddha-Kalpa*, “Procedures for Ancestral Rites” (13.87-92), in an *adhyāya* where Bhīṣma distinguishes Brahmins who are unsuitable to hire for *śrāddhas* from those who are suitable, mentioning among the latter “Yatis conversant with *mokṣadharmā*” (*yatayo mokṣadharmajñā*; 3.90.25c).

¹⁷ See the repeated uses of *iha*, “here,” in this second dip to describe Nārada’s arrival at Badarī (331.21d; 38d; 51e). On the Śuka story, cf. Hiltebeitel 2001, 286-94, especially with reference to 12.314.33-36, where Vyāsa’s disciples, including Śuka, ask his favor that the Vedas should “abide here,” probably including the *Mahābhārata* as “this (*ayam*) Veda.”

Vaiśampāyana, *adhyāya* 12.327, at the beginning of Part B, is the chapter in which the *Nārāyaṇīya* makes its *first* dip to the outer frame. Basically, Śaunaka asks Ugraśravas (called Sauti) the first question that has come to mind from hearing the White Island story, and Sauti answers by telling him what Vaiśampāyana said when asked “the same” question by Janamejaya, which was to tell him what Vyāsa once told his five disciples, including Vaiśampāyana and Śuka (see Hildebeitel 2006a, 233-39). For present purposes, it must suffice to give the contextual flavor of the three usages of *mokṣadharmā*.

Śaunaka opens thing up in Part B by asking about *Nārāyaṇa*: how, while he is “established in *nivṛtti dharma*, enjoying peace, ever the beloved of *Bhagavatas*,” do the other gods come to accept shares according to *pravṛtti dharmas*, while *nivṛtti dharmas* are “made for those who have turned aside” (327.2-3). The first use of *mokṣadharmā* now occurs when Sauti recalls the purportedly similar question that Janamejaya asked Vaiśampāyana, from which I cull only the verses with which he begins:

[Janamejaya said,]

These worlds with *Brahmā*, men, gods and demons are seen everywhere to be attached to rites said to assure prosperity. And *mokṣa* is said by you, O Brahmin, to be *nirvāṇa*, the supreme happiness. And those who are released are beyond merit and sin; we hear they enter the god of a thousand rays. Alas, the eternal *mokṣadharmā* is surely difficult to observe (*aho hi duranuṣṭeyo mokṣadharmāḥ sanātanaḥ*), abandoning which all the gods have become enjoyers of rites to gods and ancestors (*havya-kavya*). (12.327.5-7)

Imagine *Aśvaghōṣa*, if he read this, raising his eyebrows ears at the comparison between *mokṣa* and *nirvāṇa*!¹⁸ So far one would suspect that beside *mokṣa*, as compared with *nirvāṇa*, “the eternal *mokṣadharmā*” would have to do more here with liberation from *samsāra* than with renunciatory asceticism. But this is only Janamejaya asking a question. The next usage comes where Vaiśampāyana is quoting what Vyāsa told him and his other four disciples, including Śuka, about what *Brahmā* and the gods and *Ṛṣis* once learned when they went to ask *Nārāyaṇa* about such matters in the northern shore of the Milky Ocean, where they found *Nārāyaṇa*. There, *Nārāyaṇa* remarked while he has consigned the gods to receive offerings until the end of the *kalpa* according to *pravṛtti dharma* for the welfare of the world, and has assigned seven mindborn *Ṛṣis*—*Marīci*, *Aṅgiras*, *Atri*, *Pulastya*, *Pulaha*, *Kratu*, and *Vasiṣṭha*—to procreation following *pravṛtti-dharma* (326.60-62), he has also assigned seven other *Ṛṣis*—*Sana*, *Sanatsujāta*, *Sanaka*, *Sanandana*, *Sanatkmāra*, *Kapila*, and *Sanātana*, “called mental sons of *Brahmā*” (64-65)—to do the following:

With knowledge that comes of itself, they are established in *nivṛtti dharma*. They are the foremost of yoga-knowers, as also knowers of the *Sāṃkhya-dharma*. They are preceptors in *mokṣasāstra* and promulgators of *mokṣadharmā* (*mokṣadharmapravartakāḥ*).¹⁹

Clearly we know this group, some of them from the *Mahābhārata* itself, as perennial *Ṛṣis* of the type whose *mokṣa* entails their returning occasionally to this world to tell us about it. Finally, the third usage comes when Vyāsa tells what happened when all the other heaven-dwellers but *Brahmā* had gone. When *Brahmā* remained in place, “desiring to see the blessed lord who takes on the body of *Aniruddha*, the god, having assumed the great Horse’s Head (*Hayaśiras*), appeared to him, reciting the *Vedas* with their *aṅgas*....” (327.80-81). The Horse’s Head now reinforces the distinctions between *nivṛtti* and *pravṛtti* with special attention to *Brahmā*’s charge to oversee *pravṛtti* as the “world’s creator” (*lokakartā*), and promises, before vanishing, that he (the Horse’s Head is of course *Nārāyaṇa*) will intervene with various manifestations

¹⁸ Cf. 12.326.63ab: “The highest *nivṛtti* is known as the extinction all *dharmas*” (*nirvānaṃ sarva dharmāṇāṃ nivṛtīḥ paramā smṛtā*).

¹⁹ 327.65c-66: *svayamāgatavijñānā nivṛttaṃ dharmam āsthitāḥ// ete yogavido mukhyāḥ sāmkyadharmavidas tathā/ ācāryā mokṣasāstre ca mokṣadharmapravartakāḥ*.

(*pradurbhāvas*) to bear the work of the gods (*surakāryam*) whenever things get intolerable (82-86b). Vyāsa then continues:

So it is that this one of great share, the eternal lotus-aveled one . . . , the eternal upholder of sacrifices, has fixed *nivṛtti dharma*, which is the destination of those whose teaching is the imperishable. He has (also) ordained *pravṛtti dharmas*, having made for the world's diversity. He is the beginning, middle, and end of creatures; he is the ordainer and the ordained, he is the maker and the made. At the end of the *yuga* he sleeps after having retracted the worlds; at the beginning of the *yuga* he awakens and creates the universe. (12.327.87-89)

We may of course take note here that he refers to Nārāyaṇa as “the eternal Padmanābha” (*padmanābhaḥ sanātanaḥ*)—a name we meet in the next unit as the name of a snake. But all this also a warm-up to the Nārāyaṇīya’s final usage of *mokṣadharmā*. Vyāsa now starts a laud of Nārāyaṇa (327.90-96) that includes this verse:

. . . O you who always dwell on the ocean, O Hari, you whose hair is like *muñja* grass,
O you who are the peace of all beings, who imparts *mokṣadharmā* (*mokṣadharmānubhāṣine*). . . .²⁰

Vyāsa then concludes his laud with a guarantee to his disciples that all this is true, and exhorts them to sing Hari’s praise with Vedic words (327.97-98), whereupon Vaiśampāyana winds up this quotation from his guru by telling Janamejaya that “all of Veda-Vyāsa’s disciples and his son Śuka, the foremost knower of *dharma*,” did as he said (327.99).

Coming now to the final unit of the *Mokṣadharmaparvan*, our work is mostly done. We have seen where Yudhiṣṭhira has made his turn already in the *Nārāyaṇīya*, and had it reinforced there by all the “here-ness” of Nārada’s running return from White Island to see Nara and Nārāyaṇa. We have also seen the family feeling generated by both the Śuka story and the *Nārāyaṇīya*, and we could add that, in the latter, it comes not only where the Pāṇḍavas take refuge in Nārāyaṇa, but with the fact that Nara is Yudhiṣṭhira’s brother Arjuna. All that remains is to note some remaining anomalies in the *Uñcavṛtṭyupākhyāna*. One is that the Brahmin Dharmāraṇya has his home in the Naimiṣa forest, which could make him a neighbor of Śaunaka. A second comes when Dharmāraṇya hears that the “highest wonder” the snake-king Padmanābha has seen pulling the Sun’s chariot was a refulgent being attaining liberation by entering the “solar disc” in a moment. That would remind Yudhiṣṭhira of Śuka, and who knows, maybe it was him. And third is the name Padmanābha, which is certainly strange for a snake. Clearly it has been set up as in the *Nārāyaṇīya* as a name of Viṣṇu-Nārāyaṇā, and I think we may take it as a little wink that if there is a devotional momentum of *Mokṣadharmaparvan* to be carried into the *Dānadharmaparvan*, it has not ended in the former with the *Nārāyaṇīya*. As to Dharmāraṇya hearing from Padmanābha that the liberated being who entered the sun was a gleaner, we have seen that potential too in the birdlike Śuka. But the story gives no hint that the snake king Padmanābha ever took up that practice himself.²¹

Finally, a few closing words about *mokṣadharmā*. In a thought-provoking article on the tensions between *sādhāraṇadharmā* and *varṇāśramadharmā* as worldly, and *mokṣadharmā*, Gerald Larson describes the latter as the *dharma* that “does not fit” (1972, 149). Adam Bowles notes that *nivṛttidharma* overlaps in the *Mahābhārata* with *mokṣadharmā*, and remarks that the latter looks at first blush “like an oxymoron” (2007, 153). I don’t think, however, that it was meant not to fit or to be as oxymoronic as it first looks. But translating the *dharma* in it is certainly less straightforward than it is in the titles for the other three of Bhīṣma’s anthologies. Not too long ago, I asked Jim Fitzgerald how he would translate the term, and he said he did not know yet. This is how he broached it in his 1980 dissertation:

²⁰ 12.327.93: *samudravāsine nityaṃ haraye munjakeśine/ śāntaye sarvabhūtānām mokṣadharmānubhāṣine*.

²¹ See Brodbeck 2010, who wants him to have been one. Brodbeck would have the beginning of a good answer in that both snakes and birds are “twice-borns,” *dvijas*, like Brahmins.

So the majority of texts collected in the MDh focus directly on *mokṣadharmā-s*, that is, behavioral or attitudinal norms (*dharma-s*) leading to *mokṣa*, ultimate personal transcendence of the limits, pain, and misery common to the situation of all living beings. From the doctrinal, or thematic, perspective, the collection is best understood in terms of a general distinction between 1) texts which address directly some *mokṣa* theme and 2) texts which address *mokṣa* related themes more indirectly, by way of working through problems posed in terms of traditional *dharmic* categories. The texts of this latter type confront the practical *dharmic* implications as well as the theoretical arguments of *mokṣa* oriented themes. (Fitzgerald 1980, 231).

I like this statement for its attention to the tension between both *dharma* and *mokṣa* in the term *mokṣadharmā*, and for its this-textly and this-worldly orientation. I believe the three units I have been discussing come under the second heading of working through *mokṣa* related themes in terms of traditional *dharmic* categories. With that in mind, let me mention in closing that one of the earlier usages of *mokṣadharmā* in the *Mahābhārata* comes in the *Pativrata-Upākhyāna* of Book 3 where the so-called *dharmavyādha* or “dharmic hunter,” actually a Śūdra meat salesman, teaches “the entire *mokṣadharmā*” (3.204.1) to a Gautama Brahmin.

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