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10 WAS THE BUDDHA POISONED?

Overview of the Discourse on the Great Final Nirvana

1. INTRODUCTION

(a) The longest Pali sutra

The last few months of the Buddha's life are recorded in detail in the Mahā Parinibbāna Sutta (D 16), the Jana,vasabha Sutta (D 17) and the Mahā Sudassana Sutta (D 28). The most details, however, are found in the Mahā Parinibbāna Sutta, “the Great Discourse on the Final Nirvana”¹ (D 16 = 2:72-167) by itself is the longest of all the Buddhist texts (96 pages of Pali text in the PTS edition), indeed, **the longest of all ancient Indian literary composition** still extant. For even though there are longer Indian texts, such as the Brāhmaṇas, these are compiled from small, independent pieces, while the Mahā Parinibbāna Sutta “is built according to a uniform plan” (Hinuber 1996: 31).

Furthermore, it forms **the hub of at least three other long discourses**, that is, the two Dīgha Nikāya sutras that immediately follow: the Mahā Sudassana Sutta (“the Discourse on the Great Sudarśana”, D 17) and the Jana,vasabha Sutta (“the Discourse on Jana,vasabha”, D 18); and the Sampasādanīya Sutta “the Discourse that Inspires”, D 28, S 47.2 = 5:159-161; cf. J 5:443). Each of these three sutras (and another) are expansions on passages from the Mahā Parinibbāna Sutta, as follows:

<u>Mahā Parinibbāna Sutta</u>	<u>Expanded as</u>
D 2 :81 = 16.1.16 (Āmra,yaṣṭhikā)	Sampasādanīya Sutta (D 28 = S 47.2)
D 2:91-93 = 16.2.5-7 (Nāḍikā)	Jana,vasabha Sutta (D 18)
D 2:119 = 16.3.49 (Great Wood)	Kaliṅgara Sutta (S 20.8 = 2:267 f.)
D 2:146 = 16.5.17-18 (Kuśinagarī)	Mahā Sudassana Sutta (D 17)

Although the Mahā Parinibbāna Sutta is in many respects the most important discourse in the Dīgha Nikāya, it differs essentially in form and contents from all the other Pali sutras. It is neither a dialogue nor a discourse on any single doctrine, but a long record, albeit not always continuous, of **the Buddha's last days** and his Final Nirvana. Although it forms the literary hub of at least three other sutras, it is not (as a whole) the oldest in the collection. Only some parts of it can be regarded as ancient and original.

(b) Composition of the sutra

At some very early period, probably soon after the Buddha's passing, there had been **a short Parinibbāna Sutta**, “the Discourse on the Final Nirvana”, which, “by means of interpolations and additions, grew longer and longer in the course of time, till it became the ‘great Sutta of the perfect Nirvana’ which we now have in our Pali Canon” (Winternitz 1933:39). According to Winternitz, those “ancient and original” sections of the Mahā Parinibbāna Sutta, besides the verses which “bear the stamp of the greatest antiquity”, are as follows (listed according to chapter and section):

¹ On the problem of the translation of *parinibbāna* and *nibbāna*, see K.R. Norman, “Mistaken Ideas about *Nibbāna*”, *The Buddhist Forum*, vol. 3, 1995:211-225. A summary of the discussion is given in section 21c below.

- 2.23 The first illness that befalls the Buddha at **Bilva**, and which he overcomes by sheer will.
 2.25 He assures **Ānanda** that he does not have a guru's "closed fist", and that he has never wished to pose as a leader of the Order.
 5.13 f. **Ānanda's grief** at the Buddha's impending departure and consolation by the Buddha.

T.W. Rhys Davids (the founder of the Pali Text Society, London) has made a concordance of sources of the Mahā Parinibbāna Sutta in his Introduction to his translation (D:R 2:71 f.). All of the 96 pages of the Pali text, with the exception of nine gaps (the original materials)—pp. 92 f.; 113-115; 117-121; 130-133; 137-140; 148-150; 153; 158-160; 164-167—are found, in nearly identical words, elsewhere in the Canon.

THE ORIGINAL MATERIALS, UNIQUE TO THE SUTRA

- | | | |
|--------------|---------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| (1) §2.10-11 | (D 2:92-93) | The Brick House & Āmrāpālī's Grove (mention of location only). |
| (2) §3.34-42 | (D 2:113-115) | The Buddha tells Ānanda about Māra's approaches in the past and in the present; the Final Nirvana in 3 months' time; Ānanda's belated request & the Buddha's rebuke. |
| (3) §3.44-51 | (D 2:117-121) | Rebuke of Ānanda continues; the Gabled House; public announcement of the Final Nirvana in 3 months' time. |
| (4) §4.26-38 | (D 2:130-133) | Putkasa presents the golden robes. |
| (5) §5.1-11 | (D 2:137-140) | The sal grove; Upavāṇa; devas' lamentation; the 4 holy places; attitude to women; the Tathāgata's remains. |
| (6) §5.19-26 | (D 2:148-150) | The impending Final Nirvana announced to the Mallas, who then visit the Buddha; Subhadra. |
| (7) §5.29-30 | (D 2:153) | Subhadra's ordination. |
| (8) §6.11-15 | (D 2:158-160) | Aniruddha consoles Ānanda, instructs Ānanda to announce the Buddha's passing to the Mallas; laying in state. |
| (9) §6.21-26 | (D 2:176-167) | The cremation and division of relics. |

The original materials amount altogether about 32 or 33 pages, that is, about one-third of the whole. That proportion, Rhys Davids notes, "would be reduced if we were to include passages of similar tendency, or passages of shorter length" (D:R 2:71). Rhys Davids has worked out a list of those passages that are found in other parts of the Canon (see following page).

CONCORDANCE OF SOURCES OF THE MAHĀ PARINIBBĀNA SUTTA (T.W. RHYS DAVIDS)
[My remarks and additions are within parentheses.]

	<u>ch</u>	<u>section</u>	<u>page</u>	<u>Other old Pali texts</u>
1	1	1-10	72-80	A 4:16-24
2		16, 17	81-83	D 28 & S 5:159-161
3		20-34	84-89	U 8.6 & V 1:226; [D 3:209; M 1:354; S 4:183]
4	2	2, 3	90, 91	S 5:431, V 1:231 & Nett 166
[6-9	91-94	S 5:356 f = 55.8
		6-9	92 f.	S 5:358-360 = 55.10]
5		12, 13	94, 95	S 4:211
6		14-19	95-98	V 1:231-233 (differs as to location.)
7		22-26	98-101	S 5:151-154, §26, 5:164, 165
8	3	1-20	102-109	A 4:308-313
9		1-10	102-107	S 5:259-263 & U 6.1; [Nett 60]
10		21-23	109, 110	A 4:30 (nearly = M 1:72)
11		24-32	110, 111	A 4:305 & 349; M 2:13, 14
12		33	111, 112	D 2:70, 71; A 4:306 & 349
13		43	116	Quoted Kvu 559
14	4	2, 3	122, 123	A 2:1, 2 & A 4:105 (quoted Kvu 115, different application.)
15		7-22	123-126	A 2:167-170
16		13-25	126-129	U 8.5
17		39-43	134-136	U 8.5
18	5	11	141, 141	D 2:161
19		12	142, 143	A 2:245, 246
20		15	144	S 5:16 (nearly)
21		16	145, 146	A 2:132
22		17, 18	146, 147	D 2:169, 170
23		27	151	Quoted Kvu 601
24		28	152	D 1:176; M 1:391, 494; S 2:21; V 1:69, 71
25	6	5	154, 155	A 2:79, 80
26		7-10	155-158	S 1:157-159 (differs as to order of sentences.)
27		9	156	A 4:410 ff.
28		10	157	Tha 905, 1046; A 1:236
29		17	161	D 2:141, 142
30		19-20	162, 163	V 2:284, 285 (differs as to order of sentences.)
31		27	167 (end of text)	
[32		28	168	Buddhaghosa attributes to Sinhalese redactors.]

(D:R 2:72)

Rhys Davids also notes that “the slight differences, the more important of which are noted in the table, are very suggestive”, that is, No. 26 (the episode of the stanzas uttered at the moment of the Buddha’s death), No. 14 (a four-line verse attributed to the Buddha in our sutra but also found in the *Aṅguttara*), and No. 30 (the old Subhadra’s callous remark after the Buddha’s passing)—which are discussed at length in the Introduction to his translation of the sutra. (Rhys Davids, 1938:73 ff.)

(c) Chronology of the Canon

An important point to note here is that all the parallel passages mentioned here, without exception, unlike the original passages, belong to the oldest strata of the Canon. In his *Buddhist India* (London, 1903:188), T.W. Rhys Davids gives the following interesting chronology of the Pali Canon.

CHRONOLOGICAL TABLE OF BUDDHIST LITERATURE FROM THE BUDDHA'S TIME TO THE TIME OF AŚOKA

1. The simple statements of Buddhist doctrine now found, in identical words, in paragraphs or verses recurring in all the books.
2. Episodes found in identical words, in two or more of the existing books.
3. The Sīlas, the Pārāyaṇa, the Octades [Aṭṭhaka] and Saṃyutta Nikāyas.
4. The Dīgha, Majjhima, Aṅguttara and Saṃyutta Nikāyas.
5. The Sutta Nipāta, the Thera- and Therī-gāthās, the Udānas, and the Khuddaka Pāṭha.
6. The Sutta Vibhaṅga and the Khandhakas [of the Vinaya Piṭaka].
7. The Jātakas and the Dhammapadas.
8. The Niddesa, the Itivuttakas, and the Paṭisambhidā.
9. The Peta- and Vimāna-Vatthu, the Apadānas, the Cariyā Piṭaka, and the Buddha Vaṃsa.
10. The Abhidhamma books; the last of which is the Kathā Vatthu, and the earliest probably the Puggala Paññatti.

The above table represents the probable order in which the extant Buddhist documents of this period were composed. They were not yet written down, and a great deal has no doubt been lost. (T.W. Rhys Davids, 1903:18)

All these passages belong to the two earliest groups. All are found in books included in groups 4-6; not one occurs in any of the books included in later groups—groups 7-10.

(d) Recensions of the sutra

The Mahā Parinibbāna Sutta is available in a number of recensions. **The Pali version** is also preserved in the Taishō Tripiṭaka (T 1 No. 2). Other Chinese versions are T 5 (diverges from the Pali), T 6 and T 7 (both closer). **The Sanskrit version**, Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra, belonging to the Sarvāstivāda, has been edited by Ernst Waldschmidt,² who also gives the parallel texts from the Sarvāstivāda Vinaya in its Tibetan and Chinese versions.

T.W. Rhys Davids' translation of the sutra is found in volume 2 of his Dīgha translation, *Dialogues of the Buddha* (2nd ed. 1938, 4th ed. 1959, D:R 2:71-191). The Tibetan version from the **Dulva** (Vinaya) has been translated by W.W. Rockhill in *The Life of the Buddha* (1884:122-147). Recent translations include one by Maurice Walshe, in his *Long Discourses of the Buddha* (1995, D:W 223-277). Sister Vajira and Francis Story have produced a revised translation ("Last Days of the Buddha", 1998), while Thanissaro Bhikkhu has translated the last two chapters ("The Great Discourse on the Total Unbinding", rev. ed. 2002). The last two are available online (www.accesstoinsight.org/canon/digha). In his *Indian Buddhism* (1970:67-80), A.K. Warder has made his own translation of the Pali version "omitting anything not confirmed by other versions. The main episodes are translated, with a minimum of comment and continuity."

² Abhandlungen DAWB, Phil. Hist. K1, 1950 and K1. f. Spr., Lit. und Kunst, 2 parts; *Das Mahāparinirvāṇasūtra*, Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1950-51.

(e) Bareau's analyses

André Bareau, the French scholar, has examined **the Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra** in several studies (1962, 1963, 1970-71, 1974, 1975, 1979). His major contribution to the study of our text is in 1979, when Bareau examines and compares the six principal recensions of the Sūtra---one version each in Pāli and Sanskrit, and four in Chinese and concludes---and concludes that our text formed gradually over several centuries.

The number and order of the episodes vary in the different versions, and less than half are found in all six versions. Nevertheless, an analysis of the six versions show (1979:46):

- (1) that there is a common plan among them;
- (2) that the texts share certain central episodes; and
- (3) that the principal episodes almost always appear in the same order.

The Sūtra in its various versions contains a total of over 80 episodes, an analysis of which shows a relative chronology in which these episodes were added. This however does not tell us the order in each individual unit came into existence.

Bareau suggests in “a fragile enough hypothesis” an absolute chronology, in which he locates the addition of the texts to the Sūtra over some 400 years from the Final Nirvana (c. 480 CE) to the beginning of the Common Era (1979:47). As Bareau sees it, the Sūtra may be divided into 9 major sections, according to locale of the incidents, and these may in turn be divided into two major groupings, as follows (1979:48) [with my own section headings here listed in parentheses]:

- I. Mahā Parinibbāna Sutta §§1-2.20
 1. In the environs of Rājagṛha [2]
 2. From Rājagṛha to Pāṭaligrāma [3]
 3. At Pāṭaligrāma [4]
 4. From Pāṭaligrāma to Vaiśālī [5]
 5. At Vaiśālī [6]
- II. Mahā Parinibbāna Sutta §§2.21-6.26
 6. In the environs of Vaiśālī [7-11]
 7. From Vaiśālī to Kuśinagarī [12-15]
 8. At Kuśinagarī: the final hours of the life of the Buddha [16-21]
 9. At Kuśinagarī: the last rites of the Buddha [22].

Sections 6-9 form the older sections, while sections 1-5 are later. Bareau proposes that the oldest section---“the kernel of the work”---is section 8 (The final hours of the Buddha at Kuśinagarī). Following this are sections 9, then 6, then 7 and then the newer sections (1979:50 f.). The oldest part of the text, section 8, minus some episodes added later, according to Bareau, is dated to **the second half of the 5th century BCE**. The next section were added from this time onward, with the latest sections (1-5) added in the 2nd-1st centuries BCE (1979:51).³

³ For other details, see Ray, 1994:386 n2 which I have summarized here.

Chapter 1

(First Recital, *paṭhama bhāṇavāra*.)

2. AJĀTAŚATRU

The Mahā Parinibbāna Sutta opens with the Buddha staying on Vulture's Peak (Gṛdhra,kūṭa/Gijjhakūṭa) at **Rājagṛha**, the capital of Magadha and one of the six main cities of India (D 2:147). It has been identified as modern Rajgir in the Nalanda district of Bihar about 21 km (13 miles) southwest of Bihar-Sarif. Its southern flank is protected by **five hills**: Vaibhāra (Vebhāra), Vaipulya (Vepulla), R̥ṣi,giri (Isigili), Pāṇḍava (Paṇḍava) and Gṛdhra,kūṭa (Gijjhakūṭa).

Ajātaśatru Vaidehi,putra (Ajātaśatru Vedehi,putta),⁴ having come into power, decides to conquer the Licchavis of Vaiśālī and the Vṛjī republic. Before embarking on his venture, Ajātaśatru wishes to know what outcome the Buddha would foresee. Consequently, he despatches his minister, the brahmin **Varṣakāra**, to consult the Buddha.

The Buddha tells the minister of **the seven conditions for a nation's welfare**: frequent public meetings, peaceful living, lawfulness, respect for the elders and for women, veneration of sanctuaries, and kindness to holy men [8:8a]. At the conclusion of this teaching, Varṣakāra remarks that if the Vṛjīs were to keep to even one of these principles, they may be expected to prosper and not decline, far less all seven! Apparently, the Vṛjīs will never be conquered by king Ajātaśatru by force of arms, but only through diplomacy or propaganda (D 2:77).

When the minister leaves, the Buddha goes on to address the monks on **the 7 conditions for the welfare of the spiritual community** [8:8b], followed by other teachings: the 7 good qualities, the 7 factors of enlightenment, the 7 perceptions, the 6 memorable qualities [6:7]. The Buddha also gives a comprehensive discourse on **the threefold training** [3a, 5a, 12a]:

This is moral conduct, this is concentration, this is wisdom. Concentration, when imbued with moral conduct, brings great fruit and profit. Wisdom, when imbued with concentration, brings great fruit and profit. The mind imbued with wisdom becomes completely free from the corruptions, that is, from the corruption of sensuality, of becoming, of false views and of ignorance.

(D 2:81)

3. FROM ĀMRA,YAṢṬIKĀ TO NĀLANDĀ

(a) Āmra,yaṣṭikā (Amba,laṭṭhikā)

After Rājagṛha, the Buddha sets out with a large retinue of monks for **Āmra,yaṣṭikā** (Amba,laṭṭhikā, located halfway between Rājagṛha and Nālandā), on his first lap of the northbound final journey. It is a royal park, surrounded by a rampart and the royal rest-house is adorned with paintings. At Āmrayaṣṭhikā, too, the Buddha gives a comprehensive discourse on the threefold training [2].

(b) Nālandā

Having stayed there long enough, they proceed to **Nālandā**, located on the outskirts of Rājagṛha. It has been identified by Cunningham on the basis of distances and directions given by the Chinese pilgrims and some image inscriptions discovered at the ruins of the village of Bargaon near the Nālandā railway station of the Bakhtiarpur-Bihar branch line of the Eastern railway. There is a high road that starts from Rājagṛha passing through Nālandā and goes up to Pāṭaligrāmaka (D 2:48). According to the Mahāvastu, Nālandā is the birthplace of Śāriputra (Mvst 2:56), who visits the Buddha there.

⁴ Vaidehi,putra. Ajātaśatru is called *Vaidehi,putra* because his mother is from Videha, whose capital is Mithilā.

At Nālandā, the Buddha and the Order stay at the **Pāvārika Mango Grove**. There, **Śāriputra** utters his lion-roar of faith in the Buddha: “Such, Lord, is my faith in the Lord, that there has not been, will not be, nor is there now another ascetic or brahmin greater or of more wisdom, that is to say, in Enlightenment!” On being asked by the Buddha, he admits that his knowledge has not penetrated the mind of the Buddhas of the past, nor the future nor even of the present. However, his testimony, he replies, is based on his retrospective knowledge (*dharm’anvaya*) [5:25c]. This episode is expanded in **the Sampasādanīya Sutta** (D 28).

4. PĀṬALI,GRĀMAKA (PĀṬALI,GĀMA)

(a) Advantages of moral conduct

The Buddha then proceeds to **Pāṭali,grāmaka** (Pāṭali,gāma), 100 km (62 miles) from Rājagṛha. This fortress would later become the capital of the Magadhan empire. This ancient town, later also known as Puṣpa,pura or Kusuma,pura, is located in the villages of Kumrahar, Bulandibagh and the outskirts of modern Patna in Bihar. At Pāṭaligrāmaka, the Buddha and the Order are well received. There, the Buddha addresses the villagers on **the five evil consequences of immoral conduct and the advantages of moral conduct** and the five advantages in being virtuous:

Householders, there are **these five advantages in being virtuous**, of success in moral conduct. What five? The first advantage is that one who is virtuous, who has succeeded in moral conduct, through care of his affairs acquires a great store of property... The second is that a good report of his fame is spread about... The third is that whatever assembly he approaches, whether of nobles, priests, householders, or ascetics, he approaches confident, not shamefaced... The fourth is that he dies unconfused... The fifth is that after death, after the body has broken up, one who is virtuous, who has succeeded in moral conduct, is reborn in a good destiny, in a heaven world. These are the five advantages in being virtuous, of success in moral conduct.

The Buddha then **instructed** (*sandassetvā*), **inspired** (*samādapetvā*), **roused** (*samuttejetvā*) and **gladdened** (*sampahaṃsetvā*) the lay disciples of Pāṭaligrāmaka for most of the night with Dharma talk, and then dismissed them.

(D 2:86; cf. D 1:126; DA 2:473; UA 242. 361, 384)

(b) The Buddha’s teaching method

This action sequence---**instructed** (*sandassetvā*), **inspired** (*samādapetvā*), **roused** (*samuttejetvā*) and **gladdened** (*sampahaṃsetvā*)...with Dharma talk---reflects the basic structure of the Buddha’s teaching method: (1) the Dharma is shown; (2) the listener/s are filled with enthusiasm; (3) they are fired with commitment; and (4) filled with joy.⁵ The Commentaries explain that by instructing, the Buddha dispels the listener’s **delusion**; by inspiring him, **heedlessness** is dispelled; by rousing him, **indolence** is dispelled; and by gladdening, brings the practice to a **conclusion**. In short, when we teach Dharma to benefit others, we should do our best to **bring instruction, inspiration, motivation and joy** to the listener. These four qualities are, in fact, the sixth or last of the ideal skills of a Dharma speaker (Ānanda Sutta, A 3.61 = 3:361 f.).

The Buddha then meets Varṣākāra [2] again, and the minister invites him and the Order to a meal offering the next day. According to the Sarvāstivāda version, the minister expresses his wish that through his alms offering to the Order, the deities of the city may long prosper and be happy, dedicating the gift in their name. In the Pali version, too, the Buddha expresses his appreciation in verses:

⁵ L.S. Cousins, in his review of *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha* (tr. Ñāṇamoli) in JBE 4 1997:272, gives a slightly different listing.

In whatever realm the wise man makes his home,
He should feed the virtuous leaders of the holy life.

Whatever devas there are who report this offering,
They will pay him respect and honour for this.

They tremble for him as a mother for her son.
And he for whom devas tremble ever happy is.

(D 2:66 f.; Walshe's tr. D:W 238)

(c) Future of Pāṭaligrāmaka

Pāṭaligrāmaka is a fortified village standing on the south bank of the Ganges between Rājagṛha and Vaiśālī, that is, on the borders between Magadha and Vṛjī country. Ajātaśtaru has commanded the construction of this fortress to repel any Vṛjī attack. Evidently, he is on the defensive, convinced of the Vṛjī strength. The Buddha, with his Divine Eye perceives the tutelary deities of the houses that are being built there; and as they are devas of high rank, and are influencing the minds of powerful persons to build there, he predicts the future greatness of the place as the city, **Pāṭali,putra** (the future capital of Aśoka's empire); and that it will face three perils: from fire, from water and from internal dissension..

This is a remarkable statement to make: either the city was later named following this remark, or “the Buddhists of the first century after the *parinirvāṇa* may perhaps be suspected of slightly embroidering this part of the narrative to connect their Master with the new and prosperous capital” (Warder 1970:70). On his leaving Pāṭaligramaka, Varṣākāra decides to call the gate by which the Buddha has departed the “**Gautama Gate**”, and the ford by which he has crossed the Ganges the “**Gautama Ford**” (*Gautama* being the Buddha's clan name). According to the Sarvāstivāda version, the Buddha leaves by the west gate. (No ford is named in the Pali version.)

(d) Crossing the Ganges

The various texts differ regarding the details of the Buddha's crossing the Ganges. They however agree that he uses his psychic power to **teleport himself (and the Order) across the river**. The Pali text apparently regard the episode as “symbolic of the Buddha's attainment of the ‘other side’ of transmigration, i.e. extinction (*nirvāṇa*), by the power of meditation” (Warder 1970:71), and puts this verse in the Buddha's mouth:

When they want to cross the sea, the lake or a pond,
People make a bridge or raft—the wise have already crossed.

(D 2:89)

According to the Sarvāstivāda account, only the Buddha crosses the Ganges by his own power. The monks swim across while other disciples build a raft (Waldschmidt 1950-51:158). The imagery here is obvious: the Buddha has crossed the ocean of suffering; his immediate disciples, the monks, crosses the river of suffering using their own effort; and the lay disciples are working at their own means of the salvation, the raft.

Chapter 2

(Second Recital, *dutiya bhāṇavāra*.)

5. VṚJĪ COUNTRY

(a) Kuṭigrāmaka (Koṭigāma)

After crossing the Ganges, the Buddha proceeds to **Kuṭi,grāmaka** (Koṭi,grāma) on the northern bank of the Ganges, where he addresses the monks on **the Four Noble Truths**:

It is through not understanding and grasping the four Noble Truths, O monks, that we have had to run so long, to wander so long in this weary path of birth and death, both you and I.

(D 2:90 = S 5:431 = V 1:231 = Nett 166; Waldschmidt 1950-51:136)

There, too, the Buddha gives a comprehensive discourse on the threefold training [2]. Having stayed in Kuṭigrāmaka long enough, they proceed to the Nādikās

(b) The Nādikās

From Kuṭigrāmaka, the Buddha and the Order go on to the **Nādikās** or **Ñātikās** (according to Buddhaghosa, two villages of the same name on the same river bank), on the highway between Kuṭigrāmaka and Vaiśālī (V 1:230 ff; D 2:90 f., 200; M 1:205). The Buddha's instructions to Ānanda given here are also recorded in the Saṃyutta, which has **Ñātika** as the place-name (S 5:356 ff.). The Commentaries to both the Dīgha and the Saṃyutta confirm it as “Ñātika”, explaining that “There were two villages close by the same pond, inhabited by the sons of two brothers. Thus, both of them were called Ñātika (‘of the relatives’)” (DA 2:543; SA 2:74).

At Nādikā, they reside in **the Brick House** (*giṇṇjak’āvasatha*, D 1:91, 2:96; M 1:205; V 1:232), which is specially mentioned in the text because generally other buildings are made of wood (MA 2:235). Ānanda mentions to the Buddha a list of monks, nuns, and lay-disciples, who had have died there and the Buddha tells him in which of the four stages of Sainthood, each of them have died.

Finding it wearisome for him to give Ānanda a complete list, the Buddha gives him the formula of **the “Mirror of the Dharma”** (*dharm’ādarśa/dhamm’ādāsa*), by which a disciple “can look at himself in” and use it to discover if he is free from rebirth in the hell realm, the animal kingdom, the hungry ghost realm, or any lower state of suffering, or that he has entered the Stream and is destined for enlightenment. The “Mirror” consists of having unwavering faith in the Buddha, the Doctrine and the Order, and mastering the Noble Eightfold Path. This instruction to Ānanda---the Mirror of the Dharma---are also recorded in two discourses (Giṇṇjak’āvasatha Sutta I and Giṇṇjak’āvasatha Sutta II, S 5:356 ff.) in the Saṃyutta.

6. VAIŚĀLĪ (VESĀLĪ)

(a) Mindfulness and full awareness

After Nādikā, the Buddha calls at **Vaiśālī**, the capital of the Vṛjī confederacy, identified with modern Basarh in the Muzaffarpur district of Bihar. At Vaiśālī, the Buddha and his monks sojourn at **Āmrapālī’s mango grove**, where he gives a short discourse to the monks on **mindfulness and full awareness** (*smṛti-samprajanya/sati,sampajañña*), the essence of meditation practice:

And how is a monk **mindful**? Here, a monk abides contemplating the body as body, earnestly, circumspect, mindful and having put away all **covetousness and discontent** for the world, and likewise with regard to feelings, mind and mind-objects. That is how a monk is mindful.

And how is a monk **fully aware**? Here a monk, when going forward or backward, is aware of what he is doing; in looking forward and backward, he is aware of what he is doing; in carrying his inner and outer robe and bowl, he is aware of what he is doing; in eating, drinking, chewing and tasting, he is aware of what he is doing; in passing excrement or urine, he is aware of what he is doing; in walking, standing, sitting or lying down, in keeping awake, in speaking or in staying silent, he is aware of what he is doing. That is how a monk is fully aware.

A monk should be mindful and fully aware: this is our charge to you!

(D 2:93)

These concise teachings are given in detail in **the Mahā Sati’paṭṭhāna Sutta** (D 22). According to Ajahn Brahmavaṃso (in a personal communication), the dvandva “covetousness and discontent” (*abhi-dhyā, daurmanasya/abhijjhā, domanassa*)—translated as “hankering and fretting” by Walshe (D:W 242, 335)—is an abbreviated statement for the 5 Mental Hindrances⁶. His interpretation agrees with the Commentary on the Mahā Sati’paṭṭhāna Sutta which glosses these two terms as *abhijjhā=kāma-c, chanda* (attachment to sensual pleasures) and *domanassa=vyāpāda* (ill-will), and they refer to the abandoning of the Five Mental Hindrances (*nīvaraṇa*) (DA 3:759).

(b) Āmra,pālī (Amba,pālī)

Among the Buddha’s disciples in Vaiśālī is the celebrated courtesan or geisha (*gaṇikā* or *gaṇakī*) [9:13], **Āmra,pālī** (Amba,pālī), a wealthy and respected woman, among whose friends is king Bimbisāra himself [9:14]. As soon as she hears that the Buddha and his Order are residing in her mango grove, she drives out using her best carriages to meet them. After the Buddha has instructed, inspired, roused and gladdened her with a discourse, she invites him and the Order for a meal offering the next day.

The Licchavīs of Vaiśālī, too, hear the news that the Buddha and his Order are in Vaiśālī. As they ride out to see the Buddha, they meet Āmrapālī on the street, hurrying home in her carriage to prepare for the morrow’s meal. They catch up with her, and “axle to axle, wheel to wheel, yoke to yoke”, they converse. On learning that she has invited the Buddha for a meal the next day, they offer her 100,000 pieces of money to give up the meal to them.

“Young sirs,” replies Āmrapālī, “if you were to give me all of Vaiśālī with its revenues, I would not give up such an important meal!” The disappointed Licchavīs snap their fingers in annoyance, “We’ve been beaten by the mango woman!” Then they head for the mango grove to meet the Buddha.

As these handsome regal young Licchavīs in their magnificent chariots, some in blue with blue make-up, some in yellow with yellow make-up, some in white with white make-up, approach the mango grove, the Buddha remarks: “Monks, any of you who have not seen the Thirty-three gods, just look at this troop of Licchavīs. Take a good look at them, and you will get an idea of the Thirty-three gods!” (D 2:96)

After the Buddha has instructed, inspired, roused and gladdened them with a discourse, they invite him and the Order for a meal offering the next day. The Buddha informs them of his prior meal invitation by Āmrapālī. Again, they snap their fingers in annoyance, “We’ve been beaten by the mango woman!” However, rejoicing in the Buddha’s discourse, they depart.

On the following day, after Āmrapālī has offered almsfood to the Buddha and his monks, she donates the mango grove to them (V 1:232). (The Sarvāstivāda version, however, only mentions that the Buddha praises the meal.) The Buddha then instructs, inspires, rouses and gladdens her with a discourse. Later, the Buddha gives another comprehensive discourse on the threefold training to the monks [2].

⁶ The 5 Mental Hindrances (*pañca, nīvaraṇa*): sensual desire (*kāma-c, chanda*), illwill (*vyāpāda*), sloth and torpor (*thīna, middha*), restless and worry (*uddhacca, kukkucca*) and spiritual doubt (*vicikicchā*). (A 3:62; Vbh 378)

7. BILVA,GRĀMAKA (BELUVA,GĀMAKA)

(a) The last rains retreat

After staying on in Āmrāpālī's mango grove for some time, the Buddha leaves for the village of **Bilva** (Bilva,grāmaka) or **Veṇu,grāmaka** (Beluva or Veḷuva), near Vaiśālī. As it is the month of Āṣāḍha (Āsāḷha, June-July), with the rains approaching, the Buddha and the Order enter the rains retreat (his last) at Bilva. The Buddha instructs the monks to spend retreat in groups in different places all around Vaiśālī. According to the Sarvāstivāda version, this is in response to a bad famine that has occurred there. The Pali version, however, makes no mention of any famine. The Commentary simply states that the small village where the Buddha spends retreat is neither able to accommodate nor feed so many monks. (DA 2:546)

During the retreat, the Buddha has a **severe illness**, accompanied by deadly pains [7:22]. This is his first attack of bodily pains recorded in the Mahā Parinibbāna Sutta:

...the Lord was attacked by a severe sickness, with sharp pains as if he were about to die. But he endured all this mindfully, clearly aware and without complaining. He thought: "It is not fitting that I should attain final Nirvana without addressing my followers and taking leave of the Order of Monks. I must hold this disease in check by energy and apply myself to the force of life." He did so and the disease abated.

(D 2:99)

(b) Self as refuge

Ānanda is greatly alarmed by the Buddha illness. "Lord, I have seen the Lord in comfort, and I have seen the Lord's patient enduring. And, Lord, my body is like a drunkard's. I've lost my bearings and things are unclear to me because of the Lord's sickness. The only thing that is some comfort to me is the thought: 'The Lord will not attain the final Nirvana until he has made some statement about the Order of Monks.'" The Buddha consoles him by explaining that he has no secret teachings nor regards himself as the leader of the Order, how he overcomes his bodily pains and that his followers should be self-reliant:

But Ānanda, what does the Order of monks expect of me? I have taught the Dharma, Ānanda, making no "inner" and "outer": **the Tathāgata has no "teacher's fist"**⁷ in respect of doctrines. If there is anyone who thinks: "I shall take charge of the Order (P. *saṅgham pariharissāmi*)," or "The Order should refer to me (P. *mam'uddisako bhikkhu,saṅgho*)," let him make some statement about the Order, but the Tathāgata does not think in such terms. So why should the Tathāgata make a statement about the Order?

Ānanda, I am now old, worn out, elderly, my time has gone, I have reached the term of my life, which is eighty. Just as an old cart is made to go by being held together with straps, so the Tathāgata's body is kept going by being strapped up. It is only when the Tathāgata withdraws his attention from outward signs, and by the cessation of certain feelings, enters into the signless concentration of mind, that this body knows comfort.

Therefore, Ānanda, you should **live as islands unto yourselves** (*ātma,dvīpa/atta,dīpa*), being your own refuge, with no one else as your refuge, with the Dharma as an island (*dharma,dvīpa/dhamma.dīpa*), with the Dharma as your refuge, with no other refuge. And how does a monk live as an island unto himself...with no other refuge?

Here, Ānanda, a monk abides contemplating the body as body, earnestly, clearly aware, mindful and having put away all covetousness and discontent for the world, and likewise with regard to feelings, mind and mind-objects. That, monks, is how a monk lives as an island unto himself...with no other refuge.

⁷ *nāsti ācārya,muṣṭi/n'atthi ācariya,muṭṭhi*.

And those who now in my time or afterwards live thus, they will become the highest (P. *tamatagge*)⁸, but **they must be anxious to learn**.

(D 2:101 = 3:58, 77; S 3:42, 5:154, 163, 164)

(c) Island or lamp?

The existence of two ancient Buddhist languages, Pali and Sanskrit, provides a dynamic stereoscopic panorama of Buddhism. It helps us to clear a problem in the interpretation of this passage from the Mahā Parinibbāna Sutta

*Tasmā-t-ih'Ānanda **atta,dīpā** viharatha **atta,saraṇā anañña,saraṇā, **dhamma,dīpā** dhamma,-saraṇā anañña,saraṇā.***⁹

Therefore, Ānanda, live **as an island unto yourself**, with self as refuge, with no other refuge, **the Dhamma as an island**, the Dhamma as a refuge, with no other refuge.

(D 2:100 = 3:58, 77; S 3:42, 5:154, 163, 164)

Some scholars have rendered the term *dīpa* here as “light”---Rhys Davids (D:R 2:110); Fausböll (Sn:F 501)---or as “lamp”(Adikaram and Childers), probably because they are influenced by the Western saying “No man is an island” and its negative connotation. **Buddhaghosa** comments on the term *atta,dīpa*, “with self as island”: “What is meant by ‘self’? The mundane and supramundane Dhamma.” Therefore he says next, “with the Dhamma as island,” etc. **Bhikkhu Bodhi** notes here that “This comment overlooks the obvious point that the Buddha is inculcating self-reliance.” (S:B 1:1055 n53).

(1) Sanskrit

The Sanskrit words *dīpa* (light, lamp) and *dvīpa* (island, continent) are both rendered as *dīpa* in Pali. The Sanskritized passage of the Buddha’s last words (D 2:100) are found in the Mahāvastu, giving *dvīpa*:

ātma,dvīpa bhikṣavo viharatha ananya,dvīpāḥ ātmaśaraṇāḥ ananya,śaraṇāḥ
(Senart, *Le Mahavastu* 1: 334)

The same Sanskrit word is found in the Turfan version of the Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra (Waldschmidt 200).

The **Gāndhārī Dharmapada** also renders the term *dīpa* as “island” (Brough 209 f.). **The Tibetan translation** also uses “island” (*glin*), and not “a light of lamp” (*mar me*).

(2) Chinese mistranslation

Chi Fa Nien (Former Chin 351-394): “a light” (T 1: 15b). Saṅghadeva (Later Chin 384-417) rendered it as “a lamp-light” in the Mādhy’āgama: “Make yourself a lamp-light” (T 1: 645c). The Chinese Dharmapada (25, 238) also uses “light” (pointed out by P.V. Bapat).

However, **Guṇabhadra** (Liu Sung dynasty 420-479) rendered *dīpa* as “island” in his translation of the same passage in the Saṃyukt’āgama (T 2: 8a).¹⁰

(d) The only way

In declaring that after his passing, only the Dharma should be one’s refuge (*dharma,śaraṇa/dhamma.saraṇa*), the Buddha effectively and radically shifts the focus from the Three Refuges to **the One**

⁸ On the difficult term, *tamatagge* (“the highest”), see Vajira & Story n20.

⁹ Cf. *yo kho Vakkali dhammaṃ passati so maṃ passati*, etc. S 3:120.

¹⁰ G.H. Sasaki, *Linguistic Approach to Buddhist Thought*. Delhi: MLBD, 1986: 58-63.

Refuge—the Dharma—that is, one’s practice of the four Stations of Mindfulness (*smṛty-upaṣṭhāna/sati’-paṭṭhāna*) that he often discourses on [7b, 10b]. In this sense, it becomes clear why in the Maha Sati’paṭṭhāna Sutta (D 22), for example, the Buddha declares it to be “the only way” (*ekāyana,magga*) “for the purification of beings.”¹¹

It is important here to understand that the Buddha is referring to mental cultivation (*bhāvanā*). For mental cultivation to progress, one needs to be strongly grounded in **virtue** or moral conduct (*śīla/sīla*), so that such a mental cultivation would lead to wisdom (*prajñā/paññā*) and spiritual liberation (*vimukti/vimutti*) (M 1:195-197). As such, the “only way” here does not refer to a particular “method” of meditation, whether it is called “Vipassanā” or “Satipaṭṭhāna”. The “only way” here refers to **the Noble Eightfold Path**, which is clear from the Dhammapada (as pointed out to me by Ajahn Brahmavamso):

*Maggān’atṭhaṅgiko seṭṭho
saccānaṃ caturo padā
virāgo seṭṭho dhammānaṃ
dipadānañ ca cakkhumā.*

The best of paths is the Eightfold Path.

The best of truths are the four sayings [the Noble Truths].
Non-attachment is the best of states.
The best of the two-legged is the Seeing One.

*Eso’va maggo natth’añño
dassanassa visuddhiyā
etaṃhi tumhe paṭipajjatha
Mārass’etaṃ pamohanaṃ*

This indeed is the only way,

There is none other for the purity of vision:

Follow then this path:
This is the bewilderment of Māra [the Evil One].

(Dh 273 f.) [19b]

It does not refer to “Vipassanā” meditation (if there is such a meditation) or one school of Buddhism to the exclusion of others. This *ekāyana* statement should be understood in the context of the Buddha’s final instruction here—and the Buddha’s prophecies of what is popularly known as **the “Dharma-ending age”** [6:21]. After the Buddha’s passing, he is no more the practitioner’s refuge as it were (not in person, anyway). As for the Saṅgha, its gradual laicization and degradation increases as the number of those who transgress the Vinaya increases and the number of Arhants and Saints decrease. [19b]

(e) The One Refuge

The One Refuge, the Dharma as one’s practice, is the “one and only way”. As we have seen here the “one and only way” is **the Noble Eightfold Path**, which is a statement of the Four Foundations of Mindfulness in terms of total practice: on the inter-personal and social level (virtue), the personal level (mind or concentration), and the spiritual level (wisdom and liberation).

The “Three Refuges” of Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha are here revised and reduced to the barest minimum: **oneself and Dharma**. Matthew Dillon, in his remarkable comparative study of the last days of Socrates and the Buddha in “Dialogues with Death”, remarks: “However much support may be offered by teacher and community, it all comes down to you and the Truth” (2000:547). The Buddha is dead, long live the Dharma!

¹¹ D 2:290 = 315 = M 1:55 = 63 = S 5:141 = 167 f. = 185 f. = Kvu 158 = Vism 3.

Chapter 3

(Third Recital, *tatiya bhāṇavāra*.)

8. CĀPĀLA SHRINE

(a) The Buddha's lifespan

On the following day, the Buddha leaves Bilva and heads for **Vaiśālī** on almsround. On returning from Vaiśālī, he sits with Ānanda at **the Cāpāla Shrine**, where the Buddha praises various shrines:

Ānanda, Vesālī is delightful, the Udena Shrine is delightful, the Gotamaka Shrine is delightful, the Satt'ambaka Shrine [of the 7 Mangoes] is delightful, the Bahu,puttaka Shrine [of Many Sons] is delightful, the Cāpāla Shrine is delightful.

(D 2:102)

With the exception of Vaiśālī, these are all probably **tree shrines**, which understandably would delight the Buddha who has lived much of his life in the open and encourages his disciples to live the solitary forest life to expedite their spiritual practice.

At **the Cāpāla Shrine**, the Buddha again tells Ānanda he is able to live longer if wishes to—for a full life-span (*kalpa/kappa*) or the remainder of it. The Buddha explains that anyone who has developed the 4 paths to spiritual power (*rddhi,pāda/iddhi,pāda*)¹² will be able to live for a full life-span or the remainder of the life-span (of about 120 years) (D 2:103, 3:77). Ānanda, however, does not understand the meaning or implication of the Buddha's statement and remains silent, even after being informed three times.

The Commentary explains that Ānanda's mind is influenced (P. *pariyuṭṭhita,citta*) by **Māra's exhibiting a fearsome sight** that distracts his attention, preventing him from appreciating what the Buddha says. The Buddha then dismisses Ānanda who takes his leave and sits down at the foot of the nearby tree.

There is some uncertainty regarding what is meant by **“life-span”** (*kalpa/kappa*) here, that is, it could mean any of the following:

- (1) A **“world-cycle” or “great cycle”** (*mahā.kalpa/mahā,kappa*), that is, one full cycle or age of the world (V 3:109; S 2:185 = It 17; Miln 108; PvA 21), described as comprising of four stages of a pulsating universe (A 2:142);
- (2) A **“fortunate cycle”** (*bhadra.kalpa/bhadda,kappa*), that is, a world-period when there is a Buddha. This is probably one of the four “incalculables” (*asaṃkhyeya/asaṅkheyya*): in this case, it would be the stable period (P. *vivaṭṭa-ī,ṭhāyi,kappa*) after the universe's re-evolution (P. *vivaṭṭa,kappa*), which, according to the Saṃyutta Commentary is the opinion of one Mahāsīva Thera (SA 3: 251).¹³
- (3) A **human “life-span”** (*āyu,kalpa/āyu,kappa*). This is the opinion of the Dīgha and Saṃyutta Commentaries (DA 554 f.; SA 3:251) and the Milinda,pañha (Miln 141).

However, there are two reasons for taking the term to mean a human life-span. The first reason comes from a statement made in **the Cakka,vatti Sihanāda Sutta** (D 26):

Keep to your pastures, monks, to the haunts of the fathers. If you do so, your life-span will increase....

¹² The 4 paths to spiritual power (*iddhi,pāda*): will or intention (*chanda*), energy or exertion (*virīya*), consciousness or mind (*citta*) and mental investigation (*vīmaṃsa*) (D 3:77, D 3:213 = M1:103 = 2:11; D 3:221; Vbh 216).

¹³ See PED s.vv. Kappa; Vivaṭṭa; Saṃvaṭṭa.

And what is the length of life for a monk? Here, a monk develops the paths to spiritual power which is the concentration of intention accompanied by effort of will, concentration of energy accompanied by the effort of will, concentration of consciousness accompanied by the effort of will and concentration of mental investigation accompanied by effort of will. By constantly practising these four roads of spiritual power he can, if he wishes, live for a full life-span, or for the remaining of the life-span. That is what I call the length of life for a monk.

(D 3:77)

It is clear from this statement that it is not only the Buddha, but any monk who has cultivated “the paths to spiritual power” will be able to live a full life-span or what remains of the longest possible life-span at that time. The paths to spiritual power here refer to the conscious development of psychic skills (*ṛddhi/iddhi*), including the knowledge of the destruction of defilements (S 51 = 5:254-290).

The second reason, based mostly on **scriptural common sense**, is attested by the fact that many of the Arhants—like Ānanda (DhA 2:99) [6:29] and Mahā Kāśyapa (SA 2:173) [6:21]—are said to live to a full 120 years, though the oldest of them, **Bakkula**, is said to have lived to 180, well over “the remainder” of the full life-span! [6:32].

(b) The life-spans of Buddhas

A Buddha has the power to live for one whole *kalpa* but no Buddha does so because the term is shortened by reason of climate and the food he takes (DA 413). No Buddha, however, dies before his dispensation is firmly established. Some Buddhas live longer than others. Those who are long-lived have only direct disciples (*saṃmukha śrāvaka/sammukha sāvaka*) who hear the Dharma in his presence, and at their final *parinirvāṇa* their relics are not scattered, but have a single stupa erected over them (SnA 194 f).

Short-lived Buddhas hold their Upoṣadha (Uposatha, Observance or ecclesiastical convocation to recite the Prātimokṣa) fortnightly. Others (like Kāśyapa Buddha) may hold it only once every six months; yet others (like Vipāśyī Buddha) only once every six years (ThaA 1:62). In cases where the Buddha does not appoint the Observance of the Pratimoksha (e.g. Vipāśyī, Sikhī, Viśvabhū) the Teaching quickly dies after his final *parinirvāṇa*. However, where the Buddha appoints the Prātimokṣa (such as Krakucchanda, Kanakamuni, Kāśyapa, Gautama), the holy life lasts long (V 3:7 f.; cf. D 2:48).

9. THE BUDDHA’S RELINQUISHMENT OF HIS LIFE-SPAN

(a) Māra’s invitation

At this point, when the Buddha is alone, **Māra**, the personification of Death, appears to him and invites him to pass away. The Buddha replies to Māra in the very same words that he had used when Māra appeared to him under the Goatherd’s banyan tree during the fifth week (after Brahmā had invited him to teach the Dharma) (S 1:122-124) that he will not pass away until there are “**monk disciples** who are accomplished, trained, skilled, learned, well-versed in Dharma, trained in accordance to the Dharma, correctly trained and walking the path of the Dharma, who will pass on what they have gained from their own teacher, teach it, declare it, establish it, expound it, analyze it, make it clear: until they shall be able by means of the Dharma to refute false teachings that have arisen, and teach the Dharma accompanied by wonders (*sapṛātihārya dharma/sappāṭihāriya dhamma*)” [4:2].

Māra then cunningly replies that the Buddha already has monk disciples, and again invites him to pass away. The Buddha then tells him that he will not pass away until there are **nun disciples** who are accomplished...who could teach the Dharma accompanied by wonders. Again Māra replies that the Buddha already has such nun disciples. Then the Buddha tells him that he will not pass away until there are **layman disciples** who are accomplished...who could teach the Dharma accompanied by wonders.

Again Māra replies that the Buddha already has such layman disciples. Then the Buddha tells him that he will not pass away until there are **laywoman disciples** who are accomplished...who could teach the Dharma accompanied by wonders. Again Māra replies that the Buddha already has such laywoman disciples. At this point, the Buddha tells Māra:

You need not worry, Evil One. The Tathāgata's Final Nirvana will not be long delayed. Three months from now, the Tathāgata will enter final Nirvana.

(D 2:106)

(b) Causes of earthquakes

Then mindfully, the Buddha at the Cāpāla Shrine renounces his will-to-live (*āyu, saṃskāra/āyu, saṅkhāra*), that is, the remaining years of his life. As he does so, the earth trembles and the sky thunders. It is said that the Buddha's life is attended by **six earth tremors**: when he is conceived, when he is born, when he attains Enlightenment, when he gives the first discourse, when he renounces the remainder of his lifespan (instead of living out the cycle), and when he attains Final Nirvana (D 2:107). To the shocked Ānanda, the Buddha then explains **the eight causes of earthquakes**:

- (1) Tectonic movement: "The great earth rests on water; the water on wind; the wind on space. And when the mighty wind moves, it disturbs the water, and through the disturbance of the water, the earth quakes."
- (2) Supernatural event. An ascetic or brahmin who has developed psychic powers, or a powerful deva "whose earth-consciousness is weakly developed but his water-consciousness is immeasurable, and he makes the earth shudder and shake violently."
- (3) The conception of the Bodhisattva, when he descends from Tuṣita heaven and enters his mother's womb.
- (4) The nativity, that is, when the Bodhisattva is born.
- (5) The Great Enlightenment.
- (6) When the Dharma Wheel is first set in motion, that is, the First Discourse.
- (7) When the Buddha renounces his will-to-live.
- (8) When the Buddha finally passes away without any remainder of the Aggregates (of form, feeling, perception, dispositions, consciousness).

(D 2:107-109) [1:8d]

This earth-shaking event apparently brings Ānanda to his senses that he should have invited the Buddha to live on for the remainder of the natural life-span. So, he beseeches the Buddha to change his mind and live on for the sake of all being. But, it is too late now: the Buddha has made his decision. After this, the text somewhat inconsistently makes the Buddha "speak of impermanence as if he could not defy this natural law". It seems probable that the episode of his life-extension, Māra's visit and Ānanda's supposed fault, together with the discussion of portents relating to a Buddha's life, "was not originally part of the text, though it was inserted in it very early" (Warder 1970:75 f.). What we have here are the seeds of legends that would grow into a cosmic drama that will inspire the art and literature of the times to come.

(c) Interpolations

At this point, the Mahā Parinibbāna seems to have some incongruous interpolations. It is as if, following the mention of the "eight" causes of earthquakes, the Reciters of the oral tradition recollect and assemble other teachings of the same number and insert them here:

The eight assemblies (*pariṣad/parisa*, D 2:109, 3:260; M 1:72; A 4:307) [see below].

The eight spheres of mastery (*abhibhv-āyatana/abhibh'āyatana*, D 2:110; M 2:13; S 4:77; Nm 143; Dhs 247; DhsA 191). These are powers gained through Kṛtsna/Kasiṇa meditation as means of transcending the Sense-sphere.¹⁴

The eight liberations (*vimokṣa/vimokkha*, D 2:111 f., 3:262, 288; A 4:306). Liberations 1-3 have to do with the spheres of mastery; liberations 4-7 are the Absorptions (*dhyāna/jhāna*); and the last is the Extinction of Perception and Feeling (*nirodha,samāpatti*).

These are teachings found elsewhere in the Canon. According to the Pali version of the sutra, after the Buddha has given these teachings, he tells Ānanda about the Goatherd Banyan Tree incident [9a], where Māra had similarly invited him to enter into final Nirvana during the 5th week after the Enlightenment [4.2]. We are made to believe that only after listening to all these teachings (after the earthquake) does Ānanda, coming to his senses, beseech the Buddha to change his mind and live on.

However, of special interest here, is the teaching of **the eight assemblies** (*aṣṭa,pariṣad/aṭṭha,parisa*), that is, the assembly of the kshatriya (nobles), of the brahmins (priests), of the householders, of ascetics, of the devas of the Realm of the Four Great Kings, of the Thirty-three Gods, of Māras, and the assembly of Brahmā.

I remember well, Ānanda, that I have attended the assembly of kshatriyas, numbering in the hundreds....the assembly of Brahmā, numbering in the hundreds. I sat down before them, spoke to them, and joined in their conversation. I assumed their appearance and speech, whatever it might be. And I instructed, inspired, roused and delighted them with a discourse on Dharma. Even as I spoke to them, they did not know me and wondered: “Who is this that speaks like this—a deva or a human?”

And having thus instructed them, I disappeared, and still they did not know me: “He who has just disappeared—is he a deva or a man?”

(D 2:109 f.)

This teaching is vital for an effective Buddhist **mission**, the discipline and art of teaching and spreading the Buddha Word. From the Buddha’s statement here, it is clear that he is capable of blending with the crowd and effectively communicating with his listeners at their level.¹⁵

(d) Dharm’ārāma

A short but inspiring episode is found in **the Dhammapada Commentary** in this connection. The Dhammapada story opens in this manner:

From the day when the Teacher announced, “Four months [*sic*] hence I shall pass into Nirvana,” monks by the thousand spent their time in attendance upon the Teacher. Those who had not yet attained the Fruit of Stream-winning were unable to restrain their tears. Those who had attained Arhantship experienced profound religious emotion. All went about in small groups, saying, “What are we to do?”

(DhA 4:93)

But, one monk, by the name of **Dharm’ārāma** (Dhamm’ārāma), which means “one who dwells in the Dharma”, kept to himself. And when they asked him, they gave them no answer. He thought to himself: “The Teacher has announced that four months hence he will pass away into Nirvana, and I have not yet freed myself from the bondage of desire. Therefore so long as the Teacher remains alive, I will struggle and attain Arhantship.”

¹⁴ See *Buddhist Dictionary*, s.v. abhibhāyatana.

¹⁵ Cf. the 6 qualities of an ideal Dharma speaker given in the Alaṃ Sutta, A 4:296-299; the Udayī Sutta, A 3:184; and Piya Tan, *The Teaching Methods of the Buddha*, 2001 (unpublished MS).

The monks reported Dharm'ārāma's aloofness to the Buddha and he was summoned. When the Buddha asked him if it was true that he was being aloof, Dharm'ārāma explained that he was trying hard to attain Arhantship while the Buddha was yet alive and before he passes away into final Nirvana. The Buddha applauded him.

Monks, every other monk should show his affection to me just as Dhamm'ārāma has done. For they honour me with garlands, perfumes and the like, honour me not; but they that practise the Dharma in accordance with the Dharma, they alone truly honour me.

(DhA 4:94)

Having said, that, the Buddha pronounced the following Dhammapada stanza

The monk who dwells delighting in the Dharma,
Who reflects on the Dharma,
Who remembers the Dharma,
Does not fall away from the True Dharma.

(Dh 364)

At the conclusion of the discourse, Dharm'ārāma was established in Arhantship, and the assembly, too, profited from the discourse.

It is curious that the Dhammapada story mentions that the Buddha's announcement of his impending final Nirvana is made "four months" instead of three month (as mentioned in the Mahā Parinibbāna Sutta). There are two possibilities: the Buddha had made an earlier announcement, or the Dhammapada Commentary (Buddhaghosa) errs.

10. ĀNANDA REBUKED

(a) Ānanda's request

On coming to his senses and realizing his error, **Ānanda thrice beseeches the Buddha to live on**. But the Rubicon is crossed, and the Buddha is a man of his word (P. *yathā, vādī tathā, kārī*, D 2:224, 229; Sn 357; It 122). "Yours is the fault, Ānanda, yours is the failure that, after being given such a broad hint, such a clear sign by the Tathāgata, you did not understand and did not invite the Tathāgata to stay on for the life-span," rebukes the Buddha. Incredibly, he has given Ānanda broad hints a total of 16 times at various places (D 2:115-118)!

One might ask here: **why does the Buddha need to throw a broad hint** to Ānanda regarding the Buddha's ability to extend his life-span? Why not the Buddha himself live out his full life-span for the benefit of all beings? There are two possible answers. The first is that the Buddha does not really need to live out his full life-span as the fourfold community has been established: his work is done. The "broad hint" is a bonus that Ānanda fails to accept. But the second reason is more likely: this curious episode was interpolated some time before the Canon was closed and does not form a vital part of the sutra. Whether the Buddha lives on or not, he would eventually have to pass into final Nirvana:

Ānanda, have I not told you before: All those things that are dear and pleasant to us must suffer change, separation and becoming other? What else is there to expect? Whatever is born, become, compounded, is liable to decay—that it should not decay is impossible.

(D 2:118 f.)

(b) The Great Wood

After consoling Ānanda, the Buddha and the Order then visit **the Great Wood** (*mahā,vana*), near Vaiśālī, and reside in the Gabled Hall (*kūṭāgāra,sālā*). The Buddha instructs Ānanda to assemble all the monks in the vicinity of Vaiśālī. When they are assembled, he exhorts them to practise the Dharma—the 4 stations of mindfulness, the 4 right efforts, the 4 bases of power, the 5 spiritual faculties, the 5 mental powers, the 7 factors of enlightenment, the Noble Eightfold Path—so that the religious life might last long. Then the Buddha announces his impending demise:

Come now, monks: subject to decay are all component things; strive on heedfully! In no long time, the Tathagata will attain Nirvana. The Tathagata will attain Nirvana in three months' time.

Ripe am I in years. Little of my life remains (P. *parittaṃ mama jīvitaṃ*).
Now I go, leaving you, having made myself my refuge.

Be heedless, monks, mindful, virtuous,
Guard well your mind with well-focussed thought.

He who would be heedless, keeping to the Dharma and Discipline,
Leaving the birth-cycle behind, will make an end of suffering.

(D 2:120 f.)

(c) The future of the Licchavīs

The Buddha then makes a **prophecy**, not recorded in the Mahā Parinibbāna Sutta, but in **the Kaliṅga-ra Sutta** (S 20.8), where he declares the strengths and weaknesses of the Licchavīs, hinting at their eventual conquest by Ajātasattu, and warns the monks of their own future:

Monks, now the Licchavīs dwell **using blocks of wood as pillows**. They are diligent and ardent in **exercise** (*upāsana*). King Ajātasattu Videhi,putta of Magadha, cannot find their weakness nor have a hold on them. But in the future, the Licchavīs will become delicate, with soft and tender hand and feet; they will sleep on soft beds with pillows of cotton until sunrise. **Then Ajātasattu will find their weakness and have a hold on them.**

Monks, now the monks dwell **using blocks of wood as pillows**. They are diligent and ardent in striving. Māra the Evil One cannot find their weakness nor have a hold on them. But in the future, the monks will become delicate, with soft and tender hand and feet; they will sleep on soft beds with pillows of cotton until sunrise. **Then Māra will find their weakness and have a hold on them.**

Therefore, monks, you should train yourselves thus: “Using blocks of wood as cushions, we will dwell diligent and ardent in striving.” Thus you should train yourselves.

(S 2:267 f.)

The Commentary explains that in the first period of the Buddha's Ministry, the monks would practise **meditation** from the time they finished their meal (before noon) through the first watch of the night. They would sleep in the middle watch (10.00 p.m. to 2.00 a.m.), resting the head on a piece of wood. Then they would rise early and resume their walking meditation. (SA 2:230)

(d) Invitation Day (*pravāraṇā/pavāraṇā*)

It is curious that the Mahā Parinibbāna Sutta, with all its detailed treatment, fails to mention an important annual ceremony of the Sangha, that is **the Invitation** (*pravāraṇā/pavāraṇā*), held on the last day of the rains retreat. It is not likely that the gathering in the Gabled Hall in the Great Forest is the Invitation assembly simply because it is “three months” before the final Nirvana (which is in the month of

Vaiśākha/Vesākha or May-June of the same year). That would put the Great Forest assembly in the month of **Māgha** (February-March).

In modern times, the month of Māgha is highlighted by **Sangha Day**, commemorating the spontaneous assembly of **1250 Arhants** in the Buddha's presence. The first 1000 were enlightened upon listening to the Buddha, and the remaining 250 were Śāriputra and Maudgalyāyana and their respective followings. To mark the occasion the Buddha delivered **the Avavāda Prātimokṣa** (Ovāda Pāṭimokkha), "The Admonition Code" (the first proclamation of a monastic conduct, comprising Dh 183-185). It is given in response to Ānanda's question regarding lengths of the dispensations of previous Buddhas (VA 186 f.; Kkhv 9 f.; MA 2:209; UA 298), and delivered during the first year of the Ministry in the Bamboo Grove soon after Śāriputra's gaining of Arhathood and Dīrgha,ṇakha's attaining of the Dharma Eye (M 1:501).¹⁶

11. THE BUDDHA'S PROPHECIES

(a) Future dangers

Early Buddhist prophecies regarding **the future of the Teaching and the Order** are scattered all over the Nikāyas, for example, the Cakka, vatti Sīhanāda Sutta (D 26), the three Ovāda Suttas (S 16.6-8) [6:21], the three Kimbila Suttas (A 5.201, 6.40, 7.56) [6:22], the Saddhamma Paṭirūpaka Sutta (S 16.13) [6:22] and others [6:22]. It is an interesting subject of study not yet examined by many scholars.¹⁷ The Aṅguttara Nikāya, for example, contains an interesting set of four suttas all entitled **Anāgata, bhaya Sutta**, the Discourses of Future Dangers (A 3:100-110). The first two suttas are inspirational and the latter two are prophetic. I shall summarize the first, and abridge the second (because it is beautiful and inspirational) and the last two suttas:

The Anāgata, bhaya Sutta I (A 5.77 = 3:100-102) exhorts the forest monk to make urgent and earnest effort to "attain the unattained" lest such a spiritual quest would be hindered by death from (1) the venomous bite of a snake, scorpion or centipede; (2) accidents or ill health; (3) dangerous animals; (4) thieves; (5) non-humans (or "inhuman people").

The Anāgata, bhaya Sutta II (A 5.78 = 3:103-105) (given in brief in the Samaya Sutta, A 3:66), a beautiful reflection on the urgency of spiritual practice, is here abridged:

- (1) The monk reflects: "I am now young...but the time will come when **old age** will touch this body; then it would not be easy to turn to the Buddha Word, or the forest and woodlands, or the solitary dwelling. Before it comes to me, let me attain the unattained, so that I will dwell comforted (*phāsu*) even when I am old."
- (2) The monk reflects: "I am healthy...but the time will come when **sickness** will touch this body... Before it comes to me, let me attain the unattained, so that I will dwell comforted even when I am sick."
- (3) The monk reflects: "Now there is no famine, and food is easy to get...but the time till come when **famine and difficulty in getting food** will arise. Before it comes to me, let me attain the unattained, so that I will dwell comforted even in time of famine and difficulty in getting food."
- (4) The monk reflects: "Now people dwell in **good fellowship**, like milk and water...but the time will come when fear will reign, when robbers abound, when the fear-stricken gather their things and flee looking for safety, and people will live in groups and communes. It is then not easy to turn to the Buddha Word, or the forest and woodlands, or the solitary dwelling. Before it comes to me, let me attain the unattained, so that I will dwell comforted even in time of fear."
- (5) The monk reflects: "Now the Order dwell in **spiritual fellowship**, finding comfort in one teaching...but the time will come when the Order is divided. It is then not easy to turn to the Buddha

¹⁶ See Piyaṣilo, 1988b:40 f.

¹⁷ Except, for example, Jan Nattier, *Once Upon a Future Time*, 1991.

Word, or the forest and woodlands, or the solitary dwelling. Before it comes to me, let me attain the unattained, so that I will dwell comforted even though the Order is divided.”

(A 3:103-105)

The Anāgata,bhaya Sutta III (A 5.79 = 3:105-108), in a more serious tone, warns of the growing malpractices and wrong views of the Order members (here abridged and paraphrased):

Monks, there will be in the long road of the future, monks who are not cultivated in body, nor in moral conduct, nor in mind, nor in wisdom.

- (1) They will ordain (P. *upasampādessanti*) others but they will not be able to lead them to higher training (in moral conduct, mind and wisdom), and these undeveloped candidates in turn ordain others, repeating the vicious cycle...
- (2) They will provide training and support (*niśraya/nissaya*) to others but they will not be able to lead them to higher training (in moral conduct, mind and wisdom), and these undeveloped candidates will repeat the vicious cycle...
- (3) They will give talks regarding Dharma (*abhidharma/abhidhamma*) and on the Catechisms (*vaidalya/vedalla*), and fall into dark teachings (*kṛṣṇa.dharma/kaṇha,dhamma*), without any understanding...
- (4) They will not listen to the Buddha Word, neither study or master them; instead they will listen to and master “discourses that are mere poetry composed by poets, beautiful in word and phrase,, created by outsiders, spoken by their disciples” [S 2:266 f.]...
- (5) They will become luxurious, lax, backsliders (P. *okkamane pubbaṅgamā*, “falling back to prior states”), not valuing solitude (P. *paviveke nikkhitta,dhurā*)...

Thus, indeed, monks, from corrupt Dharma comes corrupt Discipline; from corrupt Discipline comes corrupt Dharma.

(A 3:105-108; cf. S 2:266 f.)

The Anāgata,bhaya Sutta IV (A 5.80 = 3:108-110), gives warning of growing materialism in the Order:

Monks, in the long road to the future, there will be monks who,

- (1) Longing for fine robes, will forsake rag-robes and leave the forest and solitary dwelling, and move into urban areas and metropolises, and commit many improper and unseemly deeds...
- (2) Longing for good almsfood..., will move into urban areas and metropolises, and commit many improper and unseemly deeds...
- (3) Longing for comfortable quarters (“beds and seats”)..., will move into urban areas and metropolises, and commit many improper and unseemly deeds...
- (4) Living with nuns, probationers and novices, will not delight in the holy life and either will commit some foul deed or return to lay life.
- (5) Living with monastery attendants and novices, will enjoy their various hoarded goods, and mark out their lands and crops (P. *oḷārikaṃ pi nimittaṃ karissanti paṭhaviyā pi haritagge pi*).

Monks, be fully awake against these things, and so should you strive to get rid of them.

(A 3:108-110; cf. S 2:195 f.)

Chapter 4

(Fourth Recital, *catuttha bhāṇavāra*: the Ālāra cycle)

12. AṄGA COUNTRY

(a) The Elephant Look

After their noonday meal, the Buddha and the Order heads for **Bhaṇḍa,grāma** (Bhaṇḍa,gāma). Just outside Vaiśālī, the Buddha turns his whole body around—the “elephant look” (*nāgāpalokita*)—to gaze at it as a final farewell gesture. At Bhaṇḍagrāma, he declares that through not understanding and penetrating four things, we have been faring for a long time in the cycle of rebirths, that is to say, our not realizing **moral conduct, concentration, insight, release** (D 2:122 f.). This is the fuller statement of the usual threefold training, comprising the first three factors (D 2:220; A 1:229).

The Buddha and his Order then pass through the villages of Hasti,grāma (Haṭṭhi,gāma), Āmra,grāma (Amba,gāma) and Jambu,grāma (Jambu,gāma, a village near Campā, the Aṅga capital),¹⁸ and sojourn at **Bhoga,nagara** (D 2:124), the city of the Bhogas, a constituent tribe of the Vṛjī confederacy, lying midway between Vaiśālī and Pāvā (Pāvā) (D 2:122-126).

(b) The 4 great references

At **Bhoga,nagara**, the Buddha discourses on **the four great references** (*mahāpradeśa/mahāpadesa*) which serve as the criteria for the true teaching. The term *apadeśa/apadesa* means “designation, pointing out; reference; witness, authority” (DP). However, in this context, it is best rendered as “reference” since we actually have only two final “authorities”, that is, the Dharma (the Suttas or Discourses) and the Vinaya (the Discipline). The four Great References are as follows:

- (1) **The Buddha.** Suppose a monk were to say: “Friends, I heard and received this teaching from the Lord’s own mouth: This is the Dharma, this is the Discipline, this is the Master’s Teaching.” Then, monks, you should neither approve nor disapprove his words...
- (2) **The Order.** Suppose a monk were to say: “In such and such a place, there is a community (*saṅgha*) with elders and distinguished teachers. I heard and received this teaching from that community: This is the Dharma, this is the Discipline, this is the Master’s Teaching.” Then, monks, you should neither approve nor disapprove his words...
- (3) **Elders.** Suppose a monk were to say: “In such and such a place, there are many elders (*stha-vira/thera*) who are learned, masters of scripture (*āgat’āgama*), Dharma-experts, Vinaya-experts, experts in the Summaries (*māṭṛkā/māṭikā*): This is the Dharma, this is the Discipline, this is the Master’s Teaching.” Then, monks, you should neither approve nor disapprove his words...
- (4) **An elder.** Suppose a monk were to say: “In such and such a place, there is an elder who is learned, bearer of tradition, Dharma-expert, Vinaya-expert, expert in the Summaries (*māṭṛkā/māṭikā*): This is the Dharma, this is the Discipline, this is the Master’s Teaching.” Then, monks, you should neither approve nor disapprove his words...

Without approving or disapproving, his words and expression should be carefully noted and compared with the Suttas and reviewed in the light of the Discipline. If they, on such comparison and review, are found not to conform to the Suttas or the Discipline, the conclusion must be: “Surely, this is not Buddha Word. It has been wrongly understood by this monk,” and the matter is to be rejected. But where on such comparison and review they are found to conform to the Suttas and the Discipline, the conclusion must be: “Surely, this is Buddha Word. It has been rightly understood by this monk.”

(D 2:123 ff. = A 2:167-170)

¹⁸ Jambugrāma. There is another Jambugrāma on the high road between Vaiśālī and Kuśinagarī.

The Buddha then (still in Bhoganagara) gives a comprehensive discourse on the threefold training [2]. Having stayed there long enough, the Buddha and the Order move on to Pāpā (Pāvā).

13. IN MALLA COUNTRY

(a) Cunda the blacksmith

After Bhoganagara, the Buddha and the Order continue their last Dharma-tour together and arrive in **Pāpā** (Pāvā), the town of the Mallas, across the Kakuṭṭha River from Kuśinagarī, to which it is connected by road. At Pāpā, the Buddha and the Order stay at **the mango grove of Cunda the blacksmith**, whose family prepare a sumptuous meal for them, abounding in **“pig’s delight”** (*sūkara,mārdava/sūkara,maddava*).¹⁹ Apparently, the Buddha knows the nature of the “pig’s delight”, for he instructs that it only be served to him and the remainder to be buried in a pit because, “Cunda, I can see no one in the world with its devas, Māra and Brahmā, in this generation with its ascetics and brahmins, its princes and people who, if they were to eat it, could thoroughly digest it except the Tathāgata.” (D 2:128)²⁰

This dish is apparently a heavy one and the Buddha has a relapse of the dysentery he suffered earlier on at Bilva [7]. Nevertheless, he bravely bears this new, less painful attack:

...the Lord was attacked by a severe sickness with bloody diarrhea, and with sharp pains as if he were about to die. But he endured all this mindfully and clearly aware, and without complaint.

(D 2:128)

Buddhaghosa gives three alternative meanings of the Pāli term *sūkara,maddava*: (1) the flesh from a single first-born wild pig, neither too young nor too old, which had come to hand naturally, i.e. without intentional killing; (2) a preparation of soft boiled rice cooked with the five cow-products (milk, cream, buttermilk, butter, ghee)²¹; (3) a kind of alchemic elixir (P. *rasāyana*) (DA 2:568). Dhammapala, in his commentary to Udāna 8.5 adds: (4) young bamboo shoots trampled by pigs (P. *sūkarehi maddita,vamsa-kaliro*). In short, the ancient Commentators are not sure of the exact meaning of *sūkara,maddava*.

Modern scholars tend to favour **“truffles”** (a kind of underground edible fungus) as the translation of *sūkara,maddava*, but this is not without its critics. Trevor Ling, in his work *The Buddha’s Philosophy of Man* (1981:218 n31) revised Rhys Davids’ translation and remarks (D:R 2:137 n31): “This explanation seems intended to avoid offence to vegetarian readers or hearers. Rhys Davids’s statement that Buddhists ‘have been mostly vegetarians, and are increasingly so,’ is difficult to accept.” In fact, adds Walshe in his own note: “Be that as it may (and in fact Eastern Theravāda Buddhists have rarely been vegetarians, though some are now, almost certainly under Western influence!), the question of vegetarianism has frequently been raised in the Buddhist field”. (D:W 572 n417).

(b) Was it a pork dish?

Although Rhys Davids notes that “it is important that the food prepared by [C]unda and eaten by the Buddha is called Bhatta [D 2:127]: this is not used elsewhere of meat” (D:R 2:137 n31), the term *bhatta* probably refers to the food offering as a whole (that is, including but not only the *sūkara,maddava*). Moreover, in reply to Devadatta’s proposal that the monks should not take fish and meat all life long, the Buddha declared that “fish and meat are pure in respect to three points: if one has not seen, heard or suspected (that they have been killed on purpose for one)” (V 2:197). In other words, vegetarianism is an option not the rule for Buddhist monastics. [7:8]

¹⁹ Cf. D:W 571 n417.

²⁰ Cf. Lamotte 1976:313 f.

²¹ V 1:244; DhA 1:158, 323, 397; SnA 322; VvA 147.

In the case of the **Ugra (Ugga), the householder of Vaiśālī** [4:21d], the foremost of those who give pleasant gifts (A 1:25), it is clear that amongst his gifts is “**pork** (P. *sūkara, māṃsa*) with a generous serving of jujube fruit” (A:W 3:41n) which the Buddha accepts “out of compassion” (A 3:49). However, it should also be noted that the Pali text is only one of two texts out of all the early sources (Sanskrit, Chinese, Tibetan) that *specifically* mentions the kind of food prepared by Cunda for the Buddha.²²

14. WAS THE BUDDHA POISONED?

The Mahā Parinibbāna Sutta (D 16) mentions two occasions of physical illness of the 80-year-old Buddha during his last days. **The first attack** is at Bilva (Beluva) [7a] during the rains retreat. However, realizing that it would be a calamity if he were to die there, the Buddha mindfully suppresses his sickness, thinking: “It would not be fitting for me to attain Nirvana without having addressed my followers, and without having taken leave of the Order of the Monks.” (D 2:99).

The second attack occurs following the Buddha’s consumption of Cunda’s meal offering at Pāpā (D 2:218). Again, for the same reason and using his mental powers, the Buddha suppresses the pain and illness, and continues his journey and teachings. Like **Socrates** who nobly drinks the hemlock deliberately prepared by his executioners without bearing them the slightest ill-will, the Buddha graciously eats his portion of the ‘pig’s delight’ offered by Cunda the smith, but bids the others refrain, and the rest of it should be buried.²³

Of course, there is no question of ill intent on Cunda’s part, but the Buddha is concerned lest the man feel guilty, and consoles him with the remark that Cunda should rather be praised, because “the Tathāgata gained final Nibbana after taking his last meal from you!” (D 16.4.42). Since neither man [Buddha or Socrates] feels that his impending death is an evil thing to be avoided, it is only natural for them not to resent the proximate causes, but the sensitivity with which they communicate this to the person responsible is indicative again of the compassion that characterizes both men.

(Matthew Dillon, 2000:531)

Traditionally, it is said that the Buddha asks Cunda to bury the remainder of the *sūkara, maddava* because the gods have infused it with **divine essence** (*ūrjas/ojā*) as a tonic for the Buddha so that “no one in the world with its devas, Māra and Brahmā, in this generation with its ascetics and brahmins, its princes and people who, if they were to eat it, could thoroughly digest it except the Tathāgata.” (D 2:128; Bareau 1971:4).

In his notes, John Strong (2001:171) highlights the curious omission in the Pali account of an episode that is found in all the other versions of the Buddha’s last meal, that is, the mysterious and confused account of the “evil monk” who steals the bowl of food intended for the Buddha, thus forcing Cunda to prepare a second special meal, or who steals a bowl containing the leftovers of the meal (Bareau, 1970-71:258-264).

The Milinda, pañha discusses the dilemma confronting Cunda’s offering and the Buddha’s final Nirvana, and concludes that

²² For the latest discussion on the Buddha’s last meal and references, see John S. Strong, *The Buddha: A short biography*, 2001:134-135.

²³ Cf. Matthew Dillon’s insightful comparison of the deaths of the two great men in “Dialogues with Death”, *Philosophy East and West* 50,4 Oct 2000:525-558.

The last offering of food is of great advantage because of the Tathāgata's attainment of *parinibbāna*. It was not because of the food that the sickness fell upon the Blessed One but because of the **extreme weakness of his body and the proximity of death**. These two offerings of food were of great and incomparable merit because of the attainment of the nine successive absorptions in forward and reverse order which the Tathāgata gained after partaking of that food.

(Miln 174-178; Miln:P 50 f. Pesala's abr. tr.)

15. KAKUṬṬHĀ RIVER

(a) Putkasa the Malla

After Pāpā, the Buddha and the Order heads for **Kuśīnagarī** (Kusinārā), some 80 km southeast from Pāpā. Midway between Pāpā and Kuśīnagarī, the Buddha rests under a tree beside a ford, over which 500 carts has crossed. As such, the water there is all churned up and muddy. The Buddha instructs Ānanda to fetch some drinking water, but Ānanda suggests that they trek to the nearby Kakuṭṭha River where “the water is clean, cool and clear, with beautiful, delightful banks” (D 2:128 f.). After the Buddha's third request, Ānanda obliges and to his wonder, there is clear water in the ford despite the passing of the 500 carts over it.

At this point, it is clear that an episode to glorify the Buddha is interpolated, as will be evident when we examine its implications. This is the episode of **the Buddha's transfiguration** following the offering of “golden” robes by **Putkasa** (Pukkusa), a pupil of Ārāḍa Kālāma, who meets the Buddha resting under the tree. Putkasa, proud of his teacher, Ārāḍa, who was also the Bodhisattva's first teacher [2:14], boasts that Ārāḍa was such a remarkable meditator who “neither saw nor heard 500 carts passing nearby”.

The Buddha replies that he himself, when meditating, is totally unaffected by greater commotion: “while conscious, not to see or hear anything in heavy rainstorm, when lightning flashes and thunder crashes”—which, he asks Putkasa, is more difficult to do? In fact, when the Buddha was staying in the threshing-house (*buś'āgāra/bhus'āgāra*, i.e. where harvest is threshed) at **Ātumā**, a village between Kuśīnagarī and Śrāvastī, there was a bad thunderstorm, where “two farmers, brothers, and four oxen were killed; and a lot of people went out of Ātumā to where the two brothers and four oxen were killed.” The Buddha was walking in meditation just outside the building, but was totally unaffected by the whole incident. (D 2:131 f.; cf. V 1:249 f.)

Putkasa is impressed at the Buddha's meditative powers and goes for refuge. He then donates to him a pair of robes “of golden cloth, burnished and ready to wear”. He instructs Putkasa to clothe him with one of the robes, and to clothe Ānanda with the other. After Putkasa has left, and while Ānanda is arranging the robe over the Buddha, **his body glows brighter than the robe of burnished gold itself** so that the robe appears to become dull in colour.

The Buddha then informs Ānanda that on two occasions, the Buddha's body would glow radiantly (as if transfigured): the first occasion is on the night of the Great Enlightenment, and the second is on the night of the Final Nirvana. “**Tonight, Ānanda, in the last watch, in the sal grove of the Mallas near Kuśīnagarī, between two sal trees, the Tathāgata's final passing without remains will take place**”²⁴. (D 2:134)

A very interesting point regarding the Buddha's transfiguration is that it is very similar to that of Jesus Christ (Mark 9:2-8), so that “his garments became glistening, intensely white, as no fuller on earth could bleach them”. In the case of the Buddha, it is his whole body that glistens brightly, some 500 years (or at least 200 years in terms of the recorded tradition) before the biblical story.

²⁴ On the 3 types of *parinirvāṇa*, see section 20b below.

(b) Exoneration of Cunda

The Buddha and the Order then proceed to the **Kakuṭṭha River** that divides Kuśinagarī and Pāpā (D 2:129, 134 ff; U 7.5). It is called Cocouthes by the ancient Greek writers. Today the river is called the Kuku. Some scholars, however, identify it with the modern Ghāgī, a small stream flowing into the Little Gandak, about 3 km (2 miles) to the west of Chitiyaon in the Gorakhpur district.

The Buddha bathes and drinks at the Kakuṭṭha River. After that, they go into **the mango grove**. There, he instructs Ānanda to inform **Cunda** that his offering will bring great reward, for it will be the immediate cause of his attaining to final Nirvana.

It might happen, Ānanda, that Cunda the smith might feel remorse, thinking, “It is your fault, Cunda, it is by your misdeed that the Tathāgata gained the final Nirvana after taking his meal from you!” But Cunda’s remorse should be expelled in this way: “This is your merit, Cunda, that is your good deed, that the Tathāgata gained the final Nirvana after taking his last meal from you! For, friend Cunda, I have heard and understood from the Lord’s own mouth that these two alms-giving are of very great fruit, of very great result, more fruitful and advantageous than any other. Which two? The one is the almsgiving after eating which the Tathāgata attains Supreme Enlightenment, the other after which the Tathāgata attains the Nirvana-element without remainder at his final passing. These two almsgiving are more fruitful and profitable than all others. Cunda’s deed is conducive to long life, beauty, happiness, fame, heaven and lordship.” In this way, Cunda’s remorse is to be expelled.

(D 2:138)

The other foremost gift is made just before the Great Enlightenment, but no mention is made of its giver, although the Theravada tradition it is the lady Sujāta [2:18].

Chapter 5

(Fifth Recital, *pañcama bhāṇavāra*: the *Hiraññavati*.)

16. KUŚINAGARĪ

(a) Upavartana Wood

At this point, the Buddha and his Order come to the river **Hiraṇya, vatī** (*Hirañña, vatī*) that runs by the sāl grove of the Mallas and the Upavartana Wood (recreation ground) of Kuśinagarī (D 2:137). Crossing the Hiraṇyavati, the Buddha reaches the sal grove of the Mallas at **Kuśinagarī** (*Kusinārā*), the Malla capital (D 2:146, 170; J 1:392, 5:278; Divy 152 ff.). The Hiraṇyavati river is today called the Little Gandak, flowing through district of Gorakhpur about 13 km (8 miles) to the west of the Great Gandak and falls into the Ghogra. Kuśinagarī is located near modern Kasia in the district of Deoria, Uttar Pradesh

According to the Commentary, Pāpā is three *gavutas* (approximately 8 km or 5 miles) from Kuśinagarī. Walking that distance with great effort and sitting down at 25 places on the way, the Buddha reaches the sal grove when the sun has already set. Thus illness comes to a man, crushing all his health. As if he wants to point to this fact, the Buddha speaks these deeply moving words: “I am weary, Ānanda, and want to lie down.” (DA 2:575) There the Buddha mindfully lies down in the “lion-posture”, on his right side with his head to the north and legs to the south, between two *sāla* trees, determined never to rise again.

It is said that the twin sal trees burst forth with untimely blossoms that fall on the Buddha’s body, covering it up, as if in homage. Divine coral tree (*mandārava*) flowers fall from the sky, divine sandalwood powder descend from the sky, sprinkling and covering the Buddha’s body in homage as it were.

Divine music and song resound through the sky. Never before has he been so honoured, the Buddha tells Ānanda.

And yet, Ānanda, whatever monk, nun, layman or laywoman practises the Dharma in accordance with the Dharma, properly practising, living in accordance with Dharma, he honours the Tathāgata, reveres him, esteems him, pays him the supreme homage (*paramā pūjā*). Therefore, Ānanda: “We will practise the Dharma in accordance with the Dharma, properly practising, living in accordance with Dharma!”— this is how you should train yourself.

(D 2:139)

(b) Looking at the Buddha

Now at the time, the venerable **Upavāṇa** is standing in front of the Buddha, fanning him. Then the Buddha tells him, “Move aside, monk, do not stand in front of me!” Upavāṇa has been the Buddha’s personal attendant for a long time before; so Ānanda wonders why the Buddha tells him to move aside. The Buddha then explains to Ānanda that the gods from ten world-systems have gathered to witness him.

For a distance of 12 yojanas (130 km) around the Mallas’ sal grove near Kusināra there is not a space you could touch with the point of a hair that is not filled with mighty devas, and they are grumbling: “We have come a long way to see the Tathāgata. It is rare for a Tathāgata, a fully self-enlightened Buddha, to arise in the world, and tonight in the last watch the Tathāgata will attain final Nirvana, and this mighty monk is standing in front of the Lord, preventing us from getting a last glimpse of the Tathāgata!”

But, Lord, what kind of devas can the Lord perceive?

Ānanda, there are sky-devas whose minds are earth-bound, they are weeping and tearing their hair, raising their arms, falling to the ground as with feet cut off, twisting and turning, crying: “All too soon the Blessed Lord is passing away, all too soon the Well-farer is passing away, all too soon **the Eye of the World** is disappearing!” And there are earth-devas whose minds are earth-bound, who do likewise. But those devas who are free from craving endure patiently, saying: “All compounded things are impermanent: what is the use of this?”

(D 2:139 f.)

This is an interesting way of presenting the ancient belief in *darśana/dassana* (“seeing”) that goes way back to the Vedic times. This notion is found the expression “the Eye of the World” (P. *cakkhum loke*, lit. “the eye in the world”), which reflects the fact the Buddha only appears *in* this world, but is not of this world (i.e. not worldly). In his notes to his translation of this sutra, Thanissaro Bhikkhu says:

From Vedic times, it has been considered auspicious in India to gaze on a holy person or heavenly being, and to be gazed on by such a being as well. Here the fact that heavenly beings themselves want to gaze on the Buddha indicates the high regard they have for him (this is also the motive for their Great Meeting in D 20 [the Mahā Samaya Sutta]); the phrase...“**the One with Eyes,**” indicates that they also regarded his gaze as highly auspicious for them. Later passages in this discourse indicate that human beings have similar feelings about the auspiciousness of the Buddha’s gaze and the Buddha as an object of one’s own gaze. A great deal of later history of Buddhism in India—including devotional practice, Buddhology, meditation practice, and even the architecture of monasteries—grew out of the continuing desire to have a vision of the Buddha and to be gazed on by the Buddha, even after his Parinibbana.

(Thanissaro Bhikkhu 2002:16 n2; my emphasis)

(c) The four holy places

Ānanda then raises the question regarding monks who after their rains retreat would come from various places to pay their respects to the Buddha: how are they going to do this after the Buddha has passed away? The Buddha then introduces a novel practice: **the pilgrimage to the four holy places:**

Ānanda, there are these four holy places the sight of which should arouse religious emotion (or “sense of urgency”, *saṃvega*) in the faithful. Which are they? “**Here the Tathāgata is born**” is the first. “**Here the Tathāgata attained supreme enlightenment**” is the second. “**Here the Tathāgata set in motion the Wheel of Dharma**” is the third. “**Here the Tathāgata attained the Nirvana-element without remainder**” is the fourth. And, Ānanda, the faithful monks and nuns, laymen and laywomen may visit those places. And anyone who dies while making the pilgrimage to these shrines with a devout heart will, at the breaking up of the body after death, be reborn in a heavenly world.

(D 2:140 f.; A 2:120)

These names of these four places “that arouses religious emotion” (*saṃvejanīya,sthāna/saṃvejanīya-ṭ,thāna*) that are worthy of pilgrimage are: Lumbinī (modern Rummidei, Nepal), Uruvilvā (Buddha Gayā), Rṣipatana (modern Sarnath) and Kuśinagarī (Kusinārā).

The *Pali-English Dictionary* defines *saṃvega* as “agitation, fear, anxiety; thrill, religious emotion (caused by contemplation of the miseries of the world)”. It is one of the most powerful of Buddhist terms that refers to a sort of spiritual crisis that results from directly perceiving the truth. For a lay person, this usually results in disillusionment with worldly life, whereas in the case of a Sangha member, it urges him to exert more energy in spiritual practice until the goal is attained. This was the kind of experience that prince Siddhārtha had when he saw the four Sights [2:3].

The *Buddhist Dictionary* defines *saṃvega* as “‘the sources of emotions’ or, of a sense of urgency” of which there are eight: “birth; old age; death; the suffering in the lower states of existence; the misery of the past rooted in the cycle of rebirth; the misery of the future rooted in the cycle of rebirth; and the misery of the present rooted in the search for food” (Vism 4.63 = KhA 235; D 3:124; S 1:197; A 1:43; It 30; J 1:138; Nm 406).

(d) Treatment of the Buddha’s remains

At this point, another arbitrary and incongruous interpolation, albeit only a short paragraph, appears to have been made, that is, Ānanda’s questioning the Buddha as to “**how should we act towards women?**” [6:6].²⁵ This episode is not found in the Sanskrit versions, attesting to its lateness. Then follows a more related question regarding **how the Buddha’s remains should be treated**, to which the Buddha answers:

Do not worry yourselves about the funeral arrangements, Ānanda. You should strive for the highest goal, devote yourselves to the highest goal, and dwell with your minds tirelessly, zealously devoted to the highest goal. There are wise kshatriyas, brahmins and householders who are devoted to the Tathāgata: they will take care of the funeral.

(D 2:141)

Ānanda, however, repeats the question: “What are we to do with the Tathāgata’s remains?” Pressed for an answer, the Buddha replies: “Ānanda, they should be treated like the remains of **a wheel-turning monarch**.” That is to say, it should be wrapped in new linen cloth, then in teased line cloth, and then in a new linen cloth. This should be done 500 times, and then the body is placed in an oil-vat of iron. This should be covered with an iron lid. The pyre should be composed totally of perfume substances, and cremate the body. Then **a stupa** (burial mound) is built over the relics at the crossroads. And those who offer a garland, a scent, or perfume powder, or bow down there, or brighten their minds there, that will be for their profit and welfare for a long time to come.

The Buddha then tells Ānanda that the following four people are **worthy of a stupa**: the Buddha, a Pratyeka Buddha (a fully self-enlightened Buddha who does not establish a dispensation), a disciple of the Buddha, and a wheel-turning (universal) monarch. The reason for this is:

²⁵ For a more positive answer, see the Bhāradvāja Sutta, S 35.127 = 4:110 f.

Because, Ānanda, at the thought, “This is the stupa of a Tathāgata, of a Pratyeka Buddha, of a disciple of the Tathāgata, of a wheel-turning monarch,” people’s hearts are made peaceful, and then, at the breaking up of the body after death, they go to a good destiny and reappear in a heavenly world.

(D 2:143)

17. FINAL INSTRUCTIONS

(a) Ānanda’s grief

And the venerable Ānanda then went into his lodging and stood lamenting, leaning against the door-post: “Alas! I am still a learner (*śaikṣa/sekha*) with much to do! And the Teacher is passing away —**he who is so kind to me!**”

(D 2:143) [6:24]

Then the Buddha, on learning of Ānanda’s predicament, summons him and then consoles him:

Enough, Ānanda, do not grieve! Do not weep! Have I not told you before: All those things that are dear and pleasant to us must suffer change, separation and becoming other? What else is there to expect? Whatever is born, become, compounded, is liable to decay—that it should not decay is impossible.

For a long time, Ānanda, you have been in the Tathāgata’s presence, showing lovingkindness in act of body, speech and mind, helpfully, happily, whole-heartedly and unstintingly. You have gained much merit, Ānanda. Make an effort, and in a short time you will be free of the corruptions.

Ānanda, being only a Stream-winner at this point, understandably suffers grief at the impending loss of a spiritual friend. Earlier on when Śāriputra is still alive, he admonished Ānanda that

Friend, even if the Teacher himself were to undergo change and become other, still sorrow, lamentation, pain, displeasure and despair would not arise in me. However, it would occur to me: “The Teacher, so influential, so powerful and mighty, has passed away. If the Blessed One had lived for a long time, that would have been for the welfare and happiness of the many, out of compassion for the world, for the good, welfare and happiness of gods and humans.”

(Upatissa Sutta, S 2:274)

It is interesting to note here that Śāriputra has actually hinted to Ānanda regarding the life-span of the Buddha. Surely, if Śāriputra had not predeceased the Buddha, Śāriputra would have surely invited the Buddha to remain for the full duration of his life-span here on earth.

(b) Valediction to Ānanda

The Buddha then delivers **his valediction to Ānanda**, giving him a vote of thanks as it were, for the decades of personal service. This is an occasion when the Buddha’s remarks are completely full of compassion, spoken totally **in terms of the person**:

Monks, all those who were Arhant, Perfect Self-enlightened Buddhas in the past have had just a chief attendant as Ānanda, and so too will those Blessed Ones to come. Monks, Ānanda is wise. He knows when it is the right time for monks to come to see the Tathāgata, when it is the right time for nuns, for male lay-followers, for female lay-followers, for kings, for royal ministers, for leaders of other schools, and for their pupils.

Ānanda has four remarkable and wonderful qualities. What are they? If a company of monks comes to see Ānanda, they are pleased at the sight of him, and when Ānanda talks Dharma to them they are pleased, and when he is silent they are disappointed. And so it is, too, with nuns, with male

followers and female followers. And these four qualities apply to **a universal monarch**: if he is visited by a company of kshatriyas, or brahmins, or householders, or of ascetics, they are pleased at the sight of him and when he talks to them, and when he is silent they are disappointed. And so too it is with Ānanda.

(D 2:144 f; A 2:132, 5:229; SA 2:94 f.) [6:6a]

18. KUŚINAGARĪ AND THE MALLAS

(a) Kuśinagarī

At this point, Ānanda is concerned that the Buddha has chosen a rather way-out place to pass away. After all, **Kuśinagarī** is “this miserable little town of wattle-and-daub, right in the jungle, an outpost township!” There are other great cities like Campā, Rājagṛha, Śrāvastī, Sāketa, Kauśāmbī or Vārāṇasī, that is, together with Vaiśālī, are the seven great cities of the time.

The Buddha then tells him that at one time, this humble place was **Kuśavatī** (Kusavatī), the capital of the universal monarch, **Mahā Sudarśana** (Mahā Sudassana), whose details are given at length in the sutra (M 17; J 95) following the Mahā Parinibbāna Sutta. The Buddha compares ancient Kuśavatī to Āḷakamandā, the royal city of Kuvera, the king of Uttarakuru, the northern continent (D 3:201).

(b) Lamentations of the Mallas

The Buddha then instructs Ānanda to inform the **Vāsiṣṭhas** (Vāseṭṭha), that is, the Malla clan of Kuśinagarī that the Buddha will be passing away in their town. The Mallas are assembled in their meeting-hall when Ānanda breaks the sad news to them. They at once lament and grieve, and in due course make their way to the sal grove.

Realising that it would go well beyond the night to present the Vāsiṣṭhas individually, Ānanda decides to present them **by families**. So, during the first watch of the night (6.00 p.m.-10.00 p.m.) each of the Vāsiṣṭha family salutes the Buddha, announcing their names to him and saluting the Buddha’s feet. This practice of announcing one’s name to a holy person is another pre-Buddhist devotional practice, which evolved into the custom of recording the donor’s names on carvings and bas-reliefs on or near the stupas, on walls and in buildings, or at any spot deemed sacred, even when such inscriptions are invisible.

19. THE LAST CONVERT

(a) Subhadra the last convert

Subhadra (Subhadda), a wanderer, hears of the impending demise of the Buddha and decides to clear his doubts at this most opportune moment. At first Ānanda refuses to allow him to see the Buddha, thinking that the Buddha should not be troubled by questions at such a time. The Buddha, however, overhears their conversation and invites Subhadra over. He asks the Buddha whether any or some, and which ones, of the six sectarian teachers [8:7] of the time have realized the truth. The Buddha replies that he need not bother about such questions:

In whatever Dharma and Discipline **the Noble Eightfold Path** is not found, no ascetic is found if the first, the second, the third or the fourth grade [i.e. the Stream-winner, the Once-returned, the Non-returned, the Arhant, respectively]. But such ascetics....are to be found where the Noble Eightfold Path is found. Now, Subhadda, in this Dharma and Discipline the Noble Eightfold is found, and in it are found the four kinds of ascetics. Those other schools are devoid of such ascetics. But here if the monks were to live rightly, this world will not be empty of Arhants.

At twenty-nine I went forth, Subhadda,
Seeking for the good.
Now over fifty years have passed
Since the day that I went forth, Subhadda.
Outside of the realm of this True Dharma
There are no ascetics.

(D 2:151 f.)

Subhadra is converted, but the Buddha informs him that converts from non-Buddhist sects, as a rule, have to undergo **a probation period of four months**. Subhadra enthusiastically answers that he is willing to wait even if it takes four years. The Buddha then instructs Ānanda to let Subhadra go forth. (D 2:152, 1:176 f.). Subhadra then, using a term from the vocabulary of his erstwhile faith, tells Ānanda that it is such good fortune to have received **“the pupil’s consecration”** (*antevāsikâbhiṣeka/antevāsikâbhiseka*) from the Buddha himself. This is the lion-roar of Subhadra, the last personal disciple (*sakṣī, śrāvaka/sak-khī, sāvaka*) of the Buddha, that is, one who has attained Arhantship in due course.

(b) The Noble Eightfold Path

The Buddha’s statement here that where the Noble Eightfold Path is found, there too is to be found the four types of Saints is of paramount importance to the growth of Buddhism after the Great Final Nirvana. One of the greatest stumbling blocks to Buddhist growth and openness is the problem of **sectarianism and triumphalism**. The Buddha’s declaration here means that it is the Noble Eightfold Path that is “the one way” and not any sect or tradition. [7d]

273. **The best of paths is the Eightfold Path.**
The best of truths are the four sayings [the Four Noble Truths].
Non-attachment is the best of states.
The best of the two-legged is the One with the Eyes.
274. **This is the only way; there is no other**
For the purity of vision.
Be sure you follow this path
For the bewilderment of Māra.
275. Entering upon that path,
You will make an end of pain.
I have taught you the way
Knowing how to draw out the dart (of suffering).
276. You yourself must strive:
The Buddhas are only teachers—
Those who follow the way and meditate
Will be free from Māra’s bonds.

(Dh 273-276)

Chapter 6

(Sixth Recital, *chaṭṭhī bhāṇavāra*.)

20. THE BUDDHA'S LAST INSTRUCTIONS

(a) The Dharma-Vinaya as teacher

The sutra continues as follows:

Ānanda, it may be that you would think: “The Teacher’s instruction has ceased; now we have no teacher.” It should not be seen like this, Ānanda, for what I have taught and explained to you as **Dharma and Discipline will, at my passing, be your teacher.**”

(D 2:154)

The Buddha then instructs that the monks should stop addressing one another as “friend” (*āvusa/āvuso*). After his passing, senior monks are to address junior monks by the name, their clan or as “**friend**”, whereas junior monks should address their seniors either as “**Venerable Sir**” (*bhāvan/bhante*) or as “**Venerable**” (*āyusmat/āyasmā*). The reason here is to inculcate due respect to seniority, so that proper authority is acknowledged and harmony maintained, hence promoting solidarity in the Order.

The Buddha then concedes that the Order may, if it wishes, after his passing, **abolish the lesser and minor rules** (*kṣudrānuṣṣūdraka śikṣāpada/khuddakānukhuddaka sikkhāpada*) (D 2:154). Ānanda, however, fails to clarify with the Buddha what are the extent of these rules, so the elders of the Council of Rājagṛha decide not to make any changes to the rules [6:28].

(b) The supreme penalty on Chandaka

The Buddha then imposes a posthumous corrective measure, the “supreme penalty” (*brahma,daṇḍa*) on the monk **Chandaka** (Channa), who had been the Bodhisattva’s charioteer, but since he joined the Order he had been showing improper conduct (*anācāra*) by being arrogant and incorrigible even towards elders of the Order. He once cut down a tree shrine revered by the people to make space for a residence (Saṅgh’ādi,sesa 7 = V 3:155 f.). He despised all the other monks, thinking, “The Buddha is mine; the Dharma is mine!” (Saṅgh’ādi,sesa 12 = V 3:177 f.). He counterquestioned his examiners during another Saṅgh’ādi,sesa proceeding against him (Pācittiya 12 = V 4:35 ff.). Going in search of grass and sticks for his lodging, he damaged the cornfield of a certain brahmin (Pācittiya 19 = V 4:47). He was generally disrespectful to others (Pācittiya 54 = V 4:113).

The Buddha defines **the supreme penalty** here as “Whatever the monk Channa wants or says, he is not to be spoken to, admonished or instructed by the monks.” (D 2:154).²⁶ Effectively this is a total boycott by the Order. The closing of Culla,vagga 11 of the Vinaya records how when Ānanda conveys the supreme penalty to Chandaka at Ghosīt’ārāma (in Kauśāmbī), he faints at the thought of being boycotted by the Order. He then goes into retreat to develop himself (V 2:292). **The Channa Sutta** (S 22.90) records in a humorous tone, how he attempts to seek Dharma instruction from other monks, and how Ānanda admonishes him (S 3:133 ff.). Apparently, no monk actually boycott him, since they try to answer his questions, albeit careful to not offend him. In due course, he gained Arhantship, by which the supreme penalty is automatically abrogated.

²⁶ Cf. D 1:96 where it is used differently.

21. THE FINAL MOMENTS

(a) The Buddha's last words

The Buddha then addresses the Order, asking whether anyone has any doubt or uncertainty about the Buddha, the Dharma or the Sangha:

Ask, monks! Do not afterwards feel remorse, thinking: "The Teacher was there before us, and we failed to ask the Lord face to face!"

Thrice the Buddha addresses the Order, and thrice they are silent. Then the Buddha says: "Perhaps, monks, you do not ask out of respect for the Teacher. Then, monks, let one friend tell it to another." But they are still silent. Ānanda then remarks:

It is wonderful, Lord! It is marvellous, Lord! I clearly perceive that in this assembly there is not one monk who has any doubt or uncertainty!

You speak out of faith, Ānanda! But the Tathāgata knows that in this assembly there is not one monk who has any doubt or uncertainty about the Buddha, the Dharma or the Sangha or the path or the practice. Ānanda, the least one of these 500 monks is a Stream-winner, incapable of falling into any suffering state, certain of Nirvana.

Now, monks, I declare to you: **all conditioned things are subject to decay—strive on heedfully!** (D 2:155 f.)

These are the Buddha's last words.

(b) The Buddha's last moments

Then the Buddha successively enters the first, the second, the third and the fourth Absorptions. Then emerging from the fourth Absorption, he enters the Sphere of Infinite Space, then the Sphere of Infinite Consciousness, then the Sphere of Nothingness, then the Sphere of Neither-Perception-Nor-Non-Perception, and leaving that, he attains the Cessation of Feeling and Perception. All this is noted by **Aniruddha**, the foremost of those monks with the Divine Eye.

When Ānanda remarks that the Buddha has passed away, Aniruddha explains that the Buddha has only attained the Cessation of Feeling and Perception. Then the Buddha emerges from that state, and proceeds in reverse until he attains the first Absorption again. Then he again attains the second Absorption, the third Absorption, and the Fourth Absorption, and there he finally passes away. At that moment, there is a great earthquake and thunder.

(c) Aspects of (pari)nirvāṇa

The oldest Pali texts (cf. DhA 2:163) mention two aspects of *nirvāṇa/nibbāna* and of *parinirvāṇa/parinibbāna*, where both the terms---*nirvāṇa* and *parinirvāṇa*---are identical in meaning. Partly due to the usage of the term *parinirvāṇa/parinibbāna* in this sutra, where it describes the Buddha's final passing away---the "Final Nirvana"---the term is often associated (exclusively) with the "death" of the Buddha or an Arhant.²⁷ Moreover, Rhys Davids' Pali-English Dictionary perpetuates this error (PED 427, under Parinibbāna). **E.J. Thomas**²⁸ remarks that "Even the Buddhists of Ceylon have the same idea [that *parinirvāṇa* means final *nirvāṇa* or *nirvāṇa* attained at death with the complete dispersal of the *skandhas*], probably because they follow Rhys Davids [i.e. the Pali Text Society's Pali-English Dictionary] more closely than the Pali texts."

²⁷ K.R. Norman, "Mistaken Ideas about Nibbāna". In *The Buddhist Forum* III, ed. Skorupski & Pagel, London, 1995:216. This section is a summary of the salient points in this insightful article.

²⁸ E.J. Thomas. "Nirvāṇa and Parinirvāṇa", in *India Antiqua* (Festschrift for Jean Philippe Vogel), Leiden, 1947:294 f. See also R. Gombrich, *Precepts and Practice*, Oxford, 1971:70 n14.

Some scholars have also endorsed this error: **A.K. Warder**²⁹, for example, says that “The prefix *pari* is generally used when referring not to *nirvāṇa* itself as a state, but to the event of an individual’s (final) attainment of it at the end of his worldly life.” Modern scholars like K.R. Norman and Bhikkhu Bodhi are well aware of this problem. **K.R. Norman** disagrees with Warder and prefers Thomas’ view, but agreeing that “the difference between *nibbāna* and *parinibbāna* is a grammatical one.” (1995:216 f.)

[E.J. Thomas] clarified the relationship between *nibbāna* and *parinibbāna* long ago, referring³⁰ to E. Kuhn’s explanation [untraced] that “*pari* compounded with a verb converts the verb from the expression of a state to the expression of the achievement of an action”. He states, “**Nirvāṇa is the state of release; parinirvāṇa is the attaining of that state.** The monk *parinirvāṇi* ‘attains *nirvāṇa*’ at the time of enlightenment as well as at death”....

Thomas...elaborated the same explanation,³¹ “He *parinibbāyati*, attains the state, and then *nibbāyati*, is in the state expressed by *nibbāna*”.

(K.R. Norman, 1995:217; my emphasis)

“It is clear, therefore, that the difference between *nibbāna* and *parinibbāna* is not that of *nibbāna* in life and *parinibbāna* at death” (Norman, 1995:216).³²

Later, medieval scholars expanded the usages of the term *parinibbāna*. Buddhaghosa, in his *Dīgha Commentary*, for example, speak of **three kinds of Parinirvāṇa** connected with the Buddha: that of the defilements (*kleśa parinirvāṇa/kilesa parinibbāna*), that of the Aggregates [lit. “Groups” of Aggregates]³³ (*skandha, parinirvāṇa/khandha parinibbāna*), and that of his bodily relics (*dhātu parinirvāṇa/dhātu parinibbāna*) (DA 899 f.).³⁴ The first, also known as “Nirvana with remnants of clinging” (*saupadhi, śeṣa nirvāṇa/sopādi, sesa nibbāna*), according to Buddhaghosa, took place under the Bodhi tree during the Enlightenment (It 41). The second, or “Nirvana without remnants of clinging” (*nirôpadhi, śeṣa nirvāṇa/nirupādi, sesa nibbāna*) (It 41; A 4.116), is the Mahā Parinirvāṇa at Kuśinagarī (a view, as have seen differing from that of the early texts). The third kind of *parinirvāṇa* refers to the end of the Dispensation, that is, the final disappearance of the Buddha’s Teaching [6:22].

The Pali term **upādi** (“clinging”, from *upa + ā + dā* “to take”) is often confused with the Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit **upādhi** (meaning “remnant, substrate”, or more correctly, “acquisitions” or “belongings”, attachment to which leads to rebirth). Despite the subtle but important difference in meaning, most modern commentators regard them as synonymous, and do not try to explain how and why the difference arose. (Norman, 1995:215)

(d) The four verses

Brahmā Sahampati (who had just after the Enlightenment invited the Buddha to proclaim the Dharma) [4:1] utters this verse:

All beings in the world, all bodies must break up!
Even the Teacher, peerless in the human world,
The Lord Thus-come, powerful in wisdom, the perfect Buddha has passed away.

²⁹ A.K. Warder, *Introduction to Pali*, London, 1963:49 n1.

³⁰ E.J. Thomas, *The History of Buddhist Thought*, London, 1933:121 n4.

³¹ E.J. Thomas. “Nirvāṇa and Parinirvāṇa”, 1971:294 f.

³² For Bhikkhu Bodhi’s discussion, see S:B 1:49-52.

³³ The Groups here comprises those of form, feeling, perception, dispositions, and consciousness. See n1.

³⁴ Cf. DhA 2:163 where 2 kinds of *parinibbāna* are distinguished.

Śakra, the king of the gods, utters this popular ancient verse, said to be a remnant from the teaching of a previous Buddha that only he remembers:

Impermanent, alas, are all compounded things!
It is their nature to rise and fall;
Having arisen, they pass away—
Happy it is when they are stilled!

(D 2:157 = 199 = J 1:392 = S 1:6 = 158 = 2:193 = Tha 1149 = DhA 1:71 = MA 1:235)

Aniruddha proclaims:

There is no more breathing in and out in the one whose mind is steady;
The wise sage, unstirred, bent on peace,
The self enlightened one attained final Nirvana.

With mind unshaken, he endured the pain:
Like a lamp extinguished, his mind is freed.

And **Ānanda** utters:

There was terror, there was hair-raising fear,
When the self-enlightened one, perfect in all excellent qualities, passed away.

(D 2:157; S 1:158)

The Parinibbāṇa Sutta of the Saṃyutta, found in the Brahma Saṃyutta (S 1:158), contains the first verse since it is attributed to Brahmā. The second is Śakra's. The last two verses are there put into the mouths of Ānanda and Aniruddha respectively, perhaps because Aniruddha's verse forms a more fitting conclusion (S 1:158). In the Dīgha, however, Ānanda's verse comes last, "either in deprecation of Ānanda (which is scarcely probable), or more probably the way in which the early Buddhists regarded the passing of the Buddha. These four speakers are "four representative persons": **Brahmā**, the exalted god of the brahmins; **Śakra**, the king of the gods, popular with the Buddhists; **Aniruddha**, the holy, thoughtful Arhant; and **Ānanda**, the loving, childlike disciple. (D:R 2:71, 73)

The Buddha passed away in the early hours of the full-moon day of the month of Vaiśākha, 543 BC (or, according to modern scholars, c. 483 BCE) at the age of 80. To remember the Buddha and mark this important occasion, south and south-east Asian Buddhists calculate their respective **Buddhist calendars** from this year (that is, by adding the number 543 to the Common Era).

22. REMEMBERING THE BUDDHA

(a) Homage to the Buddha's remains

Aniruddha then comforts the congregation reminding them of what the Buddha himself has admonished on impermanence. Those devas who are free from craving patiently endure the loss, saying: "All compounded things are impermanent. What is the use of all this?" Then Aniruddha and Ānanda spend the rest of the night in conversation on Dharma.

At the end of the conversation, Aniruddha instructs Ānanda to go to the Malla family called **the Vāsiṣṭha** (Vāseṭṭha) to inform them of the Buddha's passing. When Ānanda arrive in their assembly hall, the Mallas are in the midst of a congregation. Hearing the news, they are overcome by grief, tearing at their hair. Sadly, they then order their people to bring perfume and wreath, and gather all the musicians together. Then with 500 sets of garments they proceed to the sal grove where the Buddha's body lie in state.

After worshipping the Buddha's body, they honour it with dance, song and music, with garlands and scents, making awnings and circular tents in order to spend the day there. Since it is already late, they decide to cremate the body the next day. But the mourning goes on for up to six days. On the seventh day, the Mallas decide to carry the body in procession through the south gate.

However, when the pall-bearers, eight Malla chiefs, try to lift the Buddha's body, they are unable to do so. Aniruddha informs them that this is because the devas desire that the body be carried through the north gate, through the city centre and out through the east gate to the Mallas' **shrine of Makuṭa Bandhana**, and there to be cremated. This location, where the Buddha's remains are cremated is believed to be marked today by the Rāmabhār Stūpa (about 15 m or 50 ft. high), located about 1.5 km from Māthā-kuār Shrine.

At that time, the sutra says, even the sewers and rubbish-dumps of Kuśinagarī are covered knee-deep in celestial coral-tree (*mandārava*) flowers. During the funeral procession, the Mallas honour the Buddha's remains with earthly music and offerings, while the devas make similar celestial music and offerings. At the Makuṭa Bandhana shrine, the Buddha's body is prepared in the manner of a universal monarch. The remains are wrapped in new linen-cloth, then in teased cotton-wool, and so on. The funeral pyre is made of all maners of perfume.

(b) The old Subhadra episode

From this point on, there are two canonical versions: the **Dīgha** version (Mahā Parinibbāna Sutta) gives in narrative form (as before), and the **Vinaya** version (V 2:284-308 = Cullavagga 11) put into the mouth of Mahā Kāśyapa himself. An interesting point here is that in the Dīgha version, **Kāśyapa's speech** is put after the outburst of Subhadra, while the Vinaya puts it before—that is, the last two paragraphs in the Dīgha are transposed in the Vinaya (D:R 2:75).

Hermann Oldenberg was the first western scholar to point out (*Vinaya Texts*, 1881:xxvi-xxviii) the parallel between the two texts. He suggests that the change is due to the position occupied by this episode in the Vinaya. It is there used as an introduction to the account of the Council of Rājagṛha held, according to the Theravada, to counteract such sentiments as were expressed by Subhadra's outburst. It was considered more appropriate, therefore, that *in that connection*, Subhadra's words should come last, to lead up to what follows. The whole story is then interpolated from our sutra. But the last paragraph is transposed, and the whole is put into Kāśyapa's mouth, on whose advice the Council is said to have been convened. [6:27]

(c) Mahā Kāśyapa

Now at that time, **Mahā Kāśyapa** is travelling along the main road from Pāpā to Kuśinagarī with a company of 500 monks. While resting under a tree by the high road, Mahā Kāśyapa sees a naked ascetic (*ājīvaka*) going towards Pāpā and holding a coral-tree (*mandārava*) flower in his hand. Mahā Kāśyapa knows that such a flower is not native to this world and only appears during very special occasions.

When Mahā Kāśyapa asks the naked ascetic about the *mandārava* flower, he is told of the Buddha's passing. Those monks who still have craving are painfully overcome with grief, while those more spiritually developed remain calm, saying: "All compounded things are impermanent. What is the use of all this?" However, in their number is the aged **Subhadra**, who still with craving, and having renounced in old age, does not grieve, claiming: "Enough, friends! Do not grieve, do not lament. We are well rid of the Great Ascetic. We were constantly troubled by his telling us: 'This is proper; that is improper!' Now, we can do what we like, and we won't have to do what we don't like." [6:23]

Mahā Kāśyapa, remaining calm, despite Subhadra’s callous remark, exhorts the monks:

Friends, enough of your weeping and wailing! Has not the Lord already told you that all things that are pleasant and delightful are changeable, subject to separation and becoming other? So why all this, friends? Whatever is born, become, compounded, is subject to decay; it cannot be that it does not decay.

(D 2:162 f.)

(d) The cremation

Mahā Kāśyapa then continues his journey with the monks, heading for Kuśinagarī to pay their last respects to the Buddha. Meanwhile, in Kuśinagara, the four Malla chiefs of the Vāsiṣṭha clan try to light Buddha’s funeral pyre, but fail to do so. Aniruddha then informs them that the devas have held up the cremation until the arrival of Mahā Kāśyapa.

Mahā Kāśyapa arrives in Kuśinagarī and pays his last respects to the Buddha by circumambulating clockwise around the pyre three times with clasped hands. Then, uncovering the Buddha’s feet, pays homage with his head to them. The 500 monks do likewise. And when this is done, the Lord’s funeral pyre ignites of itself. (D 2:63-165)

The sutras says that the bodily remains of the Buddha all burned up, “not even ashes or dust remained, only the relics remained” (D 2:165). Then a shower of water descend from the sky, and another burst forth from the sal trees extinguishing the last funeral embers. In his translation notes, Maurice Walshe remarks that some trees are said to have the property of putting out fires. In Japan this is said of the ginkgo—despite considerable evidence to the contrary! (D:W 576 n462)

The Mallas then pour perfumed water over the pyre for the same purpose. For a week they honoured the Buddha’s relics in their assembly hall, “having made a lattice-work of spears and an encircling wall of bows, with dancing, singing, garlands and music”. (D 2:164)

(e) Division of the relics

King Ajātaśatru of Magadha then sends a message to the Mallas of Kuśinagarī: “The Lord was a kshatriya and I’m a kshatriya. I am worthy to receive a share of the Lord’s remains. I will make a great stupa for them.” [8:9a]. **The Licchavīs** of Vaiśālī, on hearing of this, send a similar message. Then **the Śākya**s send their message: “The Lord was the chief of our clan...”. **The Bulakas** (Bulayas) of Calakalpā (Allakappā), **the Krauḍyas** (Koliyas) of Rāmagrāma (Rāmagāma), **the brahmins of Viṣṇudvīpa** (Veṭṭha-dīpa), and **the Mallas** of Pāpā, all made similar claims.

The Mallas of Kuśinagarī, however, refuse to share the relics, claiming that the Buddha has passed away in their town. To defuse the tension, the **brahmin Dhūmrasa, gotra** (also called Droṇa/Doṇa) address the gathering:

Listen, lords, to my proposal,
Forbearance is the Buddha’s teaching.
It is not right that strife should come
From sharing out the best of men’s remains.
Let’s all be joined in harmony and peace,
In friendship sharing out the portions eight:
Let stupas far and wide be put up,
That all may see—and gain in faith!

(D 2:166)

And so the relics are peacefully divided, with Droṇa himself taking for himself the urn with which the relics are measured. **The Mauryas** (Moriyas) of Pipphali, vana, however, arrive too late, and receive only the ashes from the pyre. Each of them then build a stupa over the precious remains that they have obtained. There are ten stupas in all: eight contain relics, the ninth over the urn, and the tenth over the ashes of the pyre. (Lamotte 1988:23 & 727 n25 for bibliography.)

The sutra originally ends here. Buddhaghosa, in his Commentary, remarks that this closing verse was added by the Sinhalese elders:

Eight portions of relics there were of him,
The All-seeing One. Of these seven remained
In Jambudīpa with honour. The eighth
In Rāmagāma's kept by nāga kings,
One tooth the Thirty Gods have kept.
Kalinga's kings have one, the nāgas, too.
The shed their glory o'er the fruitful earth.
Thus the Seer's honoured by the honoured.
Gods and nāgas, kings, the noblest men
Clasp their hands in homage, for hard it is
To find another such for countless aeons.

(D 2:167 f. Walshe's tr.)

(f) **Barlaam & Josaphat**

Apparently, the relics of the Buddha made fabulous journeys even into foreign lands----and outside of Buddhism. Few mediaeval Christian names are better known than those of **Barlaam and Josaphat**,³⁵ who were credited with the “second conversion” of India to Christianity, after the country had relapsed to “paganism” following the mission of the Apostle Thomas. Barlaam and Josaphat were remembered in the roll of saints recognized by the Roman Catholic Church with the festival day of **27 November**. In the Greek Church, Iosaph (Josaphat) was commemorated on **26 August**, while the Russians remember both Barlaam and Iosaph, together with the latter's father, King Abenner (Śuddhōdāna), on **19 November** (2 December, Old Style). Sir Henry Yule once visited a church at Palermo, Italy, dedicated to “**Divo Josaphat**”.

In 1571, the Doge Luigi Mocenigo presented to King Sebastian of Portugal **a bone and part of the spine** of St. Josaphat. When Spain annexed Portugal in 1580, these sacred treasures were removed by Antonio, the Pretender to the Portuguese throne, and ultimately found its way to Antwerp, Belgium, where they were preserved in the cloister of St. Salvator.

After the European colonists had settled in India with the arrival of Roman Catholic missionaries, some of them were struck by the similarities between episodes and features of the life of St. Josaphat and those of the Buddha, as is clearly evident from the early 17th century Portuguese writer **Diogo do Couto** who declared this fact. By the 1850s, European scholars doing comparative study of the legend of St. Josaphat [“Bodhisat”] and the life of the Buddha, “came to the startling conclusion that for almost a thousand years, the Buddha in the guise of the holy Josaphat, had been revered as a saint of the principal Churches of Christendom”! (D.M. Lang, introd. Barlaam & Josaphat, 1967:x-ix).

□ □ □

³⁵ See, for example, Graeme MacQueen's “Changing Master Narratives in Midstream: *Barlaam and Josaphat* and the Growth of Religious Intolerance in the Buddhalegend's Westward Journey”. *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 5 1998:144-166.

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